ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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Summary

This chapter explores the main contributions and debates of Economic Anthropology, a field that has been developing considerably since the beginning of the 20th Century and that still enjoys a great vitality. It aims to provide a state of the art, always necessarily limited but general enough to help the reader to locate and understand the objectives of economic anthropology and its main areas of research. The introduction presents a synthetic definition of this sub-field, it outlines its main chronological phases, and it highlights the most relevant influences involved in its emergence. Forceful criticism of the precepts of neoclassical economics and a concern for the relationship between society, environment and economy, have been two central pillars of its initial development. Then the chapter describes and explains the three main theoretical roots of classical economic anthropology: substantivism, formalism, and the contributions of Marxist anthropology and its most representative schools. In line with the Marxist discussion two influential themes of analysis within this subfield are presented: peasant studies (especially in Latin America and Asia) and development, along with the discussion of moral economy and its main assumptions. Following a coherent narrative, the second part of this chapter is divided in three parts, and it focuses on production, distribution and consumption, as well as on details of what we consider to be the major substantive contributions: the analysis of primitive money, gift-exchange, the prestige economy, spheres of exchange, types of exchange (barter, market, silent trade, and so on), types of reciprocity and the social life of things, among others. The last section attempts to present some of the newest developments and future research directions.
1. Introduction

The following chapter aims to provide the state-of-the-art of Economic Anthropology and illustrate, in an inevitably limited way, its main lines of research and contributions.

Economic Anthropology is a scholarly subfield of social and cultural anthropology that attempts to explain economic life in its widest historic, geographic, and cultural scope. It focuses on the mechanisms that support, taking one of Karl Polanyi’s titles, the livelihood of man, including the processes of production, circulation, and consumption in pre-capitalist and capitalist societies alike. Economic anthropology describes the systems within which people do these things, how such systems are organized, how they operate, how they relate to other systems, how a social group produces what it wants, needs, and desires; how those goods are exchanged, the role of the different social sectors in the economic provisioning of the community, how and why those goods are consumed, and so on. But the interest of economic anthropology exceeds these utilitarian questions when the anthropological gaze turns to the complex nature of production, exchange, and consumption, and the link between these and culture, symbolism and the individual. Beyond this specific goal, economic anthropology also touches upon fundamental philosophical issues on human nature, and reframes the concept of economy as one of the key terms of modernity under a critical spotlight.

In the history of economic anthropology we can distinguish the influence of some main currents of Western social thought, notably German and French socialism, British utilitarians, and the French tradition of critical rationalism from Rousseau onwards (Hann and Hart, 2011: 53). The German school, with the influence of Karl Bücher and Richard Thurnwald, gave priority to the study of work, modes of production, and technology. For Bücher, gifts and exchange were instrumental in the rise of the economy, and he remarked that only in the last stage of economic development becomes the market relevant. He insisted upon the need to contextualize economic activity and pointed out that market principles and methodological individualism could not explain all economic behavior. On the other hand, Bronislaw Malinowski, pioneer of social anthropology, can also be regarded as one of the founders of British economic anthropology with his classical work on the Trobriand Islanders of the East coast of New Guinea. The complex exchange of goods between islands on the basis of generosity called into question the notion of homo economicus, showing instead that exchange could be organized without money or markets. The islanders’ economic behavior challenged taken-for-granted notions of private property, work, and economic exchange. In the American tradition, the influence of Thorstein B. Veblen and John R. Commons foregrounded institutional economics. In American anthropology the leading figure was Franz Boas. His description of the potlatch illustrated the role of destruction of goods in the acquisition of prestige and political authority, while rural Mexico was also very fertile ground for American economic anthropology, with the works of Foster, Robert Redfield and Lewis, on the one hand, and the materialism of Leslie White, Steward and his students on the other, as we will see. In the French tradition, Marcel Mauss’ Essay sur le don (1925) has been most influential. For Mauss, the idea of a free market based on an individual contract is as impossible as the idea of total collective altruism.
Regarding the historical development of the field, and following Hann and Hart’s (2011) chronology, it is possible to outline at least four stages: from the end of the 19th Century to the 1940s; from the 1940s to the 1950s; between the 1950s and the 1960s, and since the 1970s to the present day.

