

DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY TO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

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Keywords: Economic anthropology, international development, economic rationality, social structure, inequality, social differentiation, poverty, colonialism, dependency theory, development anthropology

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Summary

This chapter examines the contributions of economic anthropology to international development practice. It provides an overview of three basic models in economic anthropology. Social models, both social-structural and political-economic, emphasize how the economy is embedded in society's structures. The self-interest model focuses on individuals as rational decision-makers who allocate scarce resources to alternative goals. The cultural model focuses on ideas and values that motivate action. Most economic anthropologists use social and/or self-interest models; social models are anthropology's distinctive contribution to development. The chapter then discusses international development practice, which began during colonialism and grew as colonies became independent. Early 1950s and 1960s initiatives were oriented by modernization theory, which suggested that developing countries lacked the characteristics of developed countries; development was to provide these through rapid, large-scale, and sustained economic growth. In the mid-1960s, dependency theory focused on understanding international and national inequality. In the 1980s, neoliberals argued that countries could develop by removing barriers to the efficient operation of markets. No single approach led to universal economic growth, so development practitioners continue to search for better models. Many now conceptualize development as more than improved economies; they focus on increasing human rights, creating sustainable livelihoods, and enhancing participation. Economic anthropologists have used their models to contribute to international development. Social-structural models have shown how local collectivities shape people's lives, the dependence of cultural frameworks on social structures and physical environments, and local differentiation and inequality. Political economic models have documented the effects

of external structures, unequal distribution of benefits, the value of local autonomy, and the workings of development programs. Self-interest models use a broad definition of resources and have shown trade-offs among goals, the importance of basic survival, and investment in social relations. Combining social and self-interest models has shown the importance of contradictions within structures, how different structures are interrelated, the fluidity of structures, and the cross-cultural nature of development projects. Anthropological insights are based on empirical methods, including attention to practice, ideas, variation, and the gap between predicted and actual data.

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the contributions of economic anthropology to international development practice. The discipline of international development took shape after World War II, with the goal of reducing world poverty by stimulating growth and raising living standards, especially in newly independent countries. When it became clear that economic growth alone did not lead to improvement for all, more attention was directed at inequality and spreading benefits more widely. More recently, the field has recognized that achieving better living standards means more than economic growth and increased equality. Development practitioners now plan and carry out programs to improve education, health, the environment, and human rights, etc.

Anthropology, which seeks to understand societies and cultures throughout the world, is well placed to address questions about development. By contextualizing economic systems in relationship to their political, social, and cultural environments, anthropology avoids considering economies in isolation from the rest of society. Anthropology also offers tools and methods for understanding and facilitating social change. This chapter looks at how the concepts and methods of economic anthropology, the subdiscipline that specializes in economic systems, have contributed to international development.

Material on international development is vast and a single chapter cannot cover it all. This chapter concentrates on models that orient development practice, particularly middle-range theories that predict relationships between actions and short-term effects. Practitioners also use broader explicit or implicit theoretical paradigms, but their focus is how change can be facilitated. Theoretical paradigms that link underdevelopment to historical circumstances may be important for deeper understanding, but history cannot be changed. Second, this chapter looks primarily at the developing countries of the global South (Many analysts differentiate the world into two major parts, although the terminologies vary: developed vs. underdeveloped or developing countries; cores vs. peripheries; the West vs. the non-West; the global North vs. the global South. Each set of terms invokes a particular theoretical stance. I have chosen the terminology of developed vs. developing because it is relatively neutral and avoids negative cultural assumptions about the poorer areas of the world.). Initiatives for economic and social change also occur within developed countries, often using the same concepts and methods, but they are beyond the scope of this chapter. Third, because this chapter is in English, it relies mostly, although not exclusively, on materials from the English-speaking world. With few exceptions, the works cited are formally published or on accessible public Internet sites; much development material, however, is not formally published or is in restricted circulation.

The chapter does include authors who have not self-identified as economic anthropologists or even anthropologists. Researchers inspired by the approaches of economic anthropology include a broad range of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and some economists.

The chapter has four sections. The first provides an overview of economic anthropology and its theoretical perspectives. The second looks at international development practice. The third shows the contributions of economic anthropology to international development practice through selected issues and examples. The conclusion highlights some contemporary aspects of anthropological participation in international development practice.

2. Economic Anthropology

Economics primarily studies contemporary societies in which the dominant mode of exchange is the market. Economists generally divide their field into macroeconomics, which studies the performance and structure of entire national, or even global, economies, and microeconomics, whose focus is decision-making by individuals, households, or firms. The goal in microeconomics is to understand rational decision making that maximizes utility (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:34).

