

*Review*

## Diverse approaches in economic anthropology: Some reflections

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Anthropology in general has colonial roots and these influences are still in existence. British colonial policy in Africa and Asia began to change in the 1930s thus, it was suddenly decided to “develop” the colonies. This paper is aimed at objectively studying the process of change without committing itself to any particular policy. The skepticism of colonialism and its arrogant assumption of omniscience and opposition to the existing social order were analyzed. The colonial regime was engaged in the expansion of cash economy and missionary approach. Accordingly anthropologists were cast into the mould of the colonial stereotypes and monolithic notions with functionalist overtones which were the keynote of the colonial anthropology of that time. The functionalist studies dealt with family life, customs, folklore, economic activities and religion. Subsequently, several monographs emerged on the gamut of culture and integration emphasizing diffusionism. The studies were largely based on relations between the individuals occupying specific roles in social structure. By and large, anthropological studies have completely ignored the genesis and basis of social relations, class formation, conflict, contradictions and the question of gender in particular. Precisely this is the crucial point which economic anthropology-formalism, substantivism, structuralism and materialism approach, respectively. In the present exercise an attempt is made to briefly appraise these schools of thought.

**Key word:** Economic anthropology.

### INTRODUCTION

There is no conducive, concise and a largely accepted definition of economic anthropology. Nevertheless it is true that the unity of a science shows itself in the unity of the problems it solves, and such unity emerges only when the relationship among its explanatory terms is established. Therefore only economic anthropology can emerge as an exploratory sister branch of anthropology at large. Be that as it may, economic anthropology is neither economic in the usual sense of the term nor is it anthropological (Sedden, 1978). Largely speaking, it is a branch of predominantly historical materialism that is not exclusively concerned with the dynamics and structure of pre-capitalist social formations and the conditions of their transformation. Due to overwhelming epistemological orientation of empiricism in anthropology this school of thought is either misconceived or under represented.

To begin with, in the 1920s only a few scholars devoted special attention to the general problems common to economics and anthropology as “a study of the ideas that

primitive peoples held about economic matters” (Sedden, 1978). Further, it was suggested that the collaboration of anthropologists could provide those in the economic field with facts in return for ideas and the fundamental issues involved in economic activities. Unfortunately these arguments were not reasonable as the separate analytical operations distinguished under the rubric of economic anthropology and anthropological economics were inconsistently handled while neglecting the diachronic evolutionary perspective in favour of synchronic functionalist inquiry. It was only under the influence of Meillassoux, Terray and Godelier that the subject of inquiry came into focus systematically. The paradigm shift to economic anthropology in the 1960s took place in accordance with the movement in ethno-graphy and ethnoscience. Be that as it may, Grass’s notion of anthropological economics was reemphasized by Salisbury under the label “ethno-economics” (Salisbury, 1968). Malinowski’s anti-economic stand prevailed among

the anthropologists till 1940s and still persists. Seen thus, economic anthropology has a chequered history. In this vein, the pioneering compendium of Herskovits contributed to a large extent to the establishment of the sub-discipline as a viable concern, while been consolidated by Raymond Firth. As a matter of fact it was only Firth who dealt with the concerned issues of anthropology and economics by noting that the recognition of a discrete analytical sphere that could be titled "economic" occurred to anthropologists since they viewed economic phenomena as a given (Firth, 1965).

Meanwhile, substantivists under Karl Polany's influence reiterate Malinowski's view as a basic tenet in economic anthropological discourse, arguing on a prior basis (Cook, 1970). This resuscitated orientation gets a push by their advocates even today. This in some way reflects anthropology inductionism and economic deductionism that fails in operationalizing the concept and propositions. Precisely, it is only in operationalization process that explanatory value of concepts and propositions will be determined (Godelier, 1972; Cook, 1969). However, it is a fact that the anthropologists in due course of time became conscious and acknowledged the gap between economy and science, and subsequently began focusing on economic processes namely, allocation of resources and decision making, pattern of social relations of production, inequality of ownership, reasons for perpetuating inequality, etc. Perhaps only then will there be explanatory possibilities of a method of enquiry that is based on the assumption that knowledge of what might occur (Problematic) or of what must occur (apodictic) will lead the investigator to a more comprehensive knowledge of what is actual or occurring (assertoric) in a given situation (Godelier, 1972). Seen more pragmatically, the study of economics provides increased awareness of rationale for systematic data collection in general.

