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MAURER, BILL

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# What I'm reading

## Occupy economic anthropology

BILL MAURER *University of California, Irvine*

What does it mean to 'do' economic anthropology, now, in the wake of the financial crisis and the re-energizing of public discussion over the nature of debt, credit, speculation, and inequality? Two recent books offer signal insights. This essay suggests they also point towards a specific kind of lingering that may be politically and analytically useful: an occupation of a uniquely anthropological kind.

When the global financial crisis was first unfolding in 2008, my colleague Julia Elyachar and I mused to an interviewer and subsequently in print that we imagined a future where people would be reading Polanyi's *The great transformation* while standing on the unemployment line. It was only half-facetious: at the American Anthropological Association meetings that autumn, we were frustrated by the corridor talk about the crisis as well as the more formal commentary offered during panels. Much of it was simplistic, ahistorical; wanting to take the barricades and boycott the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia (the site of the conference), people sounded as if they had all the answers, the situation was new, and they possessed the keys to unlock the mysteries of capital and finance (keys they had held all along). Our own predilection has always been for less self-assured, more attenuated commentary tied to the actual conditions and histories in the world – which include actions as well as theories-in-motion, which never play out as their designers intend or as we imagine they might. Call it ethnography if you will. So, we told anyone who would listen: read Polanyi, read Keynes, read Hayek, El-Erian, Roubini, Krugman... Financiers were in their silos, said anthropologist and journalist Gillian Tett (2009). Academics were, too. We were siloed in our own disciples and critical theories, and we were siloed by the reflex to respond quickly, to write a blog or give an interview or get 'out there' somehow the 'anthropological take' on the crisis. Elyachar and I may have sounded like old-fashioned academics or pedagogues, but ours was a call to slow down, get out of our own silos, and take a look at the world even though the world yet demanded a rapid response.

Flash forward to the autumn of 2011 and in cities around the United States and the world protesters were occupying civic and private spaces – repossessing

already-enclosed commons, as in the case of the privately held Zuccotti Park in New York City – and, well, reading Polanyi, Mauss, and others. Reports from Occupy Los Angeles tell of protesters passing around a copy of Anna Tsing's *Friction*. Anthropologist and provocateur David Graeber has emerged as a spokesperson, a leader of a leaderless movement, and popular author, his new book *Debt: the first 5,000 years* (2011) a bible for some in this emerging movement. In the space of just a couple of months – the time it took me to start and finish reading the books under review, and to write this piece – ‘the conversation has changed’, as they say: from debt, deficit, and austerity, to income inequality and ‘the 99 per cent’, the moniker and rallying cry of protesters who claim to speak for the bottom 99 per cent of the income distribution protesting the top 1 per cent which earns almost 20 per cent of all wealth in the US – a level last seen in the 1920s.

One can almost hear Polanyi speaking through these protests, his ‘society’ railing against and reasserting itself in the face of the excesses of the self-regulating market. One can also detect frustration among the protesters as well as commentators and critics at the apparent lack of meaningful alternatives. Abolish capitalism? Well, what would you put in its place? The protesters are derided for ‘lacking any concrete demands’, and at the same time extolled as a collective scream of angst seeking change, any change. But in the meantime they have rather remarkably created self-organized communities, with libraries, vegetable gardens, hospital tents, livestreaming broadcasts, and Internet servers powered via jury-rigged cables. There are also familiar signs and slogans, familiar in the US anyway because they are part of the long history of anti-federalism, a tendency that has alternately fostered progressive change and (not to put too fine a point on it) white supremacy, the drive against central authority animated by both liberation praxis and the desire for ‘liberty’ from federal secularisms. Most striking to me are placards that read ‘Abolish the Fed’, referring to the US Federal Reserve Bank and harking back to that initial call for protest during the AAA meetings, or sentiments expressing a desire to end ‘fiat’ or ‘fractional reserve’ currency. The terms are used interchangeably and are now in rather common circulation, not just among the protesters but among elements of the radical right, the disorganized left, what has become the ‘mainstream’ of the US Republican party, and the great muddle in the middle.

