

Exploring the Fault Lines: Introduction to the Minisymposium on the History of Economic Anthropology

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This *HOPE* minisymposium has been prompted by a question I have been asking friends in anthropology for some time now, namely, where are the writers who are revisiting and rethinking the history of economic anthropology? Lest one wonders if this question asks for something that no one wants, or else is hopelessly naive, let me quickly add that, in stark contrast to economics, anthropology has welcomed a wider range of philosophical reflections on its problems and prospects; has recently pioneered within its ranks the development and legitimization of a specialization in the history of anthropology, best represented by the work of George Stocking Jr. in America and Adam Kuper in Britain; and in general has revealed greater tolerance for inquiry into revisions of the fundamental tenets of the discipline. But having acknowledged these facts, some years of experience have convinced me, at least, that there is a serious lacuna in modern American anthropology having to do with an unwillingness to confront the heritage and status of their subfield known as “economic anthropology.” To put the case in a perhaps overly dramatic fashion, I suspect that the history of the specialization of economic anthropology has not been an altogether happy one for anthropologists in the recent past (while for economists it has been mostly invisible), and that this has had more than a little to do with long-standing tensions between the disciplines of anthropology and economics, as well

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as postwar developments internal to the respective fields. Even more distressing, most historians of anthropology have shied away from dealing with the topic, apparently in order to preempt rekindling the blood feuds of honored ancestors. In a strange inversion, many economic anthropologists have displayed a strong interest in the history of economics itself, revealing more familiarity with François Quesnay and Marx than most modern economists (Gudeman 1986; Gregory 1982), but betray little or no motivation to confront the history of economic anthropology, other than as ceremonial homage paid to a small collection of classic texts.

Although many would deny that the situation is anywhere near so dire in the present, conversations with a number of economic anthropologists essentially confirm a tempered version of this hypothesis. Further, ethnological sojourns among the Anthro in their annual potlatches have provided further evidence.¹ Economists have made a few tentative attempts to raise the issue of the narrative outlines of the history of economic anthropology as a discipline (Mirowski, 1994, 1997; Lodewijks 1994); their overtures, however, have been met with frosty silence on the part of anthropologists. This brings us to the centerpiece of our minisymposium, Heath Pearson's essay "*Homo Economicus Goes Native.*" It seems that, if neither side will muster sufficient enthusiasm to explore the historical issues involved, then the task will devolve to outsiders to both disciplines to set out and write the history of economic anthropology. Pearson's article approaches the question from a background in German studies, which is quite fortunate, given that the bulk of the earliest literature on what was once called "the economics of primitive man" was in fact written in German.² Pearson's essay constructs the narrative from the mid-nineteenth century up until 1945 around the disputed question of whether the aboriginal was essentially different from *Homo economicus*, or structurally similar but divergent in goals, or fundamentally identical. He provides prodigious evidence that, even in the

1. Most recently, I would cite my participation in a symposium in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Marshall Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* at the American Anthropological Association in 1997 in Washington, D.C. The irony of a well-attended celebration of the achievements of a subject area that the major protagonist and guest of honor maintains (albeit in private, as noted below by Keith Hart) is all washed up seemed to have been lost on most of those present.

2. "Most English and American historians of anthropology tend to avoid dealing in depth with the influence of German thought on ethnology" (Smith, 1991, 241). An honorable exception to this regularity is Kocke (1979).

German literature, the question would frequently be phrased in individualist and psychological terms. In his telling, after 1945 the assertion of complete identity won out, thus undercutting much of the rationale for the existence of a separate or distinct discipline of economic anthropology.

