

Economic Representations: What's at Stake?

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Representations – the word makes some anthropologists pause and others grimace. I understand representations to be a relational idea referring to how we make one thing stand in for another. For example, according to some, a model may take the place of "facts on the ground," a flag stands for the nation, a representative stands for office and for her constituency. But there are many kinds of representations, even within a single discipline, and I want to say something about changing notions of representations in anthropology, especially in relation to economics. I shall distinguish three modes of representation but in order to speak of their interrelations. The notion of representations, however, does not seem to be problematic for economists. Why do the disciplines differ in their preoccupation?

Here's the problem for anthropologists. Once upon a time, we knew that we could go "somewhere" (distant and exotic), learn the language, live with the people, take notes, find an unusual custom, return home, write up the fieldwork as a "monograph" and gain a degree of fame as the expert on our people. Let's call this the realist or modernist project. According to this modernist vision, regnant in the first half of the twentieth century, the world consists of discrete societies. Most of us learned to represent "this world" through terms such as system, equilibrium, functions, ritual escape valves, and personality mechanisms. In the 1960s, Lévi-Strauss stole the stage, and some of us became devout believers in structuralism. Drawing on Saussure, structural linguistics and phonemics, Lévi-Strauss promised that the world of the mind was uniquely accessible to anthropology (by studying variations and mind's operation in ordering space, kinship, myths, rituals, and even politics). Meaning was generated through patterns of binary oppositions.

From Lévi-Strauss we also learned to distinguish "home-made" models (how a people represent themselves to themselves) from the anthropologist's models that represent the underlying structure of things.

I used this exciting, rational method in my early analysis of godparenthood, though the analysis was based on church ideology (or a home-made representation). Its application to economics gave me pause, however. Lévi-Strauss – as THE student of Mauss – assured us that social life is made up of three exchanges: we exchange words in social life; men exchange women in marriage; we exchange things in economy. But I never thought that economy is only about exchange (what about self-sufficiency?). With the advent of Marxism and structural Marxism, however, life for the economic anthropologist did seem to become more grounded, because we learned that if we uncovered modes of production with their articulations, found patterns of labor exploitation, or displayed how class (intertwined with race and gender) could be discerned within lineage systems, our work was structural. No one played out the parallel of home-made models and mystification, however, partly because economic anthropologists had not read Lévi-Strauss, but it was an intriguing and disturbing possibility, for it strengthened the anthropologist's claim that he alone was not fooled by the apparent reality of home-made models or market exchange.

After the French prince, anthropology took an abrupt turn with the persuasive writing of Geertz. At first, we thought he was really like Lévi-Strauss because he emphasized meaning. But we soon found that Geertz had something different in "mind," because he claimed that ethnography is a text and that culture (not structure) is the discipline's defining focus, for "man" is a culture-making being. Geertz made us re-tool, and as the discipline shifted from a social science to a humanistic perspective, which was liberating and distressing, our task became to *interpret* "their" activities and expressions. Geertz never really addressed the war between logic and rhetoric, or "science" and the humanities, however; and he never considered reflexivity as more

than reciprocal winks and nods between people. For Geertz it was turtles all the way down, and a generation loved that – goodbye, foundations.

So, all Hell broke loose, for Geertz aided and abetted the transition to post structuralism, though that was never his banner. The certainties of the pre structuralist and structuralist eras disappeared, and we could no longer claim that our representations reflected what was out there, or that our representations reflected their representations, or that our representations reflected anything more than our representations, which was rather solipsistic. Why do anthropology? What were we to do in the field, or say after leaving it? Why not just go to learn about ourselves through a mirror of our choice?

What was the poor economic anthropologist to do in this roiling situation? In fact, most of them did not give a damn and seemed oblivious to the changes in the discipline and its disappearing borders. Most remained caught up in an older way of representing economy that pitted the sturdy individual against institutions, and by passed the emerging problems of translation, understanding and meaning. (After all, doesn't economics "explain" rather than "describe?") The main skirmish in economic anthropology was set off by the economic historian, Karl Polanyi, who distinguished between "formalist" economics (a.k.a. neoclassical economics) and "substantive" economics. The first framework – taking off from the rational actor operating in a market situation – was appropriate for representing market economy, whereas the second framework – focused on institutions and exchange – was appropriate for representing "them," the embedded economies that anthropologists studied. But the formalists claimed that their representation was universal, and so the battle was joined: if one side was filled with deductivists and rationalists, the other had inductivists and empiricists who promised fidelity to the facts on the ground. The struggle grew especially heated when the formalists – as Becker was later to do – tried to explain and reduce social behavior to individual choice,

maximization, and countable, discrete factors within the constraints (externalities and exogenous variables) posed by ecology, state systems, and the frictions of a local social structure. For formalists, reciprocity and altruism, trump cards which had been held by the substantivists, could always be reduced to an expression of self-interest. Homo economicus was the moving agent within local economies which implied that all economies were on the road to modernization as we know it, because how could self-interest be denied from asserting itself? This battle, which locked empiricists and rationalists within an essentialist epistemology, never led the participants to question the division it inscribed between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. Eventually, exhaustion led to a degree of peace, and economic anthropology rather dried up in the early 1980s after some Sahlins' interjections, and the promises of the modes of production approach were not fulfilled. Thus, the post structuralist revolution set off by Geertz bypassed most economic anthropologists.

