



BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

JANE I. GUYER

December 31, 1943–January 17, 2024

Elected to the NAS, 2008

A Biographical Memoir by Michael Degani

A GIANT OF Africanist anthropology, Jane Isabel Guyer's career spanned landmark contributions to the study of economic life on the continent and beyond. Her work was characterized by a fine-grained British empiricism skeptical of conventional wisdom that nevertheless remained committed to a broader project of theory-building: "Africa has never been traditional—so can we make a case?" "Is confusion a form?"² Her stance was artisanal and collaborative, an exercise in seemingly "marginal" gains.³ And yet the modest, inquiring tone of these titles belies the fact that to read her work is to have the exhilarating sense of being on the frontiers of the discipline—thinking in the fresh air, watching as surprising patterns are brought into focus. In this she evokes Marcel Mauss, the anthropological ancestor whose masterwork *The Gift* she retranslated at the end of her career,⁴ and who built his own striking rejoinder to mainstream economics upon close readings of his colleagues and friends' ethnographies, many of whom had perished in the First World War.

Guyer was born Jane Isabel Mason during the Second World War on December 31, 1943, in Scotland, where her father was stationed with the British Royal Navy. She would grow up near Liverpool. The disorientations of those early years of postwar reconstruction would shape her biographical and intellectual trajectory. With their own ambitions thwarted, her parents were deeply invested in the success of their children, including her older brother Tim, who would go on to become a historian of Nazi Germany and whom Guyer greatly admired. She recalled ration cards, for instance, as her paradigmatic experience of economic transactions, as well



Figure 1 Jane Guyer. Photo courtesy of Johns Hopkins University.

as the web of ancillary tips, sweeteners, and under-the-table trades that made life run.⁵ Like many of her generation, she sensed that it was only through such "toiling ingenuity" that some order might be rebuilt from the ashes of war.⁶

By the time Guyer entered university, she was drawn into a larger orbit of North Atlantic prosperity, confronting the ossified doctrines of the free market at the London School of Economics in 1962 and rubbing shoulders with the likes of Mick Jagger. It was there she met and married an American exchange student, Bernard "Bernie" Guyer, and relocated to the University of Rochester to pursue a doctorate while he completed medical school. West Africa was flush in its first



decade of decolonization, and cities like Ibadan in Nigeria were expanding rapidly. Guyer's doctoral research examined how the agrarian hinterlands were transforming to feed the residents of those cities. She returned to West Africa in the 1970s to study women's farming systems in Cameroon, where Bernie was placed, and over the ensuing decade they would have three children: Sam (1970), Nathan (1973) and Kate (1976). Beginning in 1971, she held positions in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Yaoundé. From 1978 to 2002, she held positions at Boston University, Harvard University, and Northwestern University, where she would publish a series of influential Africanist works. She joined the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University in 2002, where she remained until retirement, expanding her focus to questions of capitalism, ethics, and anthropological knowledge more broadly.

Guyer's first major article, "Household and Community in African Studies," found her surveying the theoretical limitations of both anthropology and economics.⁷ Since the 1930s, Africanist anthropology had been dominated by the concept of the lineage system—corporate groups subject to clearly defined rules and sanctions—as the principle of social life. On the ground, the reality was much fuzzier, and social life was far more fluid and transactional. People could strategically invoke lineage for resource purposes but just as often cast it aside. The household too, that workhorse of economic methodology, hardly stood still. "Though the house and the farms just sit there to be visited and counted," she observed, "people come and go—on business, on visits, or for seasonal migration."⁸ There was also the problem of intra-household allocation—women were often in control of their own incomes, making it hard to calculate a single economic unit. Indeed, the related idea that senior men controlled the productive capacities of their wives and children was, Guyer pointed out, grossly overstated.

Guyer was already laying the groundwork for another signal intervention. The concept of an African "wealth in people" tended to imagine "Big Men" accumulating wives, children, and other dependents in raw numbers. Working with historical and ethnographic sources, Guyer suggested a more a textilic, compositional image of "wealth in people as wealth in knowledge"—with different actors realizing different forms of unique excellence that could combine with and amplify each other.⁹ With Samuel Eno Belinga, she offered a close reading of a narrative-musical epic from the Beti-Bulu-Fang areas of Cameroon in which a singular young man defies the dictatorial control of his father, drawing on his own extraordinary powers and those of others to do so. Their article captured the spirit of an African Studies that was emerging pell-mell out of a long typological legacy of tribes and systems and grappling with dynamism and

heterogeneity. She would go on to offer a case study of these ideas in *An African Niche Economy: Farming to Feed Ibadan*, which was based on her original doctoral work in 1968 and follow-up research twenty years later.¹⁰ African cities had only continued to grow, and yet somehow they remained provisioned. Farmers responded to commercial opportunities in ways completely orthogonal to the predictions of development economists focused on exports and subsistence. With unusual longitudinal depth, Guyer offered the minimalist concept of a "niche economy," in which people endlessly diversified into specialist knowledges, inventory, and positions to thicken regional connections, drawing from and recombining a deep historical archive.

