

# Keith Hart Answers Eleven Questions about Economic Anthropology

*This is how Keith Hart describes himself in brief:*

*I was born in Manchester, England in 1943. I now live in Paris and teach anthropology part-time in London. I studied classics at Cambridge University before changing to social anthropology. My doctoral research was in a slum of Ghana's capital, Accra, as a result of which I coined the idea of the Informal Economy. First identified with the Third World urban poor, this has now become a universal concept in the social sciences. I jointly wrote the development programme for Papua New Guinea's independence. I have taught in a dozen universities around the world, for the longest time at Cambridge, where I was Director of the African Studies Centre. In the last decade I have investigated how money and exchange are evolving in response to the digital revolution in communications and to the formation of world society. I have worked as a journalist, development consultant, publisher and professional gambler; and I maintain an active Web presence at [www.thememorybank.co.uk](http://www.thememorybank.co.uk).*

## 1. Professor Hart, could you please begin by telling me a bit about what you are currently working on?

In the last couple of years I have written several articles on money from different points of view. Four essays in press are *On Money and Anthropology: Towards a New Object, Theory and Method*, *The Persuasive Power of Money*, *Money is Always Personal and Impersonal*, *Money in the Making of World Society* (the last being the title of my inaugural lecture at Goldsmiths this coming October). I have