Max Planck-Cambridge Exchange for Economic Life (CaMP)

Workshop 'Wants and Their Shadows' (CaMP-03)

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, 2-3 September 2025

After the previous workshop had dealt with wants in an exploratory fashion, co-convenors Brumann, Lazar, Sanchez and Xiang decided to dedicate CaMP-03 to a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between people's wants and their 'dark side'. The shadow metaphor was left deliberately vague – whether to focus on the negative consequences for others, the common good, or even oneself; on adverse economic and social contexts in which the realisation of wants is often a challenge; or on all the things that our wants push back and make unseen was left to the initiative of the contributors. For the first time, we congregated in Cambridge, holding our discussions in the anthropology department's Edmund Leach Room.

This time, our ambition was to prepare a joint publication, so that the ten papers (four from the Cambridge side and six from the MPI) were all precirculated, presentations were brief, and discussion was lively. We also benefitted from the engaged comments of four discussants not previously involved, Cambridge scholars Shailaja Fennell, Emma Mawdsley, Alice Pearson and Xin Zhan. Our debates saw a good deal of convergence but also disagreement. Particularly divided were the assessments of asking people directly what they want during fieldwork – for some, this seemed an impossible move; for others, it looked like the most natural thing. Talking about wants, we concluded, needs to be distinguished from actual wanting, and some of the ethnographic interlocutors quoted in the papers were more consistent in fervently wanting than in what it was that they wanted. We heard of cases where flexibility and keeping one's options for a later stage was more important than wanting anything specific right away, and also of the extreme want of not being oneself any longer. Some of us insisted that for wants to become significant, they need articulation, practice and a politics. Conceptualising the shadows also occupied us – while they were clearly present in all papers, we debated their theorisation. There was also the call to problematise attributing wants to third parties in ethnographic writing, given that actual encounters primarily feature what 'I' and what 'you' want, rather than what 'they' want. Case studies once again spanned the world: South Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Indian and Chinese diasporas all featured in the papers.

The general sentiment was that of having spent two intellectually fruitful and also very sociable days, complete with the excitement of a fire alarm that impressively activated Sanchez' fire warden's role (we all stayed out of harm's way). We now endeavour to turn the revised papers into an edited volume.