

# An Economic Sociological Look at Economic Anthropology

**Patrik Aspers, Asaf Darr, and Sebastian Kohl**

[aspers@mpifg.de](mailto:aspers@mpifg.de) , [kohl@mpifg.de](mailto:kohl@mpifg.de),  
[adarr@univ.haifa.ac.il](mailto:adarr@univ.haifa.ac.il)

## Introduction

This short article is an introduction and an overview of the field of economic anthropology from a sociological perspective. In the following issues of the Newsletter we will focus on other disciplines that also study the economy. After all, the economy has been the focus of attention of several disciplines, and we believe that there are many opportunities for cross-fertilization among disciplines. Given the vast amount of scholarly writings about economy and society, our goal is modest: to introduce the foundation of economic anthropology, to highlight some of the main debates within this field and to sketch out a few fruitful encounters between economic sociology and anthropology.

The sociological system of meaning will guide our interpretation of economic anthropology. This means that we, as observers, may to some extent impose coherence, where the “natives” may in fact see tensions. Moreover, our work is nothing but a preface to a larger undertaking. The text is written for an audience with little or no previous exposure to anthropological thinking, and it starts with a short introduction of what anthropology is.

## Anthropology and Economic Anthropology

Anthropology can be defined as the study of human beings, in the widest sense. What is called “anthropology” is sometimes also called social anthropology (Great Britain), cultural anthropology (US), or ethnology (Germany); the notion is broad enough to include a natural science perspective on the evolution of humankind as well as archaeology (e.g. physical anthropology in the US). Among an-

thropologists, as among sociologists, one can identify those who stress social structures or social institutions.<sup>2</sup> Other anthropological streams focus on cultural forms, and stress the symbolic expression and interpretation of cultures. The two notions of “social” and “cultural” anthropology, to some extent, reflect the distinction between the structural and interpretive emphasis.

Anthropology emerged as a study of what was called primitive societies, in contrast to economics and sociology, whose emergence directly corresponds with the development of modern societies. For an outside observer, anthropology is also characterized by its distinct research methods. Thus, the long-term fieldwork, including direct observation, participant observation, and learning the language of those studied, has become a defining feature of the discipline. Theoretical questions and research methods often inform one another, so it should come as little surprise that anthropologists have a great interest in what people do, and not just in what they say.

Economic anthropology is a sub-field of anthropology, but what is its distinct nature? One way of addressing this question is by identifying the disciplines’ core set of theoretical questions. A central question, not only in economic anthropology, but also in economic sociology, is defining what the economy is. Sociology, with its heritage of modernity and differentiation of spheres of life (Weber 1946), sees the economy as a rather autonomous part of a larger whole, and consequently speaks of economic actions (Weber 1978), embedded in social processes and institutions (Granovetter 1985). In economic anthropology, this embeddedness can be regarded as the analytical starting point. Thus, the object of study could in the broadest sense be defined as economic life, i.e., all activities through which people produce, circulate and consume things (Carrier 2005). More concretely, the field typically deals with topics such as human nature, methodological questions, different forms of circulation (commodities, barter, gifts), consumption, money, and the constitution of cultural values, to present a few examples.

## The Emergence of Modern Economic Anthropology

The field of economic anthropology was formed in part through a fruitful dialogue with other fields, which also focused on the economy, above all, economics. This influence is apparent in the work of Malinowski, the founding father of modern economic anthropology, and perhaps also of anthropology in general. His (Malinowski 1922) classical study, in what today is Papua New Guinea, is essential to anyone who wants to understand the economy in traditional societies. Malinowski refers to concepts and terms developed within the field of economics, such as the market. He shows how the conditions of life and economic transactions are intertwined, and cannot be analyzed separately. His work is also important because it deals with basic categories such as property, time and social relations, which are also central to sociology, and more specifically for the understanding of a "primitive economy". Malinowski has also deeply influenced the methodological association between anthropology and fieldwork.

Marcel Mauss (2002) is another founding father of economic anthropology, with his influential study of gifts which he originally published in 1925, though it relies on secondary data and not on field work. Mauss juxtaposed gift and commodity exchange, and created an implicit association between capitalist societies and the commodity form, and between pre-industrial societies and the gift form (see Bird-David [1997] for a review). Mauss also demonstrated how gifting produces and reproduces social relations and statuses among donors and recipients.