It could be suggested that this is just one of many alternative ways the story might be told, although Pearson's entry point through individual mentalities would seem to be congenial to a fin de siècle economist who believed that neoclassical theory was open to behavioral considerations. Perhaps it is just this perceived bias that has provoked the reactions of some of the anthropologists who have graciously agreed to participate here. One consideration raised by the commentators in this minisymposium is the issue of whether the most informative or comprehensive way to approach this contentious history is through the question of the cognitive status of the "primitive," a question that evokes more queasiness than analytical precision in either anthropologists or economists. Accusations of "rationality" or irrationality seem to be the preferred ground upon which economists would like to set the terms of the debate (Posner 1980; Kranton 1996; Arrow 1997). But there are other considerations raised by our commentators regarding the problem of finding a narrative structure. One is that the really interesting Anglophone discussions of economic anthropology seem to be gearing up just where Pearson leaves off his account (fully comprehensible in the context of German history), something that strikes our commentators as a significant omission. Consequently, Keith Hart suggests that the formalist-substantivist controversy of the 1960s should be reread through the lens of the earlier German *Methodenstreit*. Chris Gregory raises the possibility that tensions also reside in empiricist versus nomothetic ambitions, while James Ferguson cites the natural-science affectations of the economists. Jane Guyer suggests that *Homo economicus* should also be acknowledged to be historically variant, so that (his? its?) encounter with the "native" might be construed as something other than two ships passing in the night. Another issue left dangling is the extent to which economics and anthropology should reasonably be expected to have been at odds in the period covered by Pearson, given the imperfect academic differentiation characteristic of the era.

It is noteworthy that citations of George Stocking and his students or Adam Kuper are entirely absent in Pearson, which suggests that his history is not being structured from within the vantage point of

anthropology as a *discipline*. Of course, American anthropology in particular has promoted the irrelevance of history for its protagonists almost as stridently as has American economics, so one cannot presume a ready-made audience for any such inquiry. Nevertheless, both Stocking and Kuper have managed to stress the sheer contingency of a discipline that was always trying to come to some accommodation with a physicalistic heritage, plotting a course between Darwin and the Enlightenment, race theory and human universals, structuralism and functionalism, armchair antiquarianism and participant observation, *Verstehen* and scientism. As Stocking (1995, 936) has written:

Anthropology departs from several well-known models of disciplinary development: the Comtean hierarchical model, in which the impulse of positive knowledge is successively extended into more complex domains . . . and the genealogical model, in which modern disciplines can be visualized as growing from various undifferentiated “ur”-discourses. . . . anthropology may best be visualized historically as originating by process of fusion rather than fission.

While we are ill suited to pronounce upon the adhesive staying power of the initial components that Stocking has enumerated, there was clearly one area where all overtures of melding were stridently resisted, and strong quarantines were maintained on both sides. It would therefore seem premature to assess the success or failure of various concepts in economic anthropology, without first taking into account the configuration of the long history of hostility towards anthropology of the greater proportion of Anglophone neoclassical economics.

Here, of course, is where geographical boundaries begin to matter, whereas synchronic slices across schools of economics serves more to confuse than to illuminate. The aspirations to combine early specializations in anthropology and economics were most fervently entertained among the German Historicist school, itself conceived in reaction to the English penchant for nomothetic statements bereft of any spatiotemporal specificity, *Kultur* set in counter-Enlightenment opposition to French notions of universalist “civilization.” If we take someone like Gustav Schmoller or Werner Sombart to be one extreme, and Marx to be somewhere in the middle, then the opposite extreme was to be found in English classical and neoclassical political economy. Contrary to his usual public image, Alfred Marshall serves conveniently to reveal the extent to which “custom” and “culture” were to be relegated to the

status of epiphenomena in the conceptual hierarchy of neoclassical causal principles. His attitudes shine through much more clearly in his correspondence than in his textbook:

My information has been got gradually, a great deal of it from conversation; I have crossexamined people (normally conversant with India) who have started by saying that prices & wages in India were ruled by custom & have got them to admit that the custom always changed in substance, if not in outward form, whenever there was any considerable Ricardo-economic reason why it sh^d.. (quoted in Whitaker 1996, 1:209)

