Introduction to A Research Agenda for Economic Anthropology

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Contemporary anthropological study of economy traces its disciplinary roots back to the first decades of the twentieth century. Early scholars approached people's economic activities as part of their study of social life, practice and organisation as a whole. This work marked out attributes of economic anthropology that remained important until the closing decades of that century.

One of those attributes, already mentioned, is that economic activities were approached as part of people's lives generally, linked with, affecting and affected by religion, kinship, politics and the rest, to form a unity that could be seen as a whole, even if not necessarily a very tidy one. This set that study off from conventional economics, which generally saw economy as a distinct realm that was studied and thought about in isolation from the rest of social life. A second important attribute emerged from the places where those early anthropologists did their research, small societies that lacked the money and market systems that were important in the countries that were home to those anthropologists. Again, this was different from conventional economics, which was concerned primarily with those home countries, large societies characterised by monetary transactions in the market.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, first the economists and then the anthropologists began to shift their orientation. For the economists, the macroeconomic interest in economic systems, which had been important since the 1930s, gave way to interest in the transactions between autonomous individuals that characterised neoclassical economics. For the anthropologists, the study of small-scale societies, what came to be called grass-hut or mud-hut anthropology, began to give way to the study of people in much larger, monetised and market-oriented places, ranging from small-holders in Central America who grow coffee for international buyers to people in London shopping in supermarkets and people in Muncie, Indiana, celebrating Christmas. The reasons for the change in orientation in both disciplines are complex. However, one consequence was that anthropologists and economists increasingly were concerned with the same sorts of people in the same sorts of societies.

To understand the present state of the sub-discipline, and to understand the significance of the research agendas of economic anthropology that are laid out by the

contributors to this volume, it is important to understand how we got to that state. I present a sketch of that journey now.

Economic anthropology in the twentieth century

I said that the foundations of the sub-discipline were laid early in the twentieth century. The two people from that era who are best remembered probably are Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss. The former is known for his work on the kula, a regional system of exchange in the islands in the east of what is now Papua New Guinea (Malinowski 1922). The latter is best known for his synthetic description of the ways that gift exchange obligates people to each other in societies where it is important, ranging from Melanesia and the Pacific Northwest through India and ancient Germany (Mauss 1990 [1925]).

Malinowski was an inveterate field worker while Mauss was an analyst and theoretician, and both wrote about societies that were alien to the Western Europe where they lived and worked. It would be wrong, however, to think that the description and analysis of people in alien places and times was their only goal. Certainly they sought that, but in some ways that was a means to a further end. That end was increasing our understanding of the Western societies that were home both to them and to the vast majority of their readers. For Malinowski (e.g. 1921) an important question was how people understand the giving and getting that were central to the circulation of things on Kiriwina, the small island that was the focus of his research. Mauss addressed a similar question, and particularly how those understandings differed in different societies, including (1990 [1925]: chapter 4; see also Parry 1986) how they had changed following the emergence of commercial capitalism in Europe. Neither man, then, was concerned solely with the description of alien societies, practices and cultures, for both used these to reflect in different ways on the West with which they were familiar. For them, that is, the work that they did was concerned with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) called the Savage Slot, using their descriptions of others to reflect upon themselves.

That reflection entailed a questioning, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, of the approach to economic activity that was common in the discipline of economics since the nineteenth century and that has been dominant since the 1970s. That approach had its roots in Adam Smith's *The wealth of nations*. Smith wrote many things in that work, but important among them was that economic activity rests on the decisions of autonomous individuals who calculate what it is among the things on offer that best serves their own interests given the resources that they have at hand. As he (1976 [1776]: 18) put it, 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest', so that, in our dealings with our fellows, 'We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages.' This view, of calculating individuals facing choices, came to be extended beyond the realm of market transaction that concerned Smith to life

in general. This is explicit in an influential work by a British economist in the 1930s, Lionel Robbins. He said that the focus of the discipline of economics is economic reasoning: 'Economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses' (Robbins 1945 [1932]: 16). Moreover, he was clear that this reasoning is by no means restricted to buying and selling, giving and getting: 'The distribution of time between prayer and good works has its economic aspect equally with the distribution of time between orgies and slumber' (1945 [1932]: 26).