The second stage in the development of economic anthropology dates from about the end of World War II to the mid seventies. This period is characterized by a methodological debate between a historically and empirically oriented school, represented here by the works of Polanyi (1957a; 1957b) and Dalton (cf. 1969), and a more formal and abstract anthropology, represented here by the work of Herskovits (1965). This is a debate between substantivists, who argue that economic anthropology should study how people survive and relate to their particular environment, and formalists, who argue that at least a "soft" version of economic modelling is applicable also to the pre-modern societies. The tension is often noticeable in the way formalists argue that findings have general application, an idea not accepted by most substantivists. A lack of constructive exchange between the two camps might

explain the duration of the intellectual conflict between them and its meagre outcome.

The debate between substantivists and formalists should be seen in relation to the process of modernization around the globe. Global modernization meant that anthropologists had to re-examine their theoretical tools. Anthropology had been initiated within the colonial systems and sometimes seen as serving its interests. Yet, anthropology was once again called upon to understand the tremendous ruptures within the developing countries in the post colonial era. The search for theoretical explanations of the ongoing process of modernization was also the reason for going beyond the single-case-character of earlier ethnographic research.

Many anthropological studies addressed the transition from a traditional form of society to a more modern one (Dalton 1969:64). Some of the studies have been done with a policy orientation (Wilk and Cligget 2007:15). Economic anthropologists during this phase directed their attention to the investigation of developing economies and their relation to the developed world, which later became a central idea in analyses of global relations.

When the international dependencies between people and countries began to be more obvious approaches, theories like the Marxist influenced world-system-theory (Wallerstein 1974) were developed in response. In the seventies a few French Marxists discovered the anthropological field (Godelier 1973; Meillassoux 1972), and they pointed out that one can view pre-modern societies and the relations of production and their development through the theory outlined by Marx.

Since the mid 1980s, anthropologists have begun to study their own societies. The thematic focus of more recent anthropological research, not unlike that of sociology, is contemporary Western society and its various institutions, and cultural landscape. Many anthropologists in the past few decades have highlighted globalization, and methodologically, this has meant that we have seen more multi-sited research (Marcus 1995).

Gudeman's (2001) economic-anthropological model describes the global economy in terms of two coexisting spheres, one is called "community" and is characterized by shared values and close social relationships and the other is the abstract and far-distant market sphere which is dominated by formal calculations. Thus, this approach does not

only transcend the dualism between substantivism and formalism, but is also applicable to virtually all societies, describable by the specific constellation of the two spheres. Another example of a modern approach in the field is Miller's materiality concept (Miller 1987), by which he examines the way in which artefacts are embedded in specific cultural contexts. There are also examples of studies of contemporary phenomena which have been conducted by anthropologists, such as Brian Moeran's (1996) study of Japanese advertising agencies or Keith Hart's (2000) study of money.

## Main Theoretical Debates within Economic Anthropology

Central to the development of economic-anthropological theory was the above mentioned dispute between the formalists and the substantivists. The leading figure within the substantivist camp is Karl Polanyi, a "Hungarian lawyer turned journalist and economic historian" (Isaac 2005:14), who nevertheless became central in economic anthropology. Polanyi (1957b) reminds us of the two meanings of the economy that should be distinguished: substantivists see the economy as a tangible reality, in which man depends on nature and on his fellow men to survive, so that there is an interchange between the members of society. Contrarily, the formalists perceive the economy through the lens of an abstract model of reality, in which man appears as homo economicus using the calculative logic of means and ends to make rational choices. While the substantivist definition implies concrete empirical research leading to holistic systems of essentially interpretative explanations, the formalist's starting point is the universal assumption of individual economizing due to a scarcity of means and the subsequent analysis of objective data.