## FORMALISM

Following formalist analysis, Lee (1969) has adopted the transactional models of input-output economics to the analysis of King Bushmann's subsistence economy while Edel (1967) has applied economics to measure variations in cooperatives of Jamaican fishing villages. Unlike many other formalists, Edel (1967) emphasizes three requirements and limitations of economic analysis (a) preference function-maximisation of production, maximum utilization of resources and exchange, (b) economic analysis is purely synchronic and (c) complimentary types of analyses are required for perceiving social relations. Thus, formalism views economic anthropology as the economic process of relating resources to targets with reference to the social milieu to which it is associated. Joy (1967) another formalist has attempted to use matrix

analysis to understand division of labour and exchange in the mountain fur economy of Darfur while Orans (1968) has applied maximization principle to formulate a model of caste relations in India, Pakistan and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Yet some others apply time series and supply demand analysis, like Cook, in a study of price and output variability in a peasant economy in Mexico (1970). On the whole formalists observe that economic anthropology is the study of social relations concomitant to the process of resource utilization in a socio-cultural setting (Firth 1961; Nash 1961; Salisbury 1962; Belshaw 1969). The approach focuses on historical and formal stand, and is primarily concerned with social performance in contrasting cultural settings, ignoring the fact of how and where the culture originates. In brief, formalists perceive the economy as a unit of economizing (rational) decision making and an object of study in the social system. Further, this school emphasizes the non spatial, ideal and normative aspects and over emphasize on subjectivity at the expense of objectivity.

In addition, they also argue that the specific structure of a particular economic system is assumed rather than the rationality principle of the classical economics. This principle of liberalism is carried on further on the basis of generality, as it is assumed that capitalist system is the natural order of society by all possible means. Besides, it is also held that with the rise of capitalism, humankind came back to its true nature that is, from savagery and barbarism to the age of civilization (Smith, 1881). Following this school of thought, Lange (1963) and Rostow (1960) argue that the concept of traditional economy comprising all social and economic structures started from the primitive societies to the rise of capitalism. Lange justifies this stand by referring to Herskovits, Sombart and Weber arguing that the individual is taken to be the starting point. This analysis proceeds from the individual existence of subjective preferences to a "natural" psychology that has a tendency to maximize their satisfaction. It is further assumed that these individuals compete with each other. Therefore, it is confirmed as to how these assumed individuals will exchange their labour and their products in order to maximize their satisfaction. This is nothing short of abstract empiricism which assumes that every product including labour power is an exchangeable commodity and the relation among the individuals to commodity exchange holds that these relations are relations of competition (Godelier, 1972). Thus, formalism argues for maximization of profit making and regards the exploitation of working class as rational.

## SUBSTANTIVISM

The substantivists view the economy as the process of producing goods for the society. They do not consider any social institution to be economic clearly reinforcing