Thus in the British orthodoxy, it was generally presumed that the “economy” was fully determined in the first instance by a small set of “external” causes, and that larger societal considerations would adjust to the economic substructure, but by no means alter them. All causal arrows pointed in a single direction, whether the unmoved mover was “diminishing returns” or “utility.” The implications of this way of carving up society were fairly distressing to those who held a different, more synoptic ambition, and they predominantly sought to stake their claim not so much on the “primitive mind,” as upon the role of custom and culture in an understanding of economic behavior. That certainly was one prime motivation for Thorstein Veblen and much of the earlier school of American institutionalist economics (Jennings and Waller 1998); and it was equally one of the motives behind the composition of Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). It also was the hallmark of late Historicist economics in Germany (Smith 1991). Thus, the very format in which both fledgling academic disciplines in the social sciences congealed into identifiable units was bound up with attitudes toward the primacy or irrelevance of “culture” in the understanding of the economy. In Britain, the academic orthodoxy in economics became identified early on with skepticism over the need to take “culture” into account, and it is this (and *not* any particular theses concerning psychology) that constitutes the subtext of that imaginary stick figure, *Homo economicus*. In America, until World War II, insofar as the institutionalists held major centers of academic power and prestige, this fear of cultural pollution was not quite so pronounced; but most American academics had cut their eyeteeth in German universities until the 1930s. The reason that 1945 looms so large at the end of Pearson’s article is because that date marks the displacement of the institutionalists

by the nascent homegrown American neoclassical orthodoxy (Morgan and Rutherford 1998; Mirowski and Hands 1998), which touted the advent of an even more purely “institution-free” economics than anything dreamed of by Marshallians.

Kulturkampf as Context

One of the deepest problems with asserting one historical starting point over another to write the history of a field like economic anthropology is that it has proven nearly impossible to keep from suggesting that one disciplinary matrix simply “wins out” over another, whereas it might instead be more insightful to ask how the disciplines in question jointly constituted one another. This may be especially daunting in the case of economics and anthropology and their struggle over the culture concept over the last century. The difficulty of the task will be compounded by the fact that “these days, anthropologists get remarkably nervous when they discuss culture” (Kuper 1999, 226); but the fact that “culture” has no fixed stable referent should serve as a further inducement to historical inquiry, rather than as a repellant.

George Stocking Jr., in *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (1968), provides a plausible point of departure in the quest for the changing meaning of culture, one that could conceivably provide an alternative organizing principle for the history of economic anthropology. There he argues that it was the German intellectual context which provided the inspiration for the *Kultur* concept, initially as the progressive accumulation of artifacts that freed man from control by nature. This is especially relevant for the differential development of economics, since it was this German tradition that reacted negatively to Adam Smith and the British conception of a laissez-faire political economy applicable to all temporal and geographical locations. In the humanist and idealist mode, “culture” was initially contrasted with the deadweight of custom and instinct, and often phrased in a developmentalist idiom conflated with “evolution” As Stocking explains, it was only around the turn of the last century in the Anglophone sphere that the Boasian transvaluation of values reanimated the “dead hand of custom” and elevated it to a functionalist status on a par with the previous “invisible hand” of the political economists.³ It

3. It should be acknowledged here that Kuper rejects Stocking’s elevation of Boas to central place in this account; see Kuper 1999, 59–62.

was then that “a number of the modern elements in the modern anthropological culture concept—historicity, plurality, behavioral determinism, integration and relativism—can be thus seen emerging from older evolutionist and humanist usages in the work of Franz Boas” (Stocking 1968, 230).

Around the same time, the first wave of neoclassical models were being proposed everywhere in Europe, but to an attenuated degree in the German-language literature. These models were lifted directly from Western energy physics, in the sense that utility was for all analytical purposes identical to potential energy (Mirowski 1989), and they were intended to be everything that the above culture concept was *not*: ahistorical, singular, initially removed from observable behavior, fragmentally individualistic and anti-relativistic. Stocking (1987, 312) makes the incisive observation that Marshall Sahlins and many others (following historians like Robert Young and Adrian Desmond) tend to regard social applications of Darwinism as crude projections of British political economy, but that classical social evolutionists tended to concentrate on subjects eschewed by economists: myth, religion, marriage, and kinship. The reason behind this division of labor was that an earlier generation tended to regard this species of “culture” as the class of atavistic or “irrational” social phenomena that the onward march of economic development would eliminate or reform. Early anthropologists were “creating, by a kind of inversion, a discipline complementary to the dominant human science of their era. For if classical political economy was the science of human behavior directed towards manifestly utilitarian goals, then classical evolutionism was the counterscience of behavior that seemed . . . to have no rational utilitarian justification” (Stocking 1987, 312).