Economic anthropology was also affected by two important currents in the social sciences, the "cultural turn" represented by Clifford Geertz and the "practice turn" by Pierre Bourdieu, though the latter, because of his later works, is often seen as a sociologist. In the 1960s Geertz began to develop his symbolic-interpretative approach. At its centre stands the articulation of culture as a system of meaning, i.e. the sum of collective experiences that constitute meaning. While common-sense-knowledge and meanings provide orientation in rituals or daily interactions, science or religion serve as second-order-constructs that interpret actors' common-sense knowledge. This is the way Geertz also conceived his role as an anthropologist, for

example, during his study-periods in Indonesia (Geertz 1963). Later, Geertz's well known study of the Bazaar economy in Morocco made an important contribution in providing a thick description of a market deeply embedded in cultural and social institutions and processes (Geertz 1978; 1979). In his work Geertz is able to develop a fruitful dialogue with the economics of information in analysing the types of uncertainties and information asymmetries that plague the Bazaar. He points to different mechanisms such as bargaining with its unique rules as well as clientelisation, which are specifically designed to overcome local market uncertainty.

Pierre Bourdieu started out as an anthropologist doing field work in Algeria under French rule, where he began developing his theory of practice and its corresponding ethnographic methods (Bourdieu 1990). With the experience and insight from Algeria, Bourdieu later analysed French society (Bourdieu 1982). Bourdieu views socially constituted fields through the lens of different kinds of capital (for example cultural capital). He provides a concept that can describe both pre-capitalistic and modern societies, which mainly differ in the structure of capitals and their degree of centralisation. In his paradigmatic statement on economic anthropology (Bourdieu 2000), he replaces both the economists' and the "interactionists'" view on the economy with his notion of a field, shaped by actors' behavior, symbolic constructions, and social institutions. Bourdieu borrowed the concept of capital from the economists (Boyer 2003), though he extended the notion to also include other dimensions, such as cultural and aesthetic capital. By discussing "the economy" in a broader way Bourdieu was, for example, able to describe the inverted economy of art, in which it is virtuous to be poor. That is, in some "economies", like the economy of art, one can only be deemed successful if one lacks economic capital but possesses a high degree of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu 1996).

## Fruitful encounters between Economic Anthropology and Sociology

What can economic sociology learn from its sister sub-discipline of anthropology? The simple answer is of course "a lot", and this is evident as soon as one is confronted with the economic anthropological literature. In addition to what has been mentioned, we would like to mention six areas where economic sociologists can benefit from an intellectual encounter with economic anthropology: Infor-

mation asymmetries, uncertainty, trust, the concept of economic actors, economies and markets without a state and modes of circulation within advanced industrial societies and markets.

The structural conception of uncertainty was introduced to the field of sociology from the discipline of economics, in an attempt to apply the theory of market exchange to the study of hierarchical structures and their respective environments (Simon 1957). Uncertainty is commonly presented in organization studies as a given structural element of the environment that organizations should try to reduce by devising an array of strategies. Within the "resource dependence" school, such strategies include "buffering" and "bridging" (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Another common strategy for organizations facing uncertainty is to place the exchange process within a hierarchy, rather than within markets (Williamson 1985). While the concept of uncertainty is central to organization studies and economic sociology, its theoretical foundations remain underdeveloped (Milliken 1987). A possible remedy is the literature within economic anthropology. In fact, there has been a long tradition in economic anthropology of craft market studies in pre-industrial and more recently in advanced societies (Epstein 1962; Firth 1939; Geertz 1978). According to some of this literature, sellers in craft markets possess intimate knowledge of a product's quality, origin and production costs that they are reluctant to share with buyers. This asymmetry in knowledge distribution, to use the terminology of the economics of information, leads buyers to try to overcome product uncertainty by engaging in an intensive search for detailed information about the specific product being exchanged. There are indications of a cross fertilization between economics of information and economic anthropology (see for example Akerlof's paper [1970] on *The Market for Lemons* and Geertz's [1978] paper on *The Bazaar Economy*). The detailed descriptions of local market mechanisms designed to reduce market uncertainty have influenced some sociologists, specifically those writing about markets and trust (see Gambetta [1993] on the Sicilian horse market and Zucker (1986) about the institutionalization of trust. The literature about market uncertainty and inter-organizational relations (Podolny 1994), and Uzzi's (1997) distinction between arm's length and embedded social ties grew out of a dialogue with transaction-cost economics and economics of information, but also with specific reference to economic anthropology. Similarly, Smith's book about *Auctions* (1990) is another example of a fruitful encounter between eco-

conomic sociologists and anthropologists around the issues of uncertainty and trust.