These themes of heterogeneity and turbulence—and getting things to hold together nonetheless—culminated in 1997, when she returned to Rochester to deliver the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, expanded upon and published as *Marginal Gains* in 2004.¹¹ Her aim was to theorize what she called Atlantic Africa—that is, an Africa violently subjected to the wider currents of the world system since at least the 1500s. The savannah-forest belt beneath the Sahel had long been subject to the depredations of the slave trade and corresponding influxes of "commodity currencies" such as cowrie shells, rifles, and brass manillas from European traders. This was a borderland of global capitalism, interfacing with it and yet developing its own internal logics. Looking north, for instance, nineteenth-century Tiv communities in what is now central Nigeria might trade Tugudu cloth in exchange for cattle or brass rods from their Hausa neighbors. Facing south, they might trade those brass rods for firearms. Facing north again, they might persuade a pastoralist community to accept that cattle as bride wealth, thereby transforming it into "wealth in people." Rather than thinking of the entire economy as reducible to a single measure, there was rather an ecology of monies whose stepwise conversions could be arbitrated for gain. Conversions, then, are fundamentally asymmetrical, with transactional vectors branching out in certain possible directions and not others. Europe, which was trading old rifles and brass manillas "one way" into Africa whilst preserving its own hard currencies for internal circulation, was doing much the same thing. This, then, is classic Guyer, reading historical and ethnographic sources closely in such a way as to see capitalism itself anew.

If state-backed financial institutions cannot standardize how much all things are worth in relation to a single currency of infinitely numbered gradation, how do you commensurate, say, a certain kind, quality, and quantity of brass rods for the same in guns? Once again, Guyer drew on a wide array of historical and ethnographic sources to show how different conventions for units, numeration, and schemes of classification found ways to hook into each other. A base unit of "a

hundred cowries” might refer to a bundle of sixty, eighty, or 100 depending on how far upstream a river system one was conducting transactions. Tips, dashes, or service fees on such transactions could alter or preserve gains depending on fluctuations in the market. A transaction was a performance in the technical sense that it came into being through the doing of it. It was understood to be something actively composed, rather than a mechanical expression of preexisting supply and demand. For anyone who has negotiated a repair or a ride or looked to exchange “hard” currencies into “soft” amidst volatile inflation in contemporary African contexts, Guyer made this deep history palpable. One of her crowning achievements was a vivid ethnography of a national fuel shortage in Nigeria in the 1990s, during which a rural petrol station had managed to receive a single shipment. In this powder-keg situation, the station proprietor, Madame A, calmly served a long queue of stressed people of different rank and means under the hot sun whilst still making enough profit to cover her costs—with all eyes on her; this was a performance in its more dramatic sense as well. One can understand the affinities Guyer might have felt for Madame A, skillfully working the margins and producing something at once ordinary and quietly miraculous.

Marginal Gains was timely. It was an implicit riposte to the discourses of Africa as the “Hopeless Continent,” as *Time* magazine would dub it, highlighting its civilizational sophistication and resilience that stretched deep into its history. It also cemented Guyer as a key thinker of capitalism and economic life tout court. Her insights about the performativity of the economy were taken up by philosophers such as Michel Callon and Helen Verran, as well as legions of anthropologists working on everything from money laundering to oil barter. Indeed, in many ways it could be said to have intimated the 2008 financial crisis in which actual financial practice far outstripped the theory.

Other intimations followed. In 2007, she published a striking essay titled “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time.”¹² It began with her admission that the current era felt foreign. The era in which she had come of age—the era of five-year plans and postwar reconstruction—evinced a sensitivity to the past and workaday commitment to building up mid-range projects that seemed to have all but evaporated. In the early twenty-first century, people were enmeshed in an enforced presentism, with no real sense of what the “near future” might look like. This in turn was buttressed by an ideological commitment to monetarism worked out by neoliberal intellectuals like Frederik Hayek and orchestrated by Alan Greenspan, chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve System. Monetarism is focused on long-term stability by disciplining the money supply, whatever the short-term ripple effects.

At stake philosophically, then, was a faith in the human and institutional ability to plan. Monetarism clearly rejected this in favor of an almost religious submission to the enigmatic play of the market. Whereas Keynes had remarked that “in the long-run we are all dead,” the going wisdom seemed to be that in the long-run we are all saved. Once again, Africa provided an echo and leitmotif, gripped as it was by forms of evangelical Pentecostalism and prosperity gospel. Preachers urged believers to embrace God and leave the past behind, whether that be the obligations of dependent relatives or collective social projects of the postcolonial moment, while at the same time attuning them to the apocalyptic imagery of a final accounting in which all would be worked out.