It is difficult for me to know how to parse the widespread subjective angst with federalism, Fed policy, central banking, money, despite the fact that I make it my stock in trade in our discipline to talk about such things. Fortunately for me at least, I have always had a number of guides through the weirdness of money, markets, and economy. I do not know if the works under consideration are circulating among the Occupy Wall Street protesters, but I will donate my copies as soon as I complete this article. The first of these works, Chris Hann and Keith Hart's *Economic anthropology* (2011), provides a comprehensive and forcefully argued overview of its title subject. The authors exemplify a mode of inquiry and practice into economy that would reorientate the discussion toward a fully ‘human’ economy, an economy focused on well-being-in-the-world. They invoke Amartya Sen, but there is also a phenomenological whiff wending through the book that pulls the reader towards a more engaged practice: not applied research in an instrumental sense, at least not as conventionally done, but a disposition of openness to the world, a critical engagement with the world, while seeking to world the world anew (see Zhan 2009). The second work I'm considering here, a collection by Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Lavelle, and Antonio David Cattini called *The human economy* (2011), is a roadmap to alternatives, a ‘citizen’s

guide' to everything from NGOs to complementary currencies as well as a series of easily digestible primers on topics ranging from international organizations to social entrepreneurship. If *Economic anthropology* is the theory, *The human economy* is the practice.

*Economic anthropology* (Hann & Hart 2011) is, at one level, a review of the classic subdiscipline of economic anthropology. Students seeking an overview will get one – a very good one. The book goes through the origins of European thought on economics from the Greeks to Locke and beyond. It is engagingly written and will work very nicely in undergraduate classes. They will learn about the origins of the subdiscipline; the formalist–substantivist debate; the anthropology of development; socialism and postsocialism; critical perspectives on the origins and rise of capitalism; a little on the anthropology of finance and feminism; and the contribution of economic anthropology to a new vision of what economics and economies are and what they can become.

But there is more to this volume. This is a 'big book', tackling big questions in deceptively simple prose. It puts forward a major proposition about what economies are and have been, how they work, what markets can and can't do, and whether it even makes sense still to talk about 'the market' or 'the economy' or 'capitalism'. This kind of thinking has been in the air for some time, of course, and many may wonder what is new here. But I think it is the boldness with which the authors articulate their position that makes this so compelling a book.

First, Hann and Hart have a big vision. They are not anti-market or anti-economy. They are *for* a human economy. This is not a romantic or utopian vision, they say (p. x). It is a pragmatic one. The economy is a 'creation of all humanity' (p. x), and as humans we have an obligation to engage it, rework it as we make our way with and through it.<sup>1</sup> Hann and Hart bear more than a few marks of classical humanism and enlightenment cosmopolitanism. They want economic anthropology to 'emerge as a discipline in its own right', grappling with 'the world economy as a whole' (p. 3). Apprehending wholeness entails an expansive notion of economy: it is about the flourishing of human well-being. This claim is profoundly political, because that expansion, in turn, depends on recognizing that there is a broad range of human needs, not just private interests. Hann and Hart contrast the notion of economy as that which expends with that which conserves and nurtures (p. 18). And they see this contrast in terms of a *longue durée* conflict going back to the Greeks and winding through the European Middle Ages and beyond between those who controlled land and those who controlled money. (Readers will be reminded of J.G.A. Pocock and A.O. Hirschman's distinction between the civic humanists and the civil humanists [Hirschman 1977; Pocock 1985]. The civic humanists, tied to military and political aristocracies, ruled via rents; the civil humanists, tied to long-distance trade, ruled via commerce.)

Hann and Hart admit that they are the inheritors of a certain European vantage-point. Their point about this fundamental distinction and their analytical orientation of viewing world history as a conflict between landlords and merchants is a central element of the book. 'This history is not unique to the Christian West', they write (p. 21). Their framing position nevertheless allows Hann and Hart to put in context the contest between national state governments and capitalist liberals over the past 150 years, made all the more evident in the past thirty to forty years of 'neoliberal' reform of governments and the challenge by market liberals to the state's monopolization of the extraction of rents. Here, I refer not only to the attacks on taxation and regulation, but

also to the privatization of taxation and rent-taking: banks make their profit not just from credit and lending, but from fees levied on transactions and rents assessed on the virtual real estate of savings accounts.

