
Preface and acknowledgements

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 Howard 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 long-standing tendency has, of course, been strengthened by the financial crisis that began in 2007–08: what had been important begins to look urgent.

This state of affairs is likely both to exhilarate and to distress anthropologists who work on economy. It is likely to exhilarate 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. 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 that characterised the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund attract significant dissent. The recent economic crisis has strengthened the growing doubts that many people had concerning the policies and programmes and ways of thinking that dominated in the closing quarter of the twentieth century. 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 decade 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 the original edition of this handbook was timely, and that this revision is, perhaps, even more so. 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 subdiscipline'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.

As I said in the preface to the first edition, 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. Those differences meant that I had to draw on the advice and knowledge of many people. Because this revised edition builds on the earlier one, my task has been easier, and experience has made it less alien. Even so, I remain indebted to people for their help and advice. Some of that was offered when I was thinking about what new topics should be covered in this revision and when I was thinking about replacements for authors whose press of work meant that they could not revise their chapters. That help and advice was especially important when I was considering the section on the financial crisis, which is new to this edition.

Many of the contributors to this volume, and many other people, were helpful with their thoughts and suggestions. However, as with the first edition, there were people who were especially helpful as I formulated my ideas and sought potential contributors, and they deserve special mention. They are Michael Blim, Chris Hann, Keith Hart and Bill Maurer. I hope that they are satisfied with the results of their help, and with my modest thanks.