Economic anthropology is the use of anthropological tools to understand diverse structures of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Given their interest in diverse societies, anthropologists seek to understand economic systems and economic behavior that may follow rules different from those in contemporary market-based economies. In their useful synthesis of economic anthropology, Wilk and Cliggett (2007) have outlined three different paradigms (social, self-interest, and cultural models) that economic anthropologists have used to understand economic structures and behavior.

2.1. Social Models: Social-structural and Political-economic

Social models focus on groups, the standard disciplinary concern of anthropologists (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:83-115). They start from the assumption that humans are social; they live and act in groups, whose structures and values constrain individual choice and action. In social models, neither economy nor society is the aggregate of individual behavior, but something greater with its own logic and rules. There are two major varieties of social models: social-structural and political-economic (Wilk and Cliggett 2007).

The social-structural model is based on the work of Emile Durkheim, who saw social life as a source of harmony and strength. Human society depended upon cooperation, which in turn required the suppression of self-interest in the goals of the group. The values of society, shaped and reinforced through human interaction, enhanced the conditions that maintained societal existence; thus successful social systems existed in an equilibrium that privileged preservation over change.

The political-economic model is based on the work of Karl Marx, who focused on

societal conflict and inequality. In this model, the basic source of conflict is the unequal distribution of private property across classes. Inequality is structured through the mode of production, which facilitates or constrains access to resources, including land, labor, and capital. Because social class was the primary form of differentiation within a society, political struggle over distribution of resources and power took place between classes.

Although the two models proposed different views of societal integration, both started from the assumption that the economy was embedded in societal structures and expressed in social values. Both Marx and Durkheim advocated government intervention in economic affairs, with the goal of creating a more just society and economy.

Durkheim's understanding of societal harmony became foundational to British Social Anthropology, the dominant paradigm in cultural anthropology in the mid-twentieth century. Within this paradigm, the economy was one of many social institutions that served to integrate and maintain society (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:103). By the late twentieth century, rapid social change and visible conflict led anthropologists to consider the idea of societal equilibrium increasingly problematic. Thus anthropologists interested in exploring the effects of social constraints turned to models that looked at conflict and inequality, many inspired by Marxism. They looked at non-capitalist as well as capitalist societies, at differentiation of power as well as economic resources. Social models formed the foundation for substantivist economic anthropology, which considered the economy a human activity embedded in social institutions (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:12). For substantivists, each social system had distinctive institutions that constrained economic goals and the possible means to attain them. Living everyday lives within the context of these institutions influenced the development of specific economic conceptions and logics among different groups.

The basic critique of both social approaches is that they did not allow for the expression of human agency through strategizing and innovation. Rather, in their strongest form, both social-structural and political-economic models understood societal or class institutions and the values that flow from them as determinants of human behavior. This rigid determinism led to criticism of classic British social anthropology by the mid-1960s (e.g. Barth 1965; Leach 1964). Although some Marxists argued that their paradigms were not deterministic because they were premised on social change, others saw the constraints posed by class as a form of strong determinism. Thus, social scientists have struggled to find ways to introduce choice and agency into Marxist models. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) proposed practice theory as a way to understand how people used strategic thinking to pursue their interests despite unequal social structures and the embodiment of unconscious assumptions in individual behavior. He also proposed that social structures were not seamless, but fragmented; the ruptures provided space for innovative action. For example, he argued that educational systems were partially autonomous from larger economic and political structures, which permitted the development of somewhat different economic conceptions and logic among educators and the dominant class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). He also proposed that there was competition for political control among those holding different forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social); this competition was a potential source social

innovation and change (Bourdieu 1984). Wolf (1999) sought to understand the role of ideology and human action in creating as well as reinforcing the structural foundations of power.

Other theorists argued that class was not the only major division or source of societal conflict. Differences such as gender, race, and ethnicity also created societal cleavages and led to contradictory interests. Conflict and negotiation along these cleavages also allowed for use of individual agency and social and cultural change (Wilk and Cliggett 2007; Anthias 2001).

2.2. The Self-interest Model

In the self-interest model, the focus is on the individual as a rational decision-maker who allocates scarce resources to alternative goals. It overlaps substantially with the approach of contemporary microeconomics (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:49-81). In contemporary economic models, the primary goal is utility: anything that brings satisfaction to an individual. Although contemporary economists recognize that utility is not the same as money, they often measure it in monetary terms, emphasizing, for example, the maximization of profit. Anthropologists, in contrast, have been more likely to look at the other goals to which people aspire, particularly in societies where economic transactions are not mediated by money or market systems. However, even though goals may vary, the individual is still considered a rational decision-maker who makes choices.

Many economic anthropologists have been attracted to the self-interest model, in part because of their concern about the strong determinism of social models. Empirical research showed differences and conflict within societies and people's manipulation of social and cultural norms. Fredrik Barth (1965) showed how Pathan men in northern Pakistan manipulated cultural rules to advance their political careers, and Edmund Leach (1964) showed how the Kachin of northern Burma individually tried to exploit their resources to gain power, social recognition, and esteem.

