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## Preface and acknowledgements

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Those who work in economic anthropology are aware of the importance of the economy in public thought and debate. In retrospect, Adam Smith might well have titled his book *The health of nations*, for in our day, if not in his, it seems that the health of a country is defined by its wealth, just as the final judgement of an activity is its bottom line, how it gains or loses money. And overweening in our day is economics, whether the formal, theoretical economics of scholars like Gary Becker, the more applied economics of bodies like the Federal Reserve Board or the Bank of England, or the less rigorous economics of public thought and debate.

This state of affairs is likely both to exhilarate and to distress anthropologists who work on economy. It exhilarates because it points out the importance of what they study, which is, after all, economic life. It is likely to distress because the economic life that they see in their research often looks so different from the world construed by those theoretical, applied and popular economics. And the word 'world' is not simple hyperbole, for economics, talk of economy, touches on and assumes so much about human life: what it means to be a person, how people think and act, what value is and what is valued, how people relate to and deal with one another.

Perhaps the exhilaration, or maybe just the prospect of it, outweighs the distress at the start of the century. The end of history that was foretold with the fall of the Berlin Wall has not come to pass. The economic policies and assumptions that came to predominate in the United Kingdom and the United States, and the Washington Consensus that sought to make those policies and assumptions global, look much less secure panaceas than they did when they were presented, bright and shiny, by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The neoliberalism and free trade of the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund attract significant dissent.

In such times, it is understandable that economic anthropologists would have some hope that their view of the world, the world implied in their view of economic life, might stimulate those who think not just about the wealth of nations, but also about their health. Indeed, in the past few years there has been a minor boom in works by economic anthropologists that, explicitly or implicitly, challenge not just specific elements of conventional economic thought, but also the fundamental ways that it construes economic life and social life more generally.

Thus it is that this handbook is timely. Saying this does not mean that dissent strides across each page, parading itself in capital letters. That is not

the purpose of this work, which is one of reference rather than advocacy. Rather, what the contributors do in their chapters is present the texture of the sub-discipline's view of economic life. Moreover, that texture does not uniformly provide grounds for dissent: careful readers will see much that accords with conventional economic thought of one sort or another. However, those careful readers also will see that even the chapters that accord with that thought exhibit a more profound questioning. This questioning sees that thought not as a self-evident truth or a valid statement about human nature, but as a rough model that seems to work in specific areas of specific people's lives and, moreover, that seems to do so for social and political reasons. But this is to be expected of economic anthropologists, who are concerned not with the nature of economic thought and action in themselves, but with the place of economy in people's lives and thoughts.

This handbook is unlike any project I have undertaken. This is true not only of its scope, but also of its purpose and intended readership. I am used to works that revolve around a central argument or theme; this one, instead, is more one of reference and consultation. I am used to works that have a fairly narrow focus; this one covers a sub-discipline. I am used to works that have seven or eight contributors at most; this one has over thirty. I am used to works that are aimed at fellow anthropologists who might be interested in its theme; this one is aimed at those outside the discipline who might be interested in what economic anthropologists have to say about one or another aspect of social or economic life.

All these differences mean that I have had to draw on the advice and knowledge of many people. Almost all the contributors were helpful in suggesting people I might approach for other contributions; and all of them were not only tolerant of my editorial nervousness, but also helped me to see where I was wrong, and did so gracefully. The contributors have my thanks.

There are, however, people whom I pestered for help more than others, and who provided help in surprising amounts. These people deserve special mention, not least because some of them were unable to contribute to this handbook because of the burden of their existing work. They are John Comaroff, Fred Damon, Jerry Eades, Richard Fardon, Stephen Gudeman, Chris Hann, Keith Hart, Danny Miller, Alan Smart and Richard Wilk. I hope that they are satisfied with the results of their help, and with my modest thanks.