

# **Economic Anthropology: Past and Future**

## **Introduction**

Sometimes the best way to imagine a future is to look at the past. And when one looks at the past of the research in economic anthropology, the future of the field looks bright indeed. The history of the this research reveals that the types of themes this field has studied during the past 60 years have expanded. Some other themes are permanent and have defined economic anthropology, so to speak. Economic anthropology has gained its identity from its studies of hunter-gather societies, and the following transitions to subsistence production, cash economies, and the market. In the past ten years, the field witnessed also the incursion of new methods, such as field experiments. This suggests that the themes that were central to the discipline 60 years ago will be studied furthermore in the near future; but also new, unpredictable topics, using unexpected methods, will emerge as well. In this paper I describe and analyze the past of the research in economic anthropology

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in order to find patterns of research topics through time and to speculate about future themes: Internet communities, the phenomenon of religion and religious diversity, the cultural aspects of financial markets, and the social implications of gender differences will receive more attention in the next decade. Before exploring the past and conjecturing about the future of the research in economic anthropology it is necessary to clarify what “economic anthropology” is.

## **Economic Anthropology: A Definition**

The first challenge that comes up when one wants to look at the history of economic anthropology is to find a useful definition of the field. Dalton considers that the research in economic anthropology is characterized by: (a) individual fieldwork, (b) a focus on small economy (community), and (c) a consideration of history. According to Dalton, economic anthropology comprises different sets of topics, such as the structure and performance of traditional pre-colonial, pre-industrial, colonial, and postcolonial tribal and peasant economies. For example, in the case of pre-colonial societies, economic anthropology is interested in the nature of tribal and peasant economies *before* serious European incursion changed them; for instance, the nature of

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primitive monetary valuables and their role as devices of social control in the prestige sector of tribal communities without central government (Dalton, 1965: 197).<sup>1</sup> Economic anthropology can also be defined by the set of topics that scholars who call themselves “economic anthropologists” write about; for example, the members of the Society of Economic Anthropology (SEA). In the inaugural meeting of the Society of Economic Anthropology in 1982 participants discussed the following topics, among others: (1) history of pre-Hispanic México; (2) evolution of pre-Hispanic Oaxaca market systems; (3) Marx’s contribution to economic anthropology; (4) the thought of Karl Polanyi – formalist vs. substantivist debate; (5) problems of decision making analysis and complexity in game theory and linear programming models; (6) the core assumptions of development economics that usually do not take into account political roles and presume a narrow definition of rationality; and (7) adding social and cultural elements to cost-benefit analysis (Plattner, 1982).

Karl Polanyi has been an influential figure in the field. Although he was mainly an economic historian, his analyses of preindustrial economies, and of the changes that fostered the industrial revolution itself, have left their mark on economic anthropology. Probably one of his most important insights is that the economy is *embedded* in society. This implies that social relations (community, reciprocity, and fairness) predate the market. Polanyi’s idea follows Aristotle in the sense that human beings are first *homo sociologicus* and then acquire characteris-

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<sup>1</sup>Concepts like “primitive” and “tribal” are quite controversial. In the text I restrict myself to the way Dalton uses those words.

tics of *homo economicus*. One consequence of this idea is that the market economy (understood as the price system, in this case) cannot penetrate all the spheres of social life. There are realms of social interaction that naturally remain outside the price mechanism (think of family relations, for instance). In fact, Polanyi suggests that the penetration of the market and the economy in non-economic spheres (consider, for example, a market for marriage, or an open competition for suicide services) will face the opposing response of social forces. Imagine a pendulum that moves left and right. The pendulum represents the degree of market penetration in society. It does not reach the extreme right, but neither does it reach the far left. Such is the nature of the market imbedded in society. Social forces will react so that the market mechanism stays away from the very core of social relations (see Carlson, 2006, for a balanced view of Polanyi’s contributions).