Sociologists have taken up Bourdieu's structural ideas, but perhaps paid less attention to what he has to say about agency, action and people, which are classical anthropological aspects. We claim that his discussion of time and economic habitus can contribute to the development of a more comprehensive depiction of economic action. We should remember that anthropological theory of "action" is rooted in a more all-encompassing view of human beings. Sociology and economics have to different degrees, though in both cases essentially apriori, excluded the important dimension of action, such as time and practical reasoning. Bourdieu is more than able to express this idea:

*Homo economicus, as conceived (tacitly or explicitly) by economic orthodoxy, is a kind of anthropological monster: this theoretically minded man of practice is the most extreme personification of the scholastic fallacy [...] by which the scholar puts into the heads of the agents he is studying [...] the theoretical considerations and constructions he has had to develop to account for their practices (Bourdieu 2005:83).*

It is also possible to learn from studies of societies without a state conducted within economic anthropology. These studies can, for example, inform us about informal economies, and essential institutions and conditions other than those created by the state. Sociology has always been related to the state, and in some countries, like the Nordic welfare countries, the origin of the discipline is intimately linked to the policy questions emerging from the constructing of the welfare state. Anthropology has studied social life coordinated without states. This is not only interesting from an empirical point of view, but is also theoretically interesting. More concretely, how important is the state for the economy, and the existence of markets? To rethink the premises, as one has to do in this case, is refreshing, and potentially useful for the development of our understanding of the economy.

Finally, in a more recent wave of studies economic anthropologists have come to question the implicit associations between capitalist societies and the commodity form, and between pre-industrial societies and the gift form, an association so central to Marcel Mauss' classical work *The Gift*. Here, we would like to point to James Carrier (1995) who offers a critical examination of this association. He claims that the association between capitalist societies and the commodity form has an ideological aspect by which it

naturalizes and essentializes the notion of a market in advanced economies, rather than expose the political nature and social embeddedness of these markets. More recent studies focus on different modes of circulation such as commodity, barter and gifts exchange, which exists in the midst of advanced economies (see Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 1992), and even point to transitions among these categories in the course of economic transactions. For example, scholars have described how on top of formal economic explanations, gifting networks can partly explain China's steady economic growth since the late 1970s (Smart 1998: 559-560). The focus is on the construction and maintenance of personal networks (*guanxi*) in China (Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996) and among Chinese expatriates and local entrepreneurs (Smart 1998), which lubricate the huge investment of Hong Kong and other Chinese entrepreneurs in their homeland. Gift exchange in the midst of advanced economies appears even in surprising contexts such as the circulation of open source software (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001).

Herrmann (1997), in her analysis of garage sales in the US, demonstrates how forms of circulation can fluctuate between gift and commodity, depending on the specific social context and social relationships between the sellers and the buyers. Garage sale transactions are constructed by the sellers and buyers as market exchange, although they are often gift-like, and sometimes involve personal items priced extremely low or even given out for free.

The growing literature on forms of circulation in advanced economies could benefit economic sociologists in their attempts to move away, as Callon (1998) suggests, from the study of the *market* to the study of the *marketplace*. The former relates to a body of theoretical knowledge and practice and depicts an abstract entity in which "supply and demand confront each other and adjust themselves in search of a compromise" (Callon 1998: 1). The latter relates to the practical activity of social agents at the location in which sales interactions unfold. We believe that the marketplace in advanced economies deserves more attention from economic sociologists. More generally, and in the light of past and ongoing discussions among economic anthropologists, it is clear that anthropologists have a strong awareness about the distinction between markets that have emerged historically, and the more recently created markets, which is a topic in the discussion on performativity. Thus, a closer collaboration between sociologists and anthropologists on the central institution of markets would most likely be of great benefit to all.

## Sociological Reflections on Anthropology

This brief, and by necessity, incomplete survey nonetheless suggests a few things about the relationship between economic anthropology and economic sociology. It is already clear that in the overlap between Science and Technology Studies and Social Studies of Finance, one finds anthropologists and sociologists cooperating (e.g., MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007). But as Karin Knorr Cetina pointed out in the last issue of the *Newsletter* (Vol 8, Number 3), sociology of finance has been living somewhat a different life than economic sociology (cf. MacKenzie 2006). One reason why economic sociology and economic anthropology have so far not been closer may be methodological; anthropology is ethnographic, whereas economic sociology is more diversified.