While many anthropologists employed the self-interest model using research and analytic methods similar to earlier anthropology, others adopted formal economic models in an effort to bring more rigor and scientific method to the social sciences (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:9). The use by economic anthropologists of a self-interest model came to be known as formalism or formalist economic anthropology.

Even as many anthropologists adopted a self-interest model, they remained critical of some of its assumptions. In particular, many questioned the idea, known as methodological individualism, that society is best understood as the outcome of individual choices and behaviors. They found problematic the idea, dating from Adam Smith, that individual self-interest working through the market system produced the greatest possible good.

They also criticized, as did some economists, the assumptions behind models of economic decision-making. They argued that choices were not always made in free and open competitive market places with perfect information. Their research showed that

market imperfections and the costs of gathering information meant that people often had to make risky choices with little certainty of outcomes. Thus, people were often “satisficers” who set a minimum goal and adopted the first strategy that met it, rather than maximizers (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:72-73). They suggested that different goals could not always be substituted for one other; for example, people often valued producing sufficient food for their households over higher consumption. These understandings affected how people evaluated substitutability among different ends. They questioned the idea that households had unitary goals. Research showed that different household members, especially men and women, often allocated resources toward different goals.

In the mid-twentieth century, economic anthropology was dominated by a formalist-substantivist debate over whether analysts should privilege a social model that focused on the structures that constrain human choices or whether they should privilege the self-interested individual who makes choices. By the late 1970s, both sides claimed victory. Indeed, the key propositions that animated the debate - that all societies are composed of economically rational maximizing individuals and that the economy is embedded in social institutions - have both remained fundamental to economic anthropology (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:14). Today, many anthropologists working on development and social change use the self-interest model and some formal analytic methods (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:11). At the same time, they also use social-structural and political-economic models, which show how people’s self-interested choices are influenced and constrained by social and political economic circumstances.

2.3. The Cultural Model

The third paradigm is the cultural economics model (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:117-151). It is rooted in the work of Max Weber, who sought to understand the ideas and values that motivated people’s actions, including innovation. Cultural economists focus on culture as symbolic communication and systems of meaning. For example, Weber concentrated on the religious beliefs that provided shared motivations. He is best known for his essay on the new ethic of secular asceticism introduced by the Protestant religion, which permitted the accumulation and reinvestment of economic resources fundamental to the growth of capitalism (Weber 2005). Within contemporary anthropology, the cultural model is found primarily within interpretative anthropology, which draws attention to values and symbolic systems as the foundation of meaning and action. Formative figures of contemporary interpretive anthropology include Clifford Geertz (1973) and Marshall Sahlins (1985).

While interpretative anthropology has become important for the discipline of anthropology as a whole, it has been little used by economic anthropologists or development practitioners, in part, because it offers few strategies for intervention. Self-interest models might suggest how incentives could be modified; social models would propose structures to change. Cultural models suggest that values and how people think may need to be changed directly. However, cultural models also usually emphasize the tenacity of values and envision culture as a “black box” that cannot be explained in reference to environmental, economic, or socio-political circumstances. In use, the cultural model has reinforced the idea that backward cultures create conditions for

underdevelopment (Gilman 2002). The use of cultural models can lead to perspectives that self-interest models sought to combat, such as the idea that cultural values prevent strategic and innovative thinking. For example, cultural models have led to the culture of poverty concept, which proposed that poor people's values enhance their poverty (Major researchers who proposed and developed this idea linked the culture of poverty to the material and social conditions in which the poor lived (e.g., Lewis 1959:1-19), but as policy makers adopted the idea, it became more purely cultural.). More recently, some analysts have argued that Islam has led people to think in distinctive ways (Huntington 1997).

Although anthropologists in development have generally avoided cultural models, one use is to understand how the adoption of Protestant religions has affected people's embrace of development and innovation. Even though many have criticized Weber's data and the details of his argument (Wilk and Cliggett 2007:127), anthropologists have sought to understand the effects of new religious ideas upon people's actions in developing countries (e.g., Long 1968; Annis 1987; Laurent 1994).

2.4. Conclusion

Most economic anthropologists who work in the development field use social models, self-interest models, or a combination of the two. To the extent that they use self-interest models, their work overlaps strongly with that of economists. Insofar as they use social models or a combination of social and self-interest models, development anthropologists offer a distinctive contribution to development studies by questioning the dominance of economic models that view individuals as maximizers.

3. International Development

This section begins with a short history of the beginnings of development in the context of late European colonialism and the achievement of independence by developing countries. It then turns to a consideration of recent international development work.

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