traditional anthropological functionalism (Polanyi, 1957; Sahlins, 1965; Dalton, 1968). Paradoxically, subsantivists do not attribute what exactly economic is in their view but emphasize the spatial, sensuous and deterministic position. The subsantivists approach denies the existence of discrete economic sphere arguing that economic activity articulates within itself, its institutional matrix in a given social system. Further, it is also argued that no pre-industrial social system has an exclusive economic institution. Accordingly, economics is viewed in dealing with social relations that are related to production of materials means of existence. These relations are regarded as an integrated whole as the functions are complimentary. In return, these functions determine the role and status of individuals in social system which is in constant equilibrium. To quote Sahlins: "A material transaction is usually a momentary episode in continuous social relations. The social relation exerts governance while the flow of goods is constrained in a part by status etiquette". Further, Sahlins (1960) criticizes the general theoretical approach relevant to historically recent evolutionary advanced system of production and exchange. The assumption being that high productivity which is predicted upon a suitable ecology and technological capacity is the cause of differentiated economy and the increase of power. This assumption illustrates that the concept are value free and thus, are cross-culturally general in order to render a structural problem into a mere technical shape. The generality that anthropological studies make is not from its theoretical eloquence but from its ideological premises. To recapitulate the above, both formalism and subsantivism equivocally argue in rational support of capitalism. That is why neither approach provides precise criteria for delimiting the field as distinct analytical category in the social system under analysis.

## STRUCTURALISM

Structure according to Levi-Strauss constitutes a level of invisible realities which are visible behind the social relations. (Levi- Strauss 1963). The logic of visible reality and the lens of social relations generally depend on the function of the hidden relations. For structural functionalists the structure lies with the totality of empirically given social relations. Therefore it is coterminous with the totality, a closed stable system tending towards equilibrium. On the other hand for structuralists, structure only exists in and through the human mind (spirit) which is rejected by formalists as well as subsantivists. Structuralism denotes structure - event and structure individual in the realm of society. In brief, an event whether from inside or outside always acts on the entire structure. The set of known and unknown properties of the structure always intervene between cause and effect. The structural causality renders

consciousness and unconsciousness to the event (Godelier, 1972). Levi-Strauss's structural analysis neglects all possible historicity. Precisely, the structural approach divides the analysis of the structural relation from their functions. Subsequently, the problem of the real articulation of relations and the other concrete social structures, are not analyzed from the formal system of structure (ex: Kinship) and the other forms of structural relations whether similar or different is also not looked into. Therefore, it is argued here that structural morphology without analyzing functions is incomplete and only by combining these two will the comprehension of the issues of transformation and progress of structure be achieved. Structuralism invariably defines infrastructure in terms of the unconscious, teleological, synchronic, relational, symbolic and universal. Levi- Strauss invokes a characteristic structuralist argument, that only the unconscious mind can mediate a mutual understanding and transcend subjective bias - "an unconditional objectivity" (Levi-Strauss 1962). Thus, it seems that Levi-Strauss's structuralism is based upon a priori assumption of Mauss who holds that gift exchange is a social fact that is synthetic, rational and systematic and also a relational and systematic process. On the whole structuralism is anti history and undermines axiological dimensions (Scholte, 1972; Goldman, 1969).

Among the structuralists, Godelier's stand seems logical and free from teleology. He outlines a scheme of different economies which is chronological (historical) and functional (logical). He undertakes Althusser's stand on social formation as that which unifies the elements of infrastructure and superstructure (Althusser, 1969).

Elaborating this further Godelier argues that by identifying the numbers and matrix of various modes of production, political and ideological structures, the articulation between various modes and the function of all the elements in the superstructure, one can comprehend social formation in general. He has applied this approach to analyze the social structure of the Inca in 16th century (Godelier, 1972). Elsewhere he has pronounced that "it is the concept of mode of production which constitutes the primary concept of economic anthropology..." (Althusser, 1969). Accordingly, he argues that production process is related to technology (T), resources (R), instrument of labour (IL) and men (M) so as to obtain the product (P) socially. Further, he holds that production is the functional combination of three set of variables (R - IL - M) which assume different forms depending on the nature of variables, while the relation between the variables is reciprocal (Godelier, 1966). This approach is different from idealism, as the productivity of a system will be the measure of the ratio between the social product and the social cost that it implies. This implies that the less complex its production pattern, the more effective the technology which is dependent on the diversity of the natural conditions in which it operates will be. Godelier argues that economic anthropology is better understood

under the framework of comparative political economy that is mercantile-machine capitalist economies that originated in Europe and its subsequent imposition of 'superiority' and 'rationality' on the non-industrial and non-European economies.