Stephen Gudeman, a contemporary prestigious economic anthropologist, talks about the *Anthropology of Economy* (2001) where he contrasts the *neoclassical economy* and the *economy as domains of value*. On the one hand, the neoclassical economy refers to the production and consumption cycle which involves firms, households, and markets. The economy as domains of value, on the other hand, adds *ideology, identity, and sacred values* to the neoclassical economy cycle.

Although these criteria to define Economic Anthropology are useful, I should recognize that this is a dynamic field, and probably it started “growing up” as an academic discipline since Malinowski’s times in the early 1900s.

For the purpose of clarity I define

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Economic Anthropology as the intersection of anthropology and economics. Graphically it would look like the intersection between two sets (economics and anthropology) in a Venn diagram. This definition includes using the tools of economics to analyze topics traditionally studied in anthropology, and using the tools of anthropology to study traditional economic variables (see this matrix in Table 1). This means that economists who have studied culture (Fernandez, 2007), identity (Akerlof and Kranton, 2002a; 2002b), and values (Porter 2000),<sup>2</sup> for example, are also considered as economic anthropologists for the purpose of analysis. In some instances I included in the analysis “economic archeology” as part of economic anthropology since both fields (economic archeology and economic anthropology) are closely linked when it comes to studying the economics of ancient civilization through the study samples of material culture.

There are many other scientific analyses which are harder to classify in the matrix in table 1, but which I think belong to economic anthropology. They come mainly from economic history (such as Botticini and Eckstein, 2005). Some classics are Karl Polanyi’s, Max Weber’s, and Banfield’s historical works (see for example Polanyi, 1969; Weber, 1958; and Banfield, 1958). Another example from economic history is David Landes’s historical work in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (see also Landes, 2000), where he concludes that “culture

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<sup>2</sup>Obviously Raquel Fernandez, Geroge Akerlof, and Rachel Kranton have done major work in areas that do not include issues of culture. My claim however is that the part of their work in which they do include culture can be reasonably included into the field of economic anthropology.

makes almost all the difference” when it comes to explaining historical patterns of prosperity across the world. In this same category is Douglass North’s *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Fukuyama’s *Trust* and Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* could also be classified as works on economic anthropology. Landes and North are economic historians, Fukuyama is a political scientist, and Putman is a sociologist. All of them study institutions or civic values that characterize different societies, and some of these values have a direct or indirect impact on economic development and growth. Landes and North combine history, economics, and culture to explain variations in prosperity around the world. Clearly their approach is multidisciplinary. Indeed, interdisciplinary research is an intrinsic characteristic of economic anthropology. There are other pieces by North that I would not include into the realm of economic anthropology (although they are base on anthropological evidence in some instances), such as his research on the transition from nomad societies into agricultural societies, and the transition from agricultural to industrial societies (North and Thomas, 1977; 1970). In these cases he studies social and economic transformations using a utility maximization approach representative of neo-classical economics.

Elinor Ostrom, the winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize, has also used different approaches to study how culture and institutions can promote the sustainable use of common pool resources. Ostrom is one of the most eclectic social scientists in terms of her methods. She is driven by the questions and not by the method, this makes her work fascinating although very hard to classify in the matrix below.

In addition, there is work done by

Table 1. What is economic anthropology? An intersection between concepts and methods.

		Conceptually	
		Economics (the main purpose is to study the economy)	Anthropology (the main purpose is to study culture and identity)
Method of Analysis	Economics (game theory, econometrics, experiments, or mathematical modeling)	<i>Purely</i> economics (e.g. the interest premium puzzle, elasticity of the demand for money. See for example the work of Barro and Jin (2009)).	<b>Economic Anthropology</b> (e.g. cross-cultural experiments to study altruism and reciprocity, neoclassical economic models to study time allocation in hunter-gather societies, game theory to study evolution of institutions. See for example Bates (1983), Grief (1994), Conley and Udry (2008), Smith (1975), Fernandez (2007), Chen and Li (2009), Bowles (1998), Bisin and Verdier (2000; 2001).
	Anthropology (ethnographic)	<b>Economic anthropology</b> (e.g. Ronald Coase (1937), Geertz (1978), Jean Ensminger (1996), Chamlee-Wright (1997), Marroquin (2007, 2008, 2010)).	<i>Purely</i> anthropology (e.g. certain rites of passage studied through participant observation (Levi-Strauss (1955, 1966, 1983), Geertz (2000)).