The other intellectual hero of this book besides Polanyi is Marcel Mauss. Hann and Hart recover Mauss's political writings in the newspaper *Populaire*, as well as an unpublished paper, to stake out a position on the human economy between the thesis of a market of purely private contracts and the antithesis of communal solidarity. In a sense, the authors are recovering the last chapter of *The gift*, foregrounding its political content. One could almost place Mauss next to some of the more thoughtful commentators on the Occupy movement, who argue that rather than decry its apparent lack of objectives, political leaders and opinion leaders must create new policy options if we are to avoid a complete meltdown or slide into fascism. For instance, the co-head of the Investment Banking Group at the National Bank of Abu Dhabi wrote to the *Financial Times* that

the protesters in New York, Chicago, London and other places should not be criticised for incoherence in voicing their grievances about capitalism. It would be unfair to expect them to articulate their anger into a policy directive or societal statement. It is not their job. Rather, it is always opinion leaders, policymakers and ambitious politicians who amplify protesters' anger into concrete and simple messages backed by well-thought-out – or demagogic – policy options.<sup>2</sup>

There is a time for politics, and it is now.

'[T]he system of *prestations* survives in our societies' (p. 51, original emphasis), after all. Hann and Hart attend to diverse economies lying within and to one side of liberal capitalism, and even as strategies taking place within the same sector or the same market actor.<sup>3</sup> Just as we sell our labour and at the same time give Christmas gifts, so too do major corporations play the capitalism game and act as the landed aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> In a particularly insightful passage, the authors discuss the conflict between profit and rent in industries transformed by the digital revolution, a revolution which, paradoxically, has led corporations to rely on rents from intellectual property as much as if not more than from actual sales of commodities (p. 158). Hence, the renewed political and legal attention to 'piracy', which by another name is the effort to recapture the commons. '[T]he world has become polarized between the corporations' drive to privatize the cultural commons and a vast resistance to that drive' (pp. 158-9).

Indeed, a re-appreciation of the commons and of public goods runs throughout the book. Hann and Hart point to the creation of new public infrastructures that facilitate new markets and exchanges and empower people to create new value and forge new linkages (see Elyachar 2010). Not surprisingly, our elites of both stripes therefore want to control these new channels. Shifting alliances between landed elites and moneyed traders form over access to and enclosure of those commons, and a central tension in world history, as Hann and Hart see it, is not just the privatization of the public but a contest between these elites and 'society' for access to and control over these infrastructures.

Anyone who quickly wants to get a handle on what some of those infrastructures are, and how one might hack into them, as it were, would do well to pick up *The human economy* (Hart *et al.* 2011). Here, in thirty-two short chapters by an interdisciplinary and international group of scholars and activists, one can learn the basics of

microcredit, feminist economics, corporate social responsibility, community participation, alternative energy, and digital commons (among others). The authors are a diverse group of established academics, organizers, and activists. The book traces its origins to the first World Social Forum and has that ‘we-can-do-it-let’s-get-to-it’ spirit that occupies Occupy. The book is meant to build public conversation and spark public engagement. As the editors write, rather than starting from utopian first principles, they seek to document and learn from ‘actual experiments that have been made in the world’ (p. 11). The results are mixed. The academics will strike some as a little too academic; the activists will strike others as a little too naïve. But to the extent to which the book is itself an example of what it proposes – the fostering of new collaborations and conversations at once local and global, personal and impersonal – neither reading need inexorably damage the project as a whole.

These books pose challenges for method, too. Hann and Hart explicitly call for anthropologists to do two specific things: first, they need to ‘acquire complementary knowledge from outside their discipline’ (p. 165). They do not make the point as explicitly as I would like, for I would want to read this as a call not simply for interdisciplinarity, but for acquiring knowledge and expertise in the domains we study, the lateral knowledges that run in parallel to what we do, say, in the pages of this journal, and that may throw us tow-lines from time to time to grab onto to pull our various agendas together in new formations. (I have the image of Donna Haraway’s [2007] cat’s cradle in mind: you can’t play it alone.) Anthropologists have always sought to gain facility in what the ‘natives think’. But this call is for a deeper knowledge as cosident expert, or collateral engagement (Riles 2011). The anthropologists of finance, for example, have had to gain expertise in the domains they study in order to acquire access, but also in order to make sense of and translate finance to other audiences without falling into old denunciations or a critical perspective born more of a pre-commitment to certain theories at the expense of the object itself. Some, too, have prior histories of engagement in these worlds (Elyachar, for instance, was originally trained in finance and worked at the New York Fed), and some have been pulled into them in ways they never might have imagined possible before the encounter (I leave to one side my own biography here).