From the end of the 19th Century until the 1940s, economic anthropology avant la lettre was mainly interested in determining whether the economic behavior of primitive peoples was dominated by the same principles of rationality and efficiency that motivated economic action in the West. In the 1920s very few scholars paid attention to the general problems common to economics and anthropology. Instead they focused primarily on the ideas that primitives people held about economic matters (Seddon, 1978).

Until then, anthropology had produced only a handful of fundamental but fragmentary works on the subject: Malinowski’s “The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders” (1921) and Coral Gardens (1935); Raymond Firth’s Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori (1929) and Primitive Polynesian Economy in 1939; Thurnwald’s Economics in Primitive Communities (1932); Viljoen’s The Economics of Primitive Peoples (1936), and Goodfellow’s Principles of Economic Sociology. The Economics of Primitive Life as Illustrated from the Bantu peoples (1939) completes the initial scenario. These works shared a concern with defining the new field of study, but also collected extensive and valuable data on livelihoods, technology and economy, such as harvest profits, agricultural production, division of labor, etc. Even as late as the 1950s, economic anthropology was primarily descriptive and ethnographic in orientation and couched in a generally social-structural theoretical framework that focused on how each culture made a living.

Between 1940 and 1950, an average of only four major articles and books were published in economic anthropology each year worldwide, and from 1951 to 1956 the average went up to only ten per year. In 1952 Melville Herskovits published Economic Anthropology. A Study in Comparative Economics, an extension of his earlier book The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples (1940). In this work he tried to apply the principles of economics to the study of “primitive” societies, engaging in a vivid exchange with the economist Frank Knight, in 1941. Nevertheless in 1957, with the publication of Karl Polanyi’s Trade and Market in the Early Empires, a lively and long-lasting substantivism/formalism debate started, and the number jumped up to twenty-seven (Wilk and Cligget, 2007).

All in all, the field was definitively established between the 1950s and 1960s, in the midst of the Cold War, when the epistemological and methodological debate between substantivists and formalists was at its heights, leading thereafter into a brief Marxist period in which cultural ecology and the study of peasants were central.

From the 1970s onward, with the worldwide neoliberal expansion, interest in globalization processes in Western society resulted in a plethora of new topics that have further expanded the field during the last years. Economic anthropology nowadays covers a wide array of topics including uneven development, globalization, ethical consumption, mass media, ethnic enterprises, financial markets, property, virtual
commons, sustainability, fair trade, post-socialist economies and new forms of work, to mention just a few.

In perspective, the overall contribution of classical economic anthropology was centered on two main areas: the confrontation with the neoclassical economics, on the one hand, and the study of the relationship between society, culture and environment, on the other. However, the second trend has been gradually subsumed under the already autonomous subfield of ecological anthropology – and it surely deserves a state-of-the-art in its own.

Regarding the first area, anthropology has challenged the very notion of the Economy and its genealogy and development. Current definitions of economy refer to concepts such as ‘management’, ‘efficient conservation of resources’, ‘practical affairs’, ‘money and wealth’ and ‘market’. But economy has not always had this meaning. The word economy originally comes from the Greek oikonomia, meaning ‘household management’ (including the garden and its products, slaves, women, artisans, etc.) and Aristotle (383-322 BCE) is generally credited with having provided its theoretical definition. Yet the concept, as we understand it today, emerged from a long historical Western discussion on the theory of value and the making of the Economy as an autonomous entity (Dumont, 1977 and Barber 1967). Lately it was used by the French physiocrats in the 18th Century to determine the interdependencies between wheat price fluctuations, land, property and social classes (i.e., Quesnay’s tableau economique). Classical and neo-classical economists thereafter created a particular conception of the economy, regarded ultimately as the science of scarcity (i.e., how to allocate limited resources to unlimited ends), implying therefore a very specific conception of human nature. In fact, the history of economic anthropology can be explained largely as a debate against the precepts of neoclassical economics as stated by marginalists (Stanley Jevons in England Carl Menger in Austria and Leon Walras in Switzerland). These precepts stipulate that economics is the science of allocating scarce resources to infinite wants and purposes (principle of scarcity); that the unit of analysis is the individual acting rationally to meet his/her needs and maximize his/her limited resources (methodological individualism); that it is possible to establish predictive and mathematical models of that behavior (deductivism), and that every human being is thought to maximize through rational decisions (specific understanding of human nature).