In the run-up to the twentieth century, when anthropology and economics were in the process of being constructed as complementary countersciences, there was no need for the one to challenge or encroach upon the other, at least in Anglophone contexts. The advent of Boasian culture and Malinowski’s functionalism destabilized this partnership, *but not in each and every respect*. It did so happen that as “culture” lost many of its atavistic/evolutionist connotations and became something that served to organize the practical efficacious endeavors of a contemporary group, something legitimate in its own right, it was eventually bound to come into conflict with the Western story of the efficient (and natural) organization of modern societies by markets. And indeed,

it seems to have been conveniently forgotten by all and sundry that many of the foundational twentieth-century texts of cultural anthropology were initially cast as open challenges to previous explicitly economic accounts of social organization: Malinowski (1922) on the *Kula*, Franz Boas (1966) on the potlatch, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) on the “exchange” of women, Marcel Mauss (1990) on the gift, Mary Douglas (1982) on the raffia cloth trade, Clifford Geertz (1973) on innovation versus. “modernization” in Indonesia, Sahlins (1972) on “stone age economics,” and so on. Nevertheless, however much the transformation of the culture noumenon into the fundamental concept of anthropology foreshadowed a coming clash with academic economics, the “division of labor” between anthropology and economics was still maintained relatively intact from their earlier incarnation as countersciences.⁴ The target populations of the anthropologists were still quarantined off geographically from those of the economists (in concept, if not in actuality), as were the topics of research. Cultural anthropologists would specialize in myth, religion, marriage, and kinship, while possibly venturing into tribal politics and “primitive economics,” whereas neoclassical economists would restrict themselves to prices in modern markets derived from individual “preferences” leached of any interpersonal component. The former elevated the method of participant observation of pride of place, whereas the latter came to privilege mathematical model-building. Anthropologists still believed there was virtue in being able to write entertaining sentences; economists just packed it in. Both sides studiously managed to avoid history, the dimension of social organization where such quarantines might have been harder to impose.

This uneasy truce started to crumble in the 1960s. An early symptom was the postwar hothouse phenomenon of “development economics,” which was one component of a complex of Cold War policy sciences. Another relevant factor was the phenomenon of cliometrics, which was the application of neoclassical economic theory to temporally remote incidents. Once the American neoclassicals had successfully defeated their institutionalist rivals within economics and left the Marshallians in disarray, it became obvious that there was no longer anything to be gained by respecting the prior academic totems and taboos carving up the social world into proprietary spheres. Indeed, the new patrons of

4. Indeed, the role of Talcott Parsons in explicitly trying to negotiate a “separate peace” between the social sciences at Harvard’s Department of Social Relations is one of the more fascinating episodes in Kuper 1999.

economic science enthusiastically encouraged their charges to boldly go where no economist had gone before. If the welfare state were to be run in an economical fashion, then economists would have to claim some expertise concerning marriage, families, and kinship (Swedberg 1990). As economists were recruited to rationalize military and corporate organization under the rubrics of operations research and decision theory, they would be brought to deal with issues like “motivation” and “cognitive frames.” Their close association with the development and deployment of the digital computer increasingly pushed them ever nearer to the direction of “cognitive science.” Their patrons at RAND and other think tanks implored them to turn their attention to politics, especially making use of their newly developed formalism of game theory.⁵ While the methods used to extend their purview were not dictated in advance, the terms of their newfound employments were. In claiming to be in possession of *the* theory of “rational choice” (again recalling that this was not singular or unique in practice), those left with the noneconomic or residual classes of phenomena were painted into a corner as attempting the impossible, or at least the unenviable: they were explaining the *irrational*, or situations where there were no choices left to be had.