“Prophecy and the Near Future” was included in the volume *Legacies, Logics, Logistics*,¹³ which consolidated Guyer's economic writings penned in the wake of *Marginal Gains*, some of which explored the increasingly digital and networked experience of what she called the platform economy. In these essays, Guyer critically engaged with philosophies such as actor-network theory while trying to deepen their historical and critical dimensions. One insightful essay drew inspiration from her work on ordinality in Africa to point out that Western economies now routinely peg monetary value to hierarchical rank in parabolic, “J-curve” distributions. The top stud fees for racehorses, salaries for CEOs, or endowments for universities are often on an order of magnitude higher than those in the second tier. Attention to the predominance of ordinal ranking, in which “more” or “less” is relative, thus suggests that inequality is not just an unfortunate or embarrassing byproduct of our economic arrangements, but is in some sense the point, culturally valorized through the continuous production of “stars,” “icons,” and “world class” services that dwarf the long tail of plebian experience. Until the interval between first and second can no longer be widened, the first will never be enough.

Parallel to her economic writings, Guyer penned, in her last decade, a series of reflections on anthropology as an intellectual ethic. In her Munro Lecture on the “quickening of the unknown,” delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 2013, she delved back into what she saw as anthropology's inescapably empiricist foundation. A good anthropologist has an open, observational equanimity, what the ancient skeptics called *ataraxia*, ready to be surprised. Such an ethical stance reflected the field's preoccupation with “possibilities,” a theme that she pointed out has recurred in various configurations every two decades or so.¹⁴ In dialogue with the emergent anthropology of ethics, Guyer also wrote movingly on responsibility—“enduring through thick and thin”—in the work of Paul Fauconnet, a colleague of Mauss's.¹⁵ Such an ethic was evident in Africa, of course, but also in her own family's history, which her mother Isabel Mason described

as a “steadfastness” in the aftermath of the war. In her Frazer Lecture “Aftermaths and Recuperations in Anthropology,” she underscored these themes again.¹⁶ Surveying the eponymous Cambridge anthropologist’s work on diluvian myths, she pointed out that they may be read as asking what it is to move forward in the wake of disaster, to rebuild by recuperating fragments of the past. All of these essays orbited in one way or another around her retranslation of Mauss’s *The Gift*, a notoriously enigmatic work that she was convinced could be best understood in its historical context.¹⁷ Mauss was grieving those cut down by the First World War and saw economic exchange as that which holds society together. Her edition reassembled the text with the memorial he wrote in tribute to his colleagues, as well as reviews of their scholarship that had informed his famous essay.

Throughout her career, Jane, as I came to know her, remained an exceptional reader of her own colleagues, less interested in having the last word than the next one. True to her family name, Mason, her intellectual style was that of “the ordinary people” that she identified with—the artisans who keep life going and whose own expertise is deeply attuned to the empirical realities of the world. When she retired and I inherited her line at Johns Hopkins—I could not believe my luck, I had been obsessed with her work throughout graduate school—my family and I moved to a neighborhood in Baltimore called Stone Hill. A small area of four streets that originally housed workers at an adjacent textile mill, its cottages were built in the 1840s from stones dredged from the nearby Jones Falls. The first time she and Bernie visited us, she marveled that it was as if she had been transported back to England—a reminder, perhaps, that we never wholly leave the past behind. Later I learned that its few remaining cobblestone walkways were said originally to have been ballast brought over in the holds of British trading ships. It is the kind of detail that Jane would have appreciated: Trading companies converting stones into commodities to offset the purchase of exports like tobacco. An exchange linking West Africa, America, and the British Isles in a single Atlantic history.

During those last years in Baltimore, Jane was a kind and generous mentor, passing along references and taking the time to read through my own fledgling scholarship. I vividly remember her standing in the doorway of my office one afternoon, having stopped to chat. She mentioned that she had been puzzling over the philosophical status of the concept of “enough,” describing the particular circumstances in which Yoruba farmers might invoke it. That moment has stayed with me, in part because of the way it seems to reflect the pragmatism and empiricism of her thought as a whole. Have our theories captured enough of the world, in all its complexity? When, and by what measure, is the margin enough to make

the trade? Coherence and duration are precious achievements in both scholarship and life, hard won and requiring just that sense of equanimity and quiet commitment to keep things going. Jane’s own work, which has done so much to reveal the sophistication and steadfastness with which people craft their futures, will surely endure.

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