Thus it was that most anthropologists, concerned with people's thoughts and actions in their economic lives, studied something different from most economists, concerned with economic reasoning. The two approaches were thrashed out in the only time when economists and anthropologists confronted each other intellectually in a sustained way. That was the formalist–substantivist debate around the 1960s, each side touting the virtues of its own approach and criticising the shortcomings of the other. The debate took its name from the distinction that Karl Polanyi (1957: 243) drew between two meanings of 'economic'. The one that he called 'formal' is concerned with 'the logical character of the means–ends relationship', Robbins's concern with allocating scarce resources among alternative ends. The one that he called 'substantive' is concerned with how people acquire 'the means of material want satisfaction', the processes, activities and relationships through which people secure their livelihoods. The debate, of course, ultimately was sterile because the two sides largely were talking past each other. Though both sides invoked 'economy', the word meant different things to them, so different that resolution was impossible (Carrier 2009).

While the debate may have been sterile, commonly the formalists, with their economic approach, were seen to have won, and perhaps because of that a decline in economic anthropology followed. Rather, it might be more accurate to say that the sub-discipline was reoriented, for many became interested in economic processes that were of larger scale and more systemic than what had interested earlier researchers. For the Marxists this meant things like the structure of capitalism (e.g. Althusser and Balibar 1970) and the articulation of modes of production (e.g. Wolpe 1980). For others it meant things like world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974) and the question of underdevelopment (Frank 1966). None of these placed much stress on detailed ethnographic description of the sort that characterised older work in the sub-discipline.

The declining visibility of economic anthropology occurred around the same time as important changes in the discipline as a whole. One of these is the Cultural Turn of the 1970s and its consequences, which resulted in anthropologists being decreasingly concerned with social organisation and practice. Instead, they attended more and more to meaning, increasingly to what things mean to smaller and smaller sets of people; not just the X people, but small subsets of them, such as those of the same gender, age, marital status, religion, economic position, and so on and so forth. Associated with this, increasingly they denied themselves a place on

which to stand, one that would provide them with an analytical perspective on what they observed. That is because they saw their job increasingly as recording people's culture, the way that they saw meaning in their world, rather than analysing it or relating it to the social organisation and practice in which the people they studied found themselves. In this reluctance to engage in more than description, many in the discipline rejected one of the two legs on which, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) said, anthropology stood. One of these he called ethnography, the description of what the researcher sees in the particular place and time of field work. The other he called comparative sociology, producing reasonably valid generalisations about aspects of social life in a range of settings and societies. Finally, anthropology became more overtly a moral discipline, as Trouillot's Savage Slot came to be replaced by the Suffering Slot (Robbins 2013). That is, many in the discipline saw their task as representing the voice of the downtrodden, particularly when those downtrodden seemed to hold or represent views that accorded with the dominant moral and political orientations in anthropology (see Carrier 2016: chapter 3).

This situation began to change as the world changed in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s and afterward. Globalisation became insistent, communism ended, free-market capitalism seemed triumphant not only in economies but also in government policies and public debate. These large-scale events that had clear economic effects, combined with events in anthropology generally, seem to have led to a resurgence of anthropological interest in economy. In the discipline generally, and for a number of reasons, anthropologists were abandoning conventional research in villages and instead were studying parts of Western societies. As well, many were motivated to investigate the practical consequences of changes that appeared to be the result of globalisation and what came to be called neoliberalism.

These tendencies in the sub-discipline became more powerful with the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession and waves of austerity that followed. While anthropologists may have remained focused on the downtrodden, a growing number of them were paying attention to structures and processes, especially in the financial sector in different countries. These shaped people's lives but were likely to be invisible to them and so not part of their culture and universe of meanings in any obvious way. Moreover, the rising nationalism and Right-wing protest that was associated with that austerity made a growing number of anthropologists question the wisdom of the disciplinary tendency to focus on those who accorded with anthropological sensibilities. Researchers may not have liked supporters of Le Pen in France, the Northern League in Italy, Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the United States or Pegida and the AfD in Germany. Increasingly, though, they realised that if they were to understand what was going in the world, much less in those countries, they could not dismiss such people as distasteful aberrations who safely could be ignored, however comforting that methodical ignorance might have been.

The result was that economic anthropologists were studying what economists studied, people in large social systems that were dominated by capitalist free markets.

They did so, however, in very different ways. Economics continued to concern itself with the analytical models of what Robbins described in the 1930s, calculating individuals deciding how to allocate their scarce resources among alternative ends. On the other hand, economic anthropologists continued their old substantivist concern with the economic systems through which people secured, or sought to secure, their subsistence: what they are, how they work and how they reflect and affect people's lives, circumstances and aspirations.

