

Max Planck-Cambridge Exchange for Economic Life (CaMP)

Workshop 'What Do People Want?' (CaMP-02)

MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle, 11-12 January

After the launch workshop in May 2023, in which general reflections on and self-positionings within economic anthropology stood in the foreground, CaMP-02 zoomed in on a specific question, even if broad in nature. Reflecting on matters such as satisfaction and alienation, co-convenors Christoph Brumann, Sian Lazar, Andrew Sanchez and Biao Xiang had agreed to focus on what people want. This attracted seven contributors from the Cambridge department of anthropology and eleven from the Department of Economic Experimentation of the MPI. Almost one half came as first-time CaMPers and nobody could be stopped by the train drivers' strike that – based on a clearly defined set of wants – brought German railway traffic to a halt during these days. Each speaker was given time for an introductory presentation before we entered into a general discussion, with more general wrap-ups closing both days.

Wants emerged as a fickle subject in our discussions – can we really trust them? People's wants are volatile, they come and go and depend on social positions and trajectories. People are often much clearer about what they do not want than what they do – asking craftspeople in the Outer Hebrides about their ideal workplace, for example, produced only blanks. Wants may reflect false consciousness in the observer's eyes. But are we allowed to judge our interlocutors' wants, or to discourage them from wanting things such as dependency? People often want several things at the same time, and not all of them -- certainty, security, dignity, autonomy, flexibility, comfort, political impact, the good or viable life, respect – are compatible with each other; some may in fact be the mere means for the fulfilment of others, such as making money in order to finally earn respect.

We spent quite some time distinguishing wants from other things, such as wishes (usually less expected to be fulfilled) or desires (persisting when satisfied, when wants do not). We mused whether ambition entails clearly defined wants while aspiration is the capacity to derive new and different wants when situations change. Divergent assumptions about the place of the psyche, culture and the economy in producing and shaping wants, as also about the degree of consciousness involved, came to the fore. Unfulfillable wants and daydreams, such as when a Berlin-based Syrian refugee fantasizes about owning a villa with scores of German servants, captured quite a bit of our attention, and we agreed that they can be socially generative and anthropologically instructive, whatever their likeliness of realization.

We also addressed methodology. It was suggested that people sharing their wants thereby issue invitations and that knowing others' wants is the basis for friendship – anthropology could be seen as the discipline most familiar with people's wants. Yet it was also noted that most presentations hinged on just a few individuals – we need to understand how collective wants arise out of individual ones, within a political economic/ecological perspective on such processes. The widespread absence of clearly defined wants, such as among contemporary Chinese youth, also requires explanation.

We agreed to hold CaMP-03 in Cambridge in 2025 and run a couple of online workshops in preparation, with fantasies being a likely topic for the first one of these.



(Text: Christoph Brumann, photo: MPI for Social Anthropology, 2024)