## MATERIALIST APPROACH

The most important landmark in the materialist conception of political economy is the development of the category of social-economic formation, the classic description of which is given to Marx's preface to his work, a contribution to the critique of political economy, 1859. Upholding Marx's analysis, Lenin wrote that "while explaining the structure and development of the given formation of society exclusively through production relations, he nevertheless everywhere and incessantly scrutinized the superstructure corresponding to these production relations (Lenin, 1971). In the present paper it is assumed that broad political economic framework would enable the explanation of the variety of economic forms that occur under specific historical conditions; in other words comprehending the qualitative changes at a given point of time.

From the materialist approach, the economic process is divided in three parts: (1) the appropriation of materials from nature (2) transforming these materials using tools, techniques and labour and (3) lastly the use of the product through distribution and consumption. The nature of these relations in production is complex and the complexity depends on the level of productive forces along with technology and the subsequent social relations between and among different economic classes. The process exchange enables the producer to acquire particular products into which he/she wishes to convert the quantity allocated. In consumption, the products are individually appropriated for use (Marx, 1904, 1971). It seems logical to apply this framework to comprehend the economic and social relations particularly in the context of pre-industrial and pre-capitalist social formations. In these societies there were diverse components of production system corresponding to specific socio-cultural adaptation. This approach to the study of culture and society dates back to the time of Morgan and Engles (Marx, 1965; Morgan, 1877; Engles, 1963; Meillassoux, 1971; Terray, 1972). Engles interpreted Morgan's schema and argued that there exists a specific relation between a mode of production and population and this precisely brought about the integration of economic and ecological studies in anthropology.

Meanwhile, Meillassoux applied historical-materialist framework to study the subsistence economy of Guro in order to analyze the post-colonial changes, commercial agriculture, the advent of money economy, trade and exchange. Similar other anthropological studies, like the Kandh and the Saora in India also throw light on the method in comprehending typical tribal social formation

(Pathy, 1984; Pathy, 1986). In the pre-capitalist societies like the Kandh, the Bodo,

The Lanjia Saora, etc., the mode of production operates in three tiers that is; economic, juridico-political and ideological structure. In these societies, land becomes a subject of and an instrument of labour. Human energy is largely the only form of energy available coupled with primitive tools which require little labour investment (Meillassoux, 1971). Terray argues that there is interplay of variables between different modes resulting in diversity of the political, juridical and ideological superstructures. Also, there is a reciprocal expression of the totality of the various parts between elements whose originality is irreducible.

Be that as it may, in pre-capitalist society, kinship relations function as relations of production and also ideological superstructure. Precisely, the low level of productive forces and minimal technological applications bring the members closer in that particular society, thereby showing the significance of group life/village unit. Thus, in these societies the economy-kinship linkage is both an internal as well as external feature.

Notwithstanding the rationality and logic of the materialist method it is argued that this cannot be simply applied dogmatically to concrete social formations.

This is so because it is assumed that socio-economic formation in general is the consequence of different modes of production, the inherent diversities and the complexities, the articulation between different modes, the dominant one among them and the subordinate mode/modes. It is this combination in the dominance of at least two modes of production, where concrete social relations that appear in the field, are exactly the product of complex causality (Taylor, 1972).

Finally, the paper submits that the application of petty commodity production (PCP) as an analytical category for the study of socio-economic formation would enlarge one's comprehension of economic anthropology particularly with regard to pre-capitalist tribal societies (Pathy, 1986).

This is because in these societies the producer appropriates the means of production while setting the productive forces in motion which is associated with the disappearance of community rights to property. However, the concept needs to be clearly defined and categorized and thus demands exploratory and explicatory exercise.

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