This does not mean, of course, that the economic anthropology of the opening decades of the twenty-first century is the same as it was in the opening decades of the twentieth. I have already mentioned one difference, that economic anthropologists are more likely to study people who live in cities, have jobs, shop in supermarkets and use computers than they are to study subsistence agriculturalists who live in villages full of grass huts.

Another difference is less obvious but is perhaps more important. Early scholars were concerned with building economic anthropology, and anthropology more generally, as a recognisable and fairly coherent intellectual field. The consequence of this was that their orientations and the questions that they asked were likely to be shaped in significant ways by what was going on within their discipline and sub-discipline. This is most striking in another of the founders, though one who attracts less attention than hitherto, Emile Durkheim. As illustrated most clearly in *The division of labour in society* (Durkheim 1984 [1893]), he was concerned with arguing for the existence of society as a thing and with trying to describe its nature: not this society or that society, but society itself. However, beginning late in the twentieth century and insistently since the financial crisis, economic anthropologists' orientations and the questions that they ask increasingly have been shaped by events in the world: globalisation, the spread of neoliberalism, the financial crisis, turmoil in the housing market in various countries, austerity.

Increasingly, that is, we seem more concerned with responding to and describing what is going on in the world than with developing and extending the analytical models and theoretical frames that make up our way of thinking about and making sense of the world. Certainly, a study of the effects of government austerity in central Italy is likely to attract more interest than an analysis of forms of circulation in a small society in Papua New Guinea. It will take some time, however, to tell if the result is to make economic anthropology a better discipline.

About this volume

I have described some of the recent events and trends in the world, the discipline and the sub-discipline, and they are the background that helps explain the focus and significance of the chapters that follow. It is worth explaining how those chapters came to be.

Once I decided to accept the invitation to put together a volume on a research agenda for economic anthropology I started to communicate with anthropologists, economic and other. I explained the nature of the project and asked them for suggestions of topics that might be included in it. Even though several topics were suggested by many people, the result was well over a hundred different ones. Reluctant to approach the publisher with a request to turn this into a multi-volume work, I set about trying to reduce that mass of different and fairly detailed suggestions into a more manageable set of more general topics, each intended to incorporate a number of specific suggestions.

I then approached the more knowledgeable people I knew and asked if they wanted to write on one or another topic, and if they knew of other people whom I might approach. The result was a set of topics and people who were competent to write chapters on them and were willing to do so. Collective exercises like this one are always somewhat chancy. In this case one person dropped out and I recruited another person to write on a different topic. The result is what you see here, some chapters written by senior scholars and some by those earlier in their academic careers.

As will become obvious in the paragraphs that follow, those chapters are not intended to survey work on topics in economic anthropology. Of course they refer to such work, but their orientation is different. That is because the authors are telling us what we should be doing, whether by identifying topics that have not attracted the interest they deserve or by describing new ways to approach existing topics. They are not, then, surveys of where we are, but are suggestions about where we ought to go.

I do not intend to describe the chapters in detail, but a few comments seem in order.

To begin with, in view of what I said about the tendency to focus on the down-trodden provided that they accord with anthropological sensibilities, it is worth pointing to two chapters that express unease with this tendency. They are the last two chapters, one by Andreas Streinzer and the other by Mark Moberg. Streinzer's chapter is concerned with ethics and consumption, and he argues that if we are to learn how people's values shape their consumption choices, we must not restrict ourselves to those who have values of which we approve. Moberg's is concerned with our approach to the world more generally, and he illustrates his arguments with the dismissive view that many anthropologists had of supporters of Donald Trump during the campaign for the US presidency in 2016. That view echoed a comment by Trump's opponent in the campaign, Hillary Clinton, who called them deplorable. Of course this led to bumper stickers and T-shirts with slogans like 'Proud to be deplorable'. In their different ways, then, both chapters say that our research on and analysis of the world would benefit if we adopted something like the value neutrality that Max Weber (e.g. 1949) long ago advocated for the social sciences. Of course we have our values and political orientations, but we should not let them blind us to the world that we study.

