Preface

The chapters in this collection were among papers presented at a conference held at the University of Manchester, 24–26 March 2015, entitled ‘The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times: Grassroots Perspectives on the Value Question in the 21st Century’. The conference marked the end of a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)—funded project entitled ‘Domestic Moral Economy: An Ethnographic Study of Value in the Asia–Pacific Region’, which was administered from Manchester by Karen Sykes. It provided PhD scholarships—successfully completed—to Rodolfo Maggio and Rachel Smith, and funds for Karen Sykes, Chris Gregory, Fiona Magowan and Jon Altman to return to the sites of their long-term fieldwork in Papua New Guinea (PNG), India and Australia, respectively, and, in the case of Sykes and Gregory, to investigate transnational familial links between PNG and North Queensland and between India and Fiji, respectively.

The main focus of the project—‘domestic moral economy’—defined its scope and limits, and the subtitle—‘an Ethnographic Study of Value in the Asia–Pacific region’—the need for a method that privileged twenty-first century accounts of the ‘native point of view’ and for historically informed comparative analyses of such data.

Workshops and conferences held in Manchester (2011, 2015), Canberra (2012), Belfast (2013) and Edinburgh (2014) provided a forum to test our ideas among colleagues who had not only done fieldwork in the Asia–Pacific region, but had worked on the general problem of moral economy in Africa and Europe. Needless to say, the papers and the general discussion that followed were invaluable in enabling us to grasp the comparative, historical and theoretical significance of our own material. This volume includes chapters by the above-named senior and junior
participants of the ESRC grant, plus two Manchester-based Oceanists, Keir Martin and Matti Eräsaari, who were closely involved with the project over a number of years.

The aim of the work in this volume is to provoke debate and pose new questions for analysis. The term ‘domestic moral economy’, as mentioned above, is used to define the scope and limits of our approach, not to suggest the conceptual framework for a new general theory of moral economy. Economy, as classically understood, has reduced the value question to that of the determinants of market prices. Scholars from other disciplines, such as historians, sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists who have worked under the general umbrella of ‘moral economy’, have striven to extend the narrow focus of economists by introducing other values of a religious, sociological, moral and familial kind. The literature on moral economy in this interdisciplinary sense is now vast. Our use of the adjective ‘domestic’ is intended to narrow the focus of our studies to something ethnographically possible, while retaining the focus on the complex interplay of market values (e.g. exchange value/use value) with religious values (e.g. pollution/purity and sacred/profane), moral values (e.g. virtues/vice) and domestic values (e.g. familial love/respect). Values everywhere seem to be informed by the logical principle of thesis/antithesis, but their concrete realisation is invariably complex, as people practise the difficult art of trying to live together well using some notion of ‘the good’. Values are mere instruments in the hands of valuers in the definition of the good. A study of values, then, must examine the social relations of the valuers and note the differences between points of view and moral environments. Women’s morality is not men’s morality, the morality of the old is not that of the young and the morality of the wealthy elite is not that of the poor subaltern. Mauss (2007) outlined these dictums in his Manual of Ethnography and provided the methodological principles that have informed the research behind our domestic moral economy project in general, and the chapters in this volume, in particular.

The authors are collectively indebted to the ESRC for the generous funding of the project, and to the many colleagues from different parts of the world who participated in the workshops and conferences and offered valuable hints and suggestions. The final conference in Manchester brought together participants from four other research projects dealing with closely related themes: ‘Popular Economies and Citizen Expectations in South Africa’, led by Deborah James of the London School of Economics; ‘Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in
the Pursuit of Livelihood’, led by Susana Narotzky of the University of Barcelona; ‘Globalization, Sports and the Precarity of Masculinity’, led by Niko Besnier of the University of Amsterdam; and ‘Realising Eurasia: Moral Economy and Civilisational Pluralism in the 21st Century’, led by Chris Hann of the Max Planck Institute at Halle in Germany. We are grateful to the team members of these projects for their contributions and critiques.

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