The trajectory of the culture concept from the nineteenth through the twentieth century has ricocheted off the boundaries of anthropology and economics. If it is true, as Stocking (1968, 232) suggests, that cultural anthropology “implied a conception of man not as a *rational* so much as a *rationalizing* being,” then neoclassical economists grew happy to concede this distinction. It conveniently left them with maximum freedom to encompass as much or as little of social life as they might find effective or entertaining. If they were inclined to imagine all sorts of virtual markets operating in families or in “the marketplace of ideas,” then they would write papers like Gary Becker or Richard Posner, insisting upon utilitarian considerations equilibrating in all manner of “cultural”

5. I should think one of the more repressed aspects of the history of anthropology is the extent to which structuralism allowed anthropologists to also participate in these Cold War developments: “Economics has in the past been suspect among anthropologists . . . [yet] every attempt in this direction has shown that the economic system provides sociological formulations with some of their more fundamental invariants. . . . The complete upheaval of economic studies resulting from the publication of [John] von Neumann and [Oskar] Morgenstern’s book ushers in an era of closer cooperation between the economist and the anthropologist” (Levi-Strauss 1963, 297). For some background on the history of game theory, see Mirowski forthcoming; and Leonard 1997.

situations. Or, on the other hand, if they wished to maintain the relative inviolability of a “cultural” sphere outside that of the “economic,” or maintain some humanist credentials, they would, like Kenneth Arrow or George Akerlof, still write down neoclassical models, but only now with psychological or sociological factors serving to account for “frictions” and “disequilibria” relative to the *optimum optimorum* of full general equilibrium. They might even imagine that the economy required a set of shared symbols and norms in order for markets to operate, only subsequently to subsume these entities in a meta-utilitarian calculus of evolutionary game theory. Culture, initially posited as the residual category of everything that the economy was not, was repeatedly and predictably absorbed back into the realm of the economic as the demands of consultancy and the exigencies of intellectual fashion permit.

It may be unpopular to insist that anthropology was subject to the very same dynamic, if only starting from the opposite pole of the supposed dichotomy. Perhaps the most instructive exemplar, if only because the most egregiously misunderstood by economists, is the career of Marshall Sahlins.⁶ Anthropologists may have ambitions, like the early Sahlins, to see the concept of culture promiscuously encompass everything—“ideas, social relations, material elements,” even including energy utilization—but that remained viable only when prosecuted under the model of a generic evolution as dictated by thermodynamics. The imperatives of that theory dictated that diverse phenomena be brought under the umbrella of the “same” model of energy usage, much as Becker always starts with a recognizable utility function. Here Leslie White’s materialist version of energetics comes home to roost much as it did in neoclassical economics, and the grand projects of unification come to resemble one other in more ways than one. Or they might, as in the later Sahlins of *Stone Age Economics*, opt for an “exterior” sphere of the conventionally economic, counterpoised to a more “interior” sphere of cultural reciprocity determined by structural considerations. This recourse to structuralism sported close family resemblances to what had

6. A wonderfully concise survey of Sahlins’s career is provided by Kuper (1999, chap. 5). Parenthetically, I would include myself (Mirowski 1994) as someone who did not adequately comprehend the place of economic anthropology in the career of Sahlins. In many ways, Sahlins is a much better “representative agent” for the history of economic anthropology than Karl Polanyi, whose relationship to academic disciplines in America was much more tortured, as Hart intimates.

been going on in economics in roughly the same era (Leonard 1997; de Almeida 1990). The assertion that “in Western culture the economy is the main site of symbolic production” (Sahlins, 1976, 211) resembled nothing so much as the shift within the neoclassical orthodoxy itself from stress on static allocation to recasting the economic agent as an information processor (Mirowski, forthcoming). Sahlins never seemed very willing to apply his “structure of the conjuncture” to himself, for if he did, he might come to regard himself as talking cybernetics without being altogether aware of it. (Levi-Strauss, however, did know it.)