economists, where the main purpose is to study how culture affects economic performance using quantitative economic analysis. Culture is not the main purpose of the study, but it is seen as a key element in economic performance (see Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales, 2006, 2004; and Grondona, 2000, for example). A subset of these studies looks at religion as a cultural factor that might affect economic development (see, for example, Daniels, 2005; Lehrer, 2004; McCleary, 2008; Barro and McCleary, 2003, 2004, 2006), Stulz and Williamson, 2003; and Timur, 2004). Many of these studies also use econometric techniques.

The research mentioned in the previous three paragraphs is difficult to classify in the two by two matrix in Table 1. One needs a matrix with more dimensions

to see why those articles can be considered as part of the economic anthropological literature. Table 2 indicates that, independently of the source of the data or the method of analysis, if either the dependent or the independent variables of a study are cultural in nature, then one can consider the study as part of the literature of economic anthropology.

### **Systematic Method to Identify the Main Topics of the Research in Economic Anthropology**

In order to identify systematically the main topics in economic anthropology/ archeology during the past 60 years I looked at a recognized anthropology journal during the first 3 years of every decade from the 1950s to the 2000s, twenty

Table 2. What is economic anthropology? Taking into account dependent and independent variables.

<b>Source of Data</b>	<b>Method of Analysis</b>	<b>Type of Independent Variables</b>	<b>Type of Dependent Variables</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Surveys	Quantitative (e.g., econometrics)	Cultural variables (e.g., religion, ethnicity)	Economic change (e.g., economic growth or economic development)	Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2006).
Interviews – participant observation	Qualitative (e.g., case study)	Economic variables (e.g., income inequality, wages, trade, production, and distribution)	Cultural change (e.g., change in traditions)	Little (2000, 2003), Adams (1997), Tax (1953)

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ty years in total. The main purpose was to find articles with themes that matched my definition of the field as Table 1 illustrates. I chose *Current Anthropology* because it is one of the most important journals in social anthropology (see the rankings of the American Anthropological Association).<sup>3</sup> Besides, this journal is ranked among the top journals in anthropology in independent rankings.<sup>4</sup> In total I looked at 68 articles in the sample. *Current Anthropology* started as a journal in 1959, but I used *Anthropology Today* to identify the research topics published in the early 1950s. To fully comply with the definition in Table 1, however, it is still necessary to examine one or several influential economic journals; this is not done in here.

### Results

The amount of articles published about economic-anthropological themes increased since the early 1950s, until it reached a peak during the early 1980s (see Table 3). The creation of the Society of Economic Anthropology was a cause and a consequence of the increasing number of publications in the field. In the sample of articles, the increasing diversity of themes since the 1950s stands out. Although some topics have usually been present all the time—such as the study of agriculture (agricultural transition), hunter-gather societies, and the penetration of the market in non-western societies—the range of themes has diversified even more since the 1980s. Regarding the me-

thods economic anthropologists have used, the combination of ethnographic work and field experiments during the 2000s stands out. In fact, teams of economists and anthropologist have worked together running cross-cultural experiments. Their findings indicate that:

... pro-social behavior [meaning cooperation] in economic experiments does not result from an invariant property of our species, and instead suggest that there are significant cultural differences between societies (Boyd, 2008, pp. 325-27).