The second explicit challenge is to get old(er). I am being flippant, but Hann and Hart make a serious point when they note that the pressures of the academic job market today do not afford the kind of slower pace of scholarly reading and thought they enjoyed in their own careers. They ask anthropologists today to turn to history, and write that ‘historical breadth can only come with experience’ (p. 165). Occupy in time for a while. Hann and Hart’s own experience leads them to look more closely at the eighteenth century than the nineteenth, which has preoccupied most anthropologists. (Think of all the attention to Marx, Weber, and Durkheim instead of, for our authors, Rousseau and Kant. I would push it even further back to the Glorious Revolution, Defoe, and Locke.<sup>5</sup>)

One can detect that Hann and Hart were shaped more by 1968 than 2008.<sup>6</sup> *Economic anthropology* may at times adopt the kind of confident tone my article wants to temper. But then *The human economy* ungrounds that tone. As I have noted, Hann and Hart’s invocation of the distinction between rents and profits is part of an older tale, and necessarily limits the conversation to European imaginaries. Still, one always requires guides, mentors, sages even. Hann and Hart occupy that role, and as such they in turn help temper – for me, at least, and hopefully for others – the passions the Occupiers

may ignite. There is a virtue in taking our time, while opening up for engagement in and with an equally curious world.

As I write, the Occupy protesters are accused of having no programme, no demands or goals, or of being confused. Hann and Hart note that there is confusion over economy because people's experiences of it belie the idea that it is any one thing or one process or set of processes. Anthropology is often excoriated for being a collection of 'mere' case studies without any overarching answer or perspective. We, too, resist the bullet-point list. We occupy – with others. Rather than arrive at a final answer, or attempting to force one unified perspective on things, Hann and Hart return to the original definition of economy. ‘“Economy” would then mean “putting one's house in order”’ (p. 35). To the extent that this would entail a sense of the interconnected, planetary systems and non-systems in which we are all enmeshed, together, this may be a lesson already put in practice by the Occupy protesters, at least insofar as they remain open-ended, inchoate, active, and simply *there*.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> One could spend some time examining the proposition that because it is known that something is humanly made there is a moral imperative to remake it, but I leave this for others and for later.

<sup>2</sup> Available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7892ff5e-0617-11e1-adoe-00144feabdco.html#axzz1cwAMieHN> (accessed 10 February 2012).

<sup>3</sup> They do not cite J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), but arrive, I think, at the same place.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, VISA and MasterCard, which have settled various antitrust cases about their fee structures. If 'free' markets are defined by competition, antitrust is just another name for non-market relations. In settling, the card networks essentially admit they are not engaging in a market defined by competition.

<sup>5</sup> I am inspired here by an unpublished paper by Julia Elyachar and Tomaz Mastnak (n.d.) that revisits the political debate over financial speculation during the time of the Glorious Revolution.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Engelke suggested this phrasing; an anonymous reviewer helped instigate this paragraph.

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## L'anthropologie économique « indignée »

### *Résumé*

Que signifie « faire » de l'anthropologie économique aujourd'hui, dans le sillage de la crise financière et de la reprise du débat public sur la nature de la dette, du crédit, de la spéculation et des inégalités ? Deux ouvrages récents donnent un éclairage sur cette question. Le présent essai suggère qu'ils pointent en outre une manière particulière de « s'indigner » qui pourrait être utile du point de vue politique aussi bien qu'analytique : une indignation d'un genre spécifiquement anthropologique.

Bill Maurer is Professor of Anthropology and Law, and Director of the Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion, at the University of California, Irvine. His research concerns law, money, and finance. He is currently working on mobile phone-enabled financial services, and transformations in offshore finance in the Caribbean.

*University of California, Irvine, Department of Anthropology, 3275 Social Sciences Plaza B, Irvine, CA 92697, USA. wmmaurer@uci.edu*