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Article

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Comment on Economic Anthropology

Chris Hann reflects on the anthropology theme of the Newsletter's last issue.

Chris Hann was born in the UK., and is a Director of the Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle hann@eth.mpg.de.

The excellent short survey of economic anthropology given (in the previous issue of this Newsletter) by Aspers, Darr and Kohl was nicely complemented by the interview with Keith Hart which followed. As Hart mentioned, he and I are currently working together on a couple of projects, one a collection of essays focused on the work of Karl Polanyi (to be published by Cambridge University Press) and the other a textbook for Polity Press outlining the history of economic anthropology (both certain to supersede all rival volumes noted by Aspers, Darr and Kohl!). Although my perspectives have been formed by fieldwork in socialist and postsocialist Eurasia rather than Africa and the Caribbean, collaboration with Keith Hart is very easy because we generally see eye to eye on the important issues. One of my goals at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle is to promote a countercurrent to economists' interpretations of the Second World's *transition* that might match the impact and elegance of Hart's theorization of the concept of the *informal economy*, which originated as a counter to dominant economics models of the Third World (see Hann 2006, 2007). Here my more modest goal is to use the space allotted to me to offer a few comments on the overview by Aspers, Darr and Kohl, with a few linked suggestions for further reading.

■ I very much agree that "closer collaboration between sociologists and anthropologists on the central institution of markets would most likely be of great benefit to all" (p. 7). In this context it is worth pointing out that the distinction between *market principle* and *marketplace*, attributed by the authors to Michel Callon, was fundamental to the polemics of the 1960s between formalist and substantivist anthropologists. The latter made the mistake of assuming that marketplaces would become less significant with the spread of capitalism, so that the study of abstract markets could be safely left to the economists. This reckless abandonment of key terrain makes us squirm today! Even so, there is much to learn from the classic substantivist collection of Paul Bohannan and George Dalton (1962). For a

thoughtful commentary on these pre-Callon debates, including a discussion of the significance of Pierre Bourdieu, I would also recommend the work of Roy Dilley (1992)

■ Dilley was much influenced by the earlier work of Stephen Gudeman on models and metaphors in the study of economic life and I think this too deserves more attention from non-anthropologists. Gudeman (1986) applies a culturalist perspective to various paradigms in the Western study of the economy. In his book with Rivera (1990), he gives excellent insight into the nature of ethnographic fieldwork as well as into the complex connections between economic processes and our concepts for grasping them. The recent culmination of this strand of his work is a volume on rhetoric (forthcoming).

■ At the other end of the spectrum, while Aspers, Darr and Kohl understandably choose to concentrate on the grand theoretical debates, sociologists might also find it useful to sample the field of what we might call *applied* economic anthropology. One window on this is provided by Research in Economic Anthropology, the annual publication of the Society for Economic Anthropology. Nowadays empirical work ranges from environmental and ecological issues to studies of intellectual property rights, aid agencies and Islamic finance.

■ The origins of today's *development* disciplines can be traced back to the colonial and early postcolonial eras. One outstanding figure from that period (incidentally the niece of John Maynard Keynes) was Polly Hill, who liked to describe herself as a *field economist*. Her unassuming empiricism carried far-reaching implications both for theoretical understanding (her study of the emergence of Ghana's cocoa industry [1963] showed the agency of African farmers long before that concept became fashionable) and for policy and practice in development economics (1986).

■ The work of Gudeman noted above can be seen as an extension of the *cultural turn* which the authors associate with Clifford Geertz. Both build on the interpretive sociology of Max Weber (a figure also revered by Keith Hart, whose notion of the informal economy harks back to the Weberian ideal type of bureaucratization). German influences on twentieth century American cultural anthropology, especially in the person of Franz Boas, are well

known. But the hermeneutic-humanistic approach that crossed the Atlantic, only to be re-imported in recent decades through translations of scholars such as Geertz, was by no means the only intellectual current in the German-speaking countries before the First World War. Bayreuth anthropologist Gerd Spittler has recently documented an impressive tradition of German research on work and technology: Karl Bücher, Eduard Hahn and others asked whether labour in *primitive* communities was drudgery, to be explained in rational terms, or a source of aesthetic gratification to the workers, irreducible to an economic calculus. Similar questions animate academic controversies today over the merits of cultural and rational-choice approaches to the economy. Malinowski created an origin myth with himself as the founding ancestor and this seems to have been accepted by Aspers, Darr and Kohl. But, like Polanyi, Malinowski was a product of Mitteleuropa. He spent two years as a student in Leipzig, where he absorbed the work of Bücher. Malinowski also drew heavily on the work of the Austrian Richard Thurnwald, a pioneering fieldworker in Papua New Guinea, who has possibly the best claim to have discovered the concept of reciprocity for the social sciences. Raymond Firth, Malinowski's colleague and successor, always acknowledged this German lineage, but Anglophone anthropologists stopped reading German in the 1920s, and our debt to these pioneers has been forgotten (Spittler forthcoming 2008).

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