These results aren't really new to anthropologists. What is new, however, is the cross-cultural experiments methodology which includes running ultimatum games, dictator games, public good games, and others, among different indigenous groups in various parts of the world. On the side, what I found most fascinating of these methods is the collaborative work economists and anthropologist can do, showing that productive and important teamwork is possible. I see this as very positive given that neoclassical economics remained silent about culture until very recently (Fernández 2008, 334).

Field experiments have been exported from economics to anthropology (and to economic anthropology), especially since their most influential proponent, Vernon Smith, won the Nobel Prize in Economics, precisely for his contributions to this methodology. In addition, several studies, especially those on hunter-gather societies, have applied evolutionary biology, which is also common in recent studies in economics. The popularity of field experiments and evolutionary biological analysis suggest a methodological convergence between economics and economic anthropology.

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.aaanet.org/publications/list-of-journals.cfm> (accessed on July 23, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>See for instance *Journal Rankings*, available at: <http://www.journal-ranking.com> (accessed on July 23, 2009).

Table 3. Main topics of the research in economic anthropology in a sample of articles.

Period	Topics
Early 1950s	Acculturation Food distribution and exchange Wealth and social status
Early 1960s	Definition of “peasant” Complex societies Cultural factors that affect economic systems Receptivity to methods and policies for community development
Early 1970s	What is economic anthropology? Wealth accumulation, savings and conspicuous consumption Transformation from subsistence economies to cash economies Economic effects of colonialism Demographic transition
Early 1980s	Effects of industrialization on labor time Effects of technological change on agricultural production Effects of expansion of the state on urbanization and market exchange Effects of modernization of fertility <b>Hunter-gathers (definitions)</b> Origins of agriculture How culture affect decision making Specialization and division of labor Tourism Polygyny and inheritance <b>SEA is formed</b> Agriculture, plantations, gender differences and discrimination Economics, culture and art Electrification and development <b>Hunter-gathers (food storage)</b>
Early 1990s	Production in bronze age <b>Hunter-gathers (trade, giving vs. reciprocity, land use and land rights, and other controversies)</b> Native American agriculture Value of natural resources (cultural elements) Transition to agriculture
Early 2000s	Economic hybridity and ritual expenditure Risk preferences (herders and peasants) <b>Hunter-gathers (Men and women’s hunting)</b> Competition in artisan economies Egalitarian social structures and inequality Agriculture and fertility Technology and fertility Experiments and games
2008-9	Branding Experiments and “games of life” Globalization and cultural diversity Tourism Division of labor and economic specialization Well being (Amazonians)

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By looking at the topics at the beginning of each decade it was possible to anticipate some of the themes that were going to be studied in the following decade (the topics that almost define the field), but the following decades have always brought surprises. For example, it might have been possible to predict studies on hunter-gather societies, but more difficult to predict other themes, such as “economic hybridity” or “branding” in the 2000s.<sup>5</sup> It is very refreshing to see topics like these, which shows the ingenuity of economic anthropologists to identify new and subtle ways through which the market economy penetrates different social spheres, as in the case of religion. The research on “branding” also shows how economic anthropology has the tools to extrapolate current happenings and situate them in different cultural contexts in the past. In this regard economic anthropologists have an advantage over economists.

Studies of the effects of new technologies are common in almost any period in the sample, which are part of the broader theme of the effects of modernity and

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<sup>5</sup>In his article “Prehistories of Commodity Branding,” Wengrow (2008) argues that the marketing concept of “branding” is not an exclusive phenomenon of the modern global economy, but can also be found in prehistorically (pre-industrial revolution) societies. “Economic hybridity” refers to the complex interaction between market economies and ritual economies in several societies in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Funerals, for example, are ritual practices that coexist and affect productivity and the economy in China and Africa, in particular. Also, hybridity makes reference to an economic order in which culture, the market, and the state coexist and interact in complex ways in the same location and at the same time. See, for example, the work of Yang (2000).

industrialization.