In general, and although one might find a lot of common grounds and mutual interests (Ensminger, 2002), collaboration between Economics and Anthropology has been infrequent, and these discussions have rarely transcended the field of anthropology itself except in the unusual case of institutional economics. The reason for this lack of dialogue between the disciplines is due to both epistemological (i.e., the method and techniques employed) and ontological (e.g., the meaning of economics) differences. Nevertheless, after the cultural and postmodern turn in the 1990s, economic anthropology is undergoing a revival and offers some promising paths. The appearance of outstanding works such as that of the anthropologist David Graeber on ‘debt’, the influential work of political economist Elinor Ostrom on the social management of the commons, and the economist Thomas Piketty on the increasing inequalities in 21st Century capitalism, touch upon the essentials of economic anthropology: the social and cultural side of economic processes.
2. Classical Theoretical Debates: Substantivism, Formalism and Marxism

Substantivism, formalism and Marxism can be regarded as the three classic theoretical foundations of economic anthropology. Some consider the period in which these developments took place as the Golden Age of economic anthropology.

2.1. Formalism versus Substantivism: Cornerstone of Economic Anthropology

In his influential book *The Great Transformation* (1944), economic historian Karl Polanyi established the foundations of substantivism. In this book he traced the development of modern market capitalism from earlier systems, and foresaw the imminent collapse of our civilization. In his view, modern capitalism had elevated profits and market logic above society and human values, turning everything into a commodity (Polanyi, 1944; Wilk and Cliggett, 2007). Economics had developed alongside market capitalism, acting as the ideological vehicle of the system, helping to keep capitalism going by making it seem natural (Dumont, 1977). Nonetheless Polanyi thought that the market economy could not penetrate all spheres of social life, as there are realms of social interaction that naturally remain outside the price mechanism, and given that social forces will react to keep market dynamics out of the very core of social relations. He further argues that trade and markets have historically functioned embedded in society rather than outside, and that strong ritual restrictions have existed in different places and times to ensure market peace and to avoid its indiscriminate expansion. In this way we find, for instance, trade without permanent traders in the old-Mesopotamian Tamkarum and the Metic in classical Greece; partial traders like the Vikings and Tuareg people, and different types of trading activities such as the silent trade practiced by Phoenicians and Banyan merchants in Zanzibar.

Echoing Max Weber’s (1922) previous distinction between material and economic rationalities, in “The Economy as Instituted Process” (1957) Polanyi defined two meanings of the word economy: *formal*, meaning the study of rational decision-making; and *substantive*, referring to the material acts of making a living. According to Polanyi, only in the historical development of the modern West had the two come to have the same meaning, for only in modern capitalism was the economic system (substantive) fused with rational economic logic (formal) in order to maximize individual self-interest. And only in our market society, for the first time in history, had the four uses of money coincided (medium of exchange, storage of value, payment and standard of value). According to Polanyi, the economy, as we understand it, is a historical construct, an anomaly. The emergence of market economy responds to a relatively recent historical process while in primitive societies the economy is *embedded* (i.e., integrated, ingrained, inserted) in other social institutions that operate on other principles than the market: kinship relations, religious institutions, commitments among neighbors, ritual activities, etc. The institutionalization of such a separation occurred specifically in England in the 19th Century, when land and labor become marketed commodities, and Capitalism was unleashed in the tide of industrial development. It is true that pre-capitalist cultures engaged in multifaceted economic activities, but not within the framework and values of the rational economic logic that is characteristic of the competitive marketplace.

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Polanyi proposed three main ways of economic integration; i.e., reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange. He believed that modern formal economics only studied the latter and was unable to comprehend the first two because of their different logics. Economic anthropologists usually agree, however, that both logics (formal and substantive) are present in all social systems, including capitalism, albeit in different guises and proportions (Gudeman, 2001).

Polanyi’s thesis had its followers and detractors within economic anthropology. While the former are usually known as substantivists, the latter defined themselves, following Polanyi’s own division, as formalists. The debate between formalists and substantivists in economic anthropology can be regarded as its rite of passage, and it was developed mainly during the 1940s and 1960s. While the main substantivist position stressed that economy is a type of human activity and that scarcity is not an existential condition of humanity but only a condition of the capitalist market economy; formalists maintained that the maximizing rationality was to be found in all societies and in all kinds of behavior.

Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* (1972) presents a strong substantivist argument. Drawing on ethnographic data he argued that foragers are, in fact, an affluent society. According to his thesis, hunter-gatherers do not suffer from poverty, as had often been assumed, but instead live in a society in which all their wants are easily satisfied. Hunter-gatherers share, Sahlins points out, the Zen road to affluence, according to which human material wants are finite and few, and their technical means on the whole adequate. This controversial thesis shows that foragers and Western societies take separate roads to affluence, the former by desiring little, the latter by producing much more than needed. The theory touches therefore upon cultural issues such as material accumulation, needs and desires, the role of production, and the ideal of “the good life”.

In the early 1960s there was a serious concern in the social sciences with establishing a more rigorous and “scientific” methods and modes of theorizing, and for some anthropologists the goals of economics seemed particularly appealing. From this perspective Polanyi’s thesis came under criticism. Formalists were concerned with objectivity and methods, and they focused on decision-making and choice, expanding their range of analytical techniques to include game theory, linear programming and decision trees. Formalists held that all people are rational but that the environment and resources act as ultimate constraints. Maximizing, they held, does not require money or markets (since even love or security can be maximized) and all societies do face rational choices between different possibilities. In this way, formalists argued, all societies, past and present, exhibit rational behavior and scarce ends and means, thus economic change is inevitable when new opportunities are available. In primitive societies the shortage is such that choices are extremely limited (Herskovits, 1952). For the formalists, it is possible to explain some of the apparently non-economic characteristics of non-Western people’s such as resistance to change, unresponsiveness to shifts in demand, supply, and prices, and preference for labor rather than capital intensive operations, by understanding behavior as ultimately economic, reducible to balancing costs against benefits.
In contrast to Polanyi’s historical account, formalist asserted that market exchanges were common in medieval Europe and elsewhere long before the Industrial Revolution. In their view substantivism was unrealistic and indulged in wishful thinking. In any case, it would no longer be relevant as the global market economy increasingly penetrated all parts of the world. Anthropologists Robbing Burling, Harold Schneider, Edward LeClair, Franck Cancian, and Scott Cook were prominent among formalists. According to Schneider, “formalism implicitly or explicitly held the belief that non-Western, indigenous people are economic men in one sense or another and that economic change is inevitable when new opportunities are available” (1975: 272), as shown by Epstein’s work in South India, by Salisbury in his study of Vunamami, and by Ortiz referring to the Paez of Colombia. However, the work of anthropologists Lee, Edel, Barth and Ortiz can be also be regarded as formalist to a lesser extent, as they did not try to establish predictive models and their vision of the economy was a little more flexible.

Good examples of the application of formalism can be found in the works of Richard Lee (1969) and his use of the transactional model of input-output economics in the analysis of Kung bushman in the Kalahari Desert; as well as Edel’s (1967) work on Jamaican fishing villages. Raymond Firth, despite calling for the universal application of “economic science”, masterfully explored the processes of saving, credit and capital formation in context, describing the role of institutions such as magic, religion, kinship and political structure in the economy of inshore Malay fishermen, the Polynesians (1939), and the Tikopia (1936, 1959), a relatively isolated and scarcely ‘developed’ society of the under-populated Solomon Islands. In a similar vein Fredrik Barth (1967) and Sutti Ortiz (1973) explored individuals’ saving and investment strategies in relation to processes of socioeconomic change, but with full development of the social and cultural context in which such practices occur.

The discussion between formalists and substantivists did not end, but fizzled out. There is a discrepancy at the heart of this debate that was never fully resolved, between distinct scientific visions: one deductive and formal (formalism) and the other empirical and inductive (substantivism) (Kaplan, 1976). Although these ideas can be found in earlier anthropologists, the fundamental positions can in fact be traced to a much older debate, that of the Methodenstreit (the German word for the “method dispute”), the controversy around economic methodology that started in the 1880s and lasted for more than a decade between the Austrian and German (Historical) Schools. The debate was concerned with the place of general theory in the social sciences and the use of history to explain the dynamics of human action.

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