Some of the authors in this volume suggest that there is much to be gained from pursuing topics that have attracted relatively little attention in the sub-discipline. Greg Urban, for instance, urges us to study what is central to modern capitalism, for-profit corporations, which he approaches as collective economic actors. As he notes, we make many assumptions about corporations on the basis of relatively little knowledge, and he says that our understanding of the economic world around us is impoverished as a result. A second chapter that urges research on a topic that we generally have ignored is by Jaume Franquesa and is concerned with resources. For him, those are aspects of our natural surroundings that humans appropriate for their use. As he presents it, the study of resources covers a range of things, from the appropriation of nature through the social and economic organisation of that appropriation to the creation of wasteland and scrub once the resources in a place have been exhausted. The third of these chapters is by Stefan Leins, who says that we should heed Laura Nader's (1972) famous injunction to study up, and investigate management of various sorts, whether managing people in an organisation, objects in a supply chain or other people's money in the financial sector. We may think that managers do little work and that the little that they do is not real. He says, however, that we need to overcome this prejudice if we are to understand what managers do and how the economy works.

The remaining chapters suggest new ways of approaching existing topics in economic anthropology. So, in his chapter on the relationship between states and markets, Felix Stein observes that, perhaps stimulated by globalisation and the spread of neoliberalism, much recent work has seen them as standing opposed to each other in important ways. However, he argues that this view has a cost, for it diverts attention from features that are common to both. One is financialisation, a term that he extends to include the technologies of financial accounting and representation, down to the level of the ubiquitous Excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations. The other is ritual, an old anthropological topic, which he uses to identify activities that strengthen and express collective entities in both state and market, and the values that justify them. Tom Neumark's chapter considers how we might approach inequality. He says that the dominant anthropological view directs our attention to production, while it would be useful to look at how surplus is appropriated and distributed, whether through informal arrangements or through mechanisms like taxation. In addition, that dominant view tends to ignore the morality of inequality. As he notes, people's objections to inequality often are concerned not with the inequality itself, but with the failure of parties to the unequal relationship to treat each other as they ought.

Fabio Mattioli's chapter, on debt, argues that much research on the topic has attended to the place of debt in everyday lives and its effects on those lives. He urges us to look beyond this, to attend as well to the ways that debt can take many different forms and so is not all of a piece, and to investigate the institutions and processes, often enough invisible to people in their everyday lives, that are part of the national and international system of loaning and borrowing money. Finally, Valeria Siniscalchi says in her chapter that we should extend our attention to social movements beyond the values that they hold and the ways that they advocate them.

In addition, we should attend to the organisations in those movements, how they are structured and financed, and the ways that these organisational nuts and bolts can reflect and affect the lives and orientations of adherents and can shape the future of the organisation.

Conclusion

In this Introduction I have sketched the development of economic anthropology, shaped by changes in the world and in the larger discipline, and have described briefly some of the important points in the chapters that follow.

As that sketch indicated, the sub-discipline has changed in substantial ways since the 1990s and especially since the financial crisis of 2008. The restrictive focus on the culture of sets of people, at the expense of the organisation of their societies and the factors that affect it, seemingly has been losing its appeal, and it would be hard to justify its continued embrace in the face of the effects on those people's lives of institutions and practices occurring far away from, and probably invisible to, them. After all, no one but a specialist or a devoted reader of business news was likely to have heard of collateralised debt obligations, their relationship with the housing market in many countries and what their effects were likely to be if the widespread boom in housing prices turned sour.

This does not mean that we have abandoned interest in culture, in beliefs, values and how people see and think about their world. Indeed, several of the contributors to this volume pay close attention to it. However, theirs is not the task that many anthropologists seem to have assigned themselves in the heyday of the Cultural Turn and the associated wave of postmodern anthropology. That task was rendering people's culture as fully as possible while refraining from seeking to analyse or account for it in any sustained way. Instead, for the contributors to this volume, culture and its effects are things to be analysed and understood, including the culture of anthropologists themselves.

The chapters in this volume are, to an important degree, idiosyncratic, reflecting assessments of what is going on in the sub-discipline that I have made and that have been made by those from whom I sought advice, as well as reflecting the specific interests and ideas of chapter authors. To repeat a point that I have made already, this volume is no handy compendium of where the sub-discipline is headed, nor is it intended to be one. Rather, readers should treat it as a collection of stimulating ideas about topics that have not attracted attention but deserve to do so, about familiar topics that we could approach in new ways and, as I have noted, about our own predilections as we look at the world around us.

If readers are stimulated, even excited, by what they read in one or more of the chapters that follow, then this volume will have justified the effort and attention that the chapter authors and I have devoted to it.

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