It is noteworthy, however, that there was not any article in the sample regarding the Internet: virtual communities, and the commons (such as the case of Wikipedia). Probably this is one of the topics that will boom in the next decade. This does not mean that research in these areas is not being carried out, but it does suggest that currently economic anthropologists are paying less attention to this area than to other areas.

### **The Future of Economic Anthropology**

In the 1950s it would have been impossible to predict most of the topics that economic anthropologists study today. In the 2000s, for example, new topics have appeared, such as “branding” and “hybridity,” as well as novel experimental methodologies. Similarly, it would be impossible today to predict the topics of the research of economic anthropology 50 years ahead of us. It would even be difficult to anticipate the next 10 years! Nevertheless, there are several opportunities that rapid economic globalization opens to economic anthropology. The increasingly popular Internet communities and virtual social networks represent “laboratory” settings to observe human behavior; reciprocity, the evolution of social norms, discrimination, political movements and many other topics can be analyzed through “virtual anthropology”. In fact, virtual worlds are redefining the nature of being a participant-observer.

Even the classic themes in economic anthropology such as *the gift* or the debate between formalist and substantivist can be investigated in these *electronic* circumstances. It has been argued, for example, that “exchange” of files (songs,

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movies) and expert opinions in different websites follow a type of behavior similar to gift giving in Native American and Australian societies. The virtual commons, such as Wikipedia, also offers fertile soil for the discipline. Although websites such as Wikipedia might be market and technologically driven, the behavior of users and contributors to these sites does not necessarily respond to the standard economic assumptions of human action. People usually contribute to Wikipedia (make corrections to existing articles, for example) out of a moral commitment: they want the articles to show what they believe is the *right* information, and their compensation is of a moral kind. The virtual commons is therefore going to call the attention of economic anthropologists and institutional economists studying the emergence and enforcement of rules. This does not mean that fieldwork will be abandoned as the preferred method; quite the opposite, only a limited amount of people have currently access to the Internet. Inequality might be increasing and one can even talk to two types of societies, those who can access a computer and the Internet and those who do not. The gap between both societies might grow larger due to rapid innovation in the Internet and the computer industry, and also due to the presence of what economists call “increasing returns to scale” in the industry.

The anthropology of financial markets is another fertile soil for anthropologists. Currently it is not very clear what specific insights anthropology can bring to the debate on the financial crisis, although there are important attempts putting forward criticisms and analysis of the behavior of capitalists and investors. I believe, however, that the definition of the culture of financial markets can be key to understanding the recurrent crisis and the see-

ingly unstable nature of financial systems. For economic anthropology to play a more important role in this debate it is critical to define the main characteristics that shape the “culture of financial markets.”

Religion, especially in developing countries (and particularly Protestantism and Islam), is adapting itself to market ideals predicating a culture of entrepreneurship, hard work, and prosperity; therefore, religion is also becoming a subtle means of market penetration in the social fabric of developing countries. What are the implications of this dynamic? Is the market economy going to advance indefinitely? This controversy will also define the field of economic anthropology in the incoming years. It is my contention therefore that the Internet, the culture of financial markets, and religion will become important components of the identity of economic anthropology.

### **Future Research and Caveats**

My view in this short paper has several limitations; the sample of articles I looked at is small and might not be representative of economic-anthropological research in general. Besides the research themes at the beginning of a decade might be different from the themes at the end of the decade, or in the mid-years of each decade, as the 2000s results suggest. An expansion of this research is to include other journals and publications, such as *Research in Economic Anthropology*, and probably see the evolution of economic-anthropological topics in economics journals as well, such as the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and the *Journal of Economic Literature*, among others. Another possibility is to analyze

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the universe of articles in *Current Anthropology* (etc.) without looking at mere samples. Finally, another interesting possibility is to look at the books reviewed in these journals to learn the perspective from authors of books instead of (or in addition to) authors of articles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The summary of the sample of articles can be provided upon request.

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