However much Sahlins sought to summon culture to counteract neoclassical economics, he often found himself backsliding into the despised idiom. Pragmatic reason often became conflated with mythopraxis. This frequently assumed the format of some mechanical laws of scarcity in the realm of the material, or supply and demand, impinging upon distinct symbolic cultural entities such as kinship structures or political relationships. In “stone age economics,” “the rates of exchange in differently organized trade systems are probably differently sensitive to changes in supply/demand” (1972, 313), a theoretical position not so very different from that of Akerlof (1984) or Rachel Kranton (1996). However, this seeming golden mean between idealism and scarcity was not ultimately deemed satisfactory by Sahlins, precisely because this version of “culture” might become indistinguishable from more conventional Western economic determinism. As the large literature on Mauss’s *Gift* makes clear, most transactions serve as much to alter sociocultural relationships as to reflect them (Mirowski 1999), and intentions cannot be easily read off strategic actions: this once more raised the issue of whether “culture” was consequence rather than cause of the format of exchange. One could recognize this as a reprise of Alfred Marshall’s original position: “Everything,” Sahlins (1972, 307–8) wrote, “depends upon the meaning and practice of that capital principle, ‘generosity.’ But the meaning is ethnographically uncertain, and therein lies the major weakness of our theory. . . . In many respects the opposite of market competition, the etiquette of primitive trade may conduct by a different route to a similar result.” It took a skilled hermeneut to know whether they were reading Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, or Alfred Marshall.

The later Sahlins came to regret, if not openly repudiate, his sojourn in economic anthropology. For those more distracted by his recent entertaining controversy over whether Captain Cook really was conflated with the Hawaiian god Lono (Sahlins 1995), they may be surprised to

learn that Sahlins is still struggling to transcend his role as “a protagonist in the central, great argument that has dominated American anthropology, divided as it always has been between evolutionary materialists and cultural relativists” (Kuper 1999, 200). In reaction to an earlier inability to differentiate culture from economic determinism, one now can find anthropologists like Sahlins seeking to restore to culture its metadeterminant status by means of an appeal to an overarching evolutionary narrative:

Human nature as we know it has been determined by culture. . . . culture antedates anatomically modern man by something like two million years or more. Culture was not simply added on to an already completed human nature; it was decisively involved in the constitution of the species, as the salient selective condition. . . . The great selective pressure in hominid evolution has been the necessity to organize somatic dispositions by symbolic means. . . . Throughout the millions of years of human evolution, the whole emotional economy of survival and selection has been displaced onto a world of meaningful signs, as distinct from the direct reaction to sensory stimuli. (Sahlins 1996, 403–4)

It takes only a modicum of imagination to detect here the analogy to evolutionary game theory in economics, where the real and ultimate determinants come to dominate the transitory Other only in the fullness of time and natural selection. Whereas in game theory, it is the persistent commitment to some version of individualist preference orderings, here instead it is the structuralist model of culture as an interlocking system of symbols. Evolution, which displays no intrinsic meaning, is in both instances deemed the ultimate validator of systems of meaning. Culture, posited as everything that “economizing” is not, collapses back into it as the ultimate principle of economy.

The question that this alternative sketch of the history of economic anthropology seeks to raise is, Does the culture/economy dichotomy (or its close relative, culture/nature) really offer two competing complexes of explanatory principles, or has it been just the same proleptic argument retailed by rival academic disciplines forced into a precarious pas de deux, an unsettling Gestalt-go-round of figure/ground reversals? In other words, contrary to Pearson, maybe there was no “ugly, drawn-out divorce.” Rather, in good American style, what we may have now is an array of suburban next-door neighbors, strangers who nod

noncommittally to one another as they walk to the mailbox (and collect their day's allotment of symbols!), jealous of their prerogatives, yet who have never really gotten around to getting acquainted, yet as alike as two peas in a pod.

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