Anthropology, with its accumulated evidence of variation of forms of social life of societies across time and space finds it hard to produce a general statement, either inductively or deductively (Carrier 2005:3). There is a risk that the anthropologists will drown in a sea of empirical evidence. Consequently, some anthropologists, like Radcliffe Brown, have made the argument that the discipline should progress to comparative analysis aiming at finding statements that are more general. Thus the central question of "distance" in theorizing, i.e., at what level one should develop a theory, is acute, and the problem is that if the theory is too grounded it is no longer a theory but merely a thick description. We think that anthropology can learn from the way the theory-evidence relation is handled in sociology; for example by developing middle range theories.

Moreover, contemporary anthropology, including economic anthropology is regarded by some as an endangered science (Kumoll 2005), because of three fundamental problems. To understand cultures and people "from the native's point of view" (Malinowski 1922) always involves a culturally-biased observer, whose subjective recordings sometimes tell more about the socio-cultural background of the researcher than about the subject being studied. A second problem revolves around the science's moral responsibility, and anthropology has in the past been accused of making statements in support of dubious colonial and post-colonial systems. The third problem comes from the science's changing object itself, which used to be a culturally and ethnically well-defined group bound to a specific world of meaning and geographical location. In

the course of an increasing number of cross-boundary interactions and dependencies, the idea of anthropology in terms of what “the field” is has to be revised.

There is, in sum, no doubt that modern economic sociology and modern economic anthropology have many things in common. Qualitatively oriented sociologists in particular will find it easy to access the anthropological literature. But one should not underestimate the differences between the two disciplines. Anthropologists often take a broader look at social agents, and locate their actions within a broader context. The same is true of their view of the economy. Nevertheless, we believe that while the engagement with economic anthropology has already proved fruitful, it could and should be increased to the benefit of the two disciplines.

## Suggested readings

For those interested in broadening their acquaintance with major works within the field of economic anthropology we suggest the following classical texts. First of all we mention Malinowski, either his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Malinowski 1922), or for the less patient reader, the two shorter pieces (Malinowski 1920; 1921). Polanyi (e.g., 1957b) could of course be included, though he was an economic historian, and he is normally known by sociologists. The book on the gift by Mauss also constitutes an important basic reading. Then we suggest the review article by George Dalton (1969), especially since it includes comments from 23 anthropologists and gives the reader a very good insight into how anthropologists think and reason. Finally, we recommend the recently published *Handbook of Economic Anthropology*, edited by James Carrier (2005), which gives the reader a good overview, though the texts are shorter compared to the economic sociology handbook of Smelser and Swedberg. The textbook by Wilk and Cliggett (2007) can be used in classes, it also provides a good introduction, and it has an appendix with many sources in economic anthropology.

## Key people

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1884-1942)

Mauss, Marcel (1872-1950)

Polanyi, Karl (1886-1964)

Firth, Raymond (1901-2002)

Geertz, Clifford (1926-2006)

Hart, Keith (1943\*)

Plattner, Stuart (1939\*)

Bourdieu, Pierre (1930-2002)

## Web Pages, Organizations and Journals

Association for Economic Anthropology:

<http://sea.org.ohio-state.edu/>

Socio-Anthropologie

( <http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/> )

## Endnotes

1 Patrik Aspers is research fellow and Sebastian Kohl is research assistant at the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. Asaf Darr is a senior lecturer and the head of the Organization Studies Group at the University of Haifa, Israel. He is the author of *Selling Technology: The Changing Shape of Sales in an Information Economy* published in 2006 by Cornell University Press. His e-mail is: [adarr@univ.haifa.ac.il](mailto:adarr@univ.haifa.ac.il).

2 Interestingly, some see modern network theory in sociology, as partly emerging out of classical anthropology. **Azarian, Reza. 2003.** *The General Sociology of Harrison White*. Stockholm: Department of Sociology, Stockholm University.

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