But the Geertzian shift did not mark The End of History in anthropology. Its aftermath led to a more fragmented moment in which we still seem to be entangled. We no longer believe that cultures can be identified as discrete units, some of us even claim that the culture idea itself should be dropped. But – and here's the discipline's problem – now that we live in a post structuralist era – sans bounded cultures and disciplinary borders, and enmeshed in globalization - what's left for anthropology?

My objective and neutral history of the discipline brings us back to "representations." What does this word mean for anthropologists? I never liked the metaphor that ethnography is a text, because feeling, shitting, interacting, creating, talking, and being influenced and coerced by others makes for a world of interacting representations. Practices are not texts that we re-present in texts, yet they are connected to representations, if only because representations are practices. What's the link of representations to economies, and to economic anthropology and economics?

Let's begin with fieldwork which I think is the heart of anthropology. In research, anthropologists undertake two broad activities. We observe or watch behavior (we "gaze"), and we talk with people, gaining their reflections and promoting or provoking discussion. The first part can take the anthropologist into gathering numerical data, building typologies, characterizing behavior, or offering generalizations. The second side leads to gathering myths, writing down changes, collecting narratives, and eliciting memories. In the field, the anthropologist is always confronted with differences that she must bridge. We are at the limits of our knowledge, or we should act as if we were at the limits of our knowing. Everything must be questioned in the attempt to gain an understanding. Furthermore, we sometimes find that peoples' reflections do not "match" their behavior – they do one thing, say another - which itself is a practice to be considered. It seems to me that both actions and talking are representations which vary by individuals. I call these representations local models and take them seriously. I do not think that many economic anthropologists work with the idea of local models, and I think that even fewer economists – whether operating in a neoclassical, Marxist, Austrian, or evolutionary framework – do so. I want to mark here, then, one striking difference between the two disciplines: economists today build models, which are representations; anthropologists are humble (or pretend to be so), because we (I) assume that people construct models and we deal with data that often falls outside the formal models, such as unpaid work (especially by women) or household economies in the countryside of Latin America and the heartland of post socialist Europe. I suspect that "real" economists consider these behaviors and their local explications to be "exogenous" variables or "externalities" that must be commensurated and colonized by their models.

Furthermore, to complicate this problem posed by the local, I (and others) have found that local models of economy often are built around metaphor – they fall in the realm of rhetoric. These local tropes frequently

are drawn from images of the body, family and lineage, or immediate space, such as the house (in the countryside of Colombia the economy is modeled after the house which makes it a true house economy). To make matters worse, local models are not linear or clean cut, for they are mixed with (what we consider to be) other domains, such as religion, rituals and myths. Local models do not fall in the realm of logic; they lack the properties of symmetry and deductibility. For example, in parts of Africa it is said that lineage land is made fertile by the ancestors who first made it productive, so that maintaining good relations with the ancestors and one's lineage mates by enacting certain rituals and respecting their embodied presence in the lineage chief is part of and essential to a successful material life. Is this "economy" as we know it? What self-respecting economist will take this sort of data or representation into account? And by what right does this sort of economic anthropologist who writes about local models as Really Serious Things justify herself as writing about economy? Do development types, including economists, NGOs, and government planners, ever listen to these "frictions" that stand in the way of achieving modernization? Let's call these local practices of people, Representations I.

But this is just the beginning of the representational problem, because one aspect of the post structuralist revolution has been to question the anthropologist's authority to learn, author an account of, or represent local models. One solution, used by some anthropologists, is to collect a people's narratives (or testimonies) and re-present them to our audience in as unblemished or unfiltered a way as possible. The epistemological objective apparently is to bypass the presence of the anthropologist, that is, to evade the idea that our texts represent their texts through the device of simply presenting their texts. My way of attending to this representational problem is to see the anthropological text itself as a product of a conversation between ethnographer and people. I think it is nonsense to claim that we represent them in our texts, for the monograph or ethnography does not point or refer

to "them" but to the interaction or encounter, and the participants in this interaction themselves are composites of their history and social context. Regardless, I observe that most economists do not recognize this problem of representation (let's call it Representations II), because they simply build models that they hope can be tested against or used to predict stable behavior, and adjust to have a better fit, so ignoring the difference between the world of the modeler and that of the modeled. Having largely omitted Representations I from their account, they do not have to struggle with the epistemological puzzles of Representations II.

But now let's rotate the binoculars 180° and look at our texts in economics as representations. We'll call these Representations III. Why not analyze them as products of time, or as rhetoric rather than logic? Do they not consist of Representations I and II as well as some logical value added? Could we see representations in economics as reflections on behavior, on local models, and on the legacy of disciplinary models that is the social and cultural context for their production? This way of thinking about economic writings hardly demeans them. It makes them into richer products.

I like to explore local models (Representations I), how we write about them (Representations II), how we explain ourselves to ourselves (Representations III), and how the three modes become interwoven. I am suggesting that we are all caught up in the problem of representation. But what's the payoff or cash value for this way of thinking about economy? What does this sort of questioning do? It opens the discussion and a space to explore. It allows us to learn from other, often silenced voices, and it provides a critical perspective on our own thinking and practices. Recognizing the representational complexity, I think, is the first step toward thinking about really serious things in economics, such as poverty, greed, and material well-being.