

AAG 2026 CFP: Schemes, Scams, and Flim-flam: Putting the 'Con' in Economic Geography

Will B. Payne, Rutgers University

Desiree Fields, University of California, Berkeley

Jovan Scott Lewis, University of California, Berkeley

Sponsored By: Economic Geography Specialty Group, Digital Geographies Specialty Group

The importance of non-market and extra-legal forms of economic activity, whether framed in Marxian terms as “primitive accumulation,” the “crooked ladder” (O’Kane 1992), or piracy, have long been part of capitalist society’s constitutive outside. Scams arise in times of heightened social and economic uncertainty and rapid change, when the past is no longer a useful template for relating to the future and information environments are characterized by incompleteness, conjecture, and secrecy (Bryant and Knight, 2019). As democratic and cultural institutions lose coherence, the distinction between the counterfeit and the real becomes an interpretive problem rather than a certainty. Of course, uncertainty and information asymmetries are unevenly distributed and experienced: some are better insured against scams than others, and confidence tricks can be a way for those more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of uncertainty to survive and benefit from upheaval (Lewis, 2020).

New media and financial instruments inaugurate new forms of predation, each keyed to the vulnerabilities they introduce. Under digital capitalism, scams don’t just *seem* to be everywhere, they *are* everywhere: ghost jobs advertise openings for positions that don’t exist, deepfake videos and AI clone voices make common scams more convincing, and the Donald Trump memecoin launched days before his 2025 inauguration was strikingly similar to a “pump and dump” scheme. Markets move on meme stocks and cryptocurrencies pushed by financial influencers (or “finfluencers;” see Guan 2022, Carter 2016). Even orthodox economists are questioning the linkage between asset prices and real value. The proliferation of confidence tricks, scams, and schemes, always a vital element of the “animal spirits” that markets channel and reflect, is a central feature of digital capitalism and increasingly invoked in everyday social critiques of systems that seem to weaponize uncertainty (Wittekind et al., forthcoming).

We are looking for papers that use the analytic methods and literature of economic geography to examine what happens when capitalism’s “edge cases” become central to its perpetuation.

Topics could include, but are not limited to, the following (in any place and time):

- Multi-level marketing (MLM), pyramid, and Ponzi schemes
- Pump and dumps, rugpulls, and boiler rooms
- Junk fees, dark patterns, and lock-in
- Graft, bribery, and financial fraud

- Catfishing, pig butchering, and whaling
- Identity theft, phishing, and skimming
- Assorted other scams, flim-flams, and broken dreams

Please send abstracts of up to 250 words, plus a title and author name(s) and affiliation(s) to will.b.payne@rutgers.edu, desireefields@berkeley.edu, and jovan@berkeley.edu by **Friday, October 17th**

Bibliography

- Carter, Daniel. "Hustle and brand: The sociotechnical shaping of influence." *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 3 (2016).
- Guan, Sue S. "The rise of the finfluencer." *NYUJL & Bus.* 19 (2022): 489.
- Knight, Daniel and Bryant, Rebecca (2019). *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, Jovan (2020). *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica*. University of Minnesota Press.
- O'Kane, James M. *The crooked ladder: Gangsters, ethnicity and the American dream*. Transaction Publishers, 1992.
- MacKenzie, Donald. *An engine, not a camera: How financial models shape markets*. MIT Press, 2008.
- Muniesa, Fabian. *The provoked economy: Economic reality and the performative turn*. Routledge, 2014.
- Wittekind, C. et al. (forthcoming). *Scams all the Way Up: The Scam as Vernacular Analytic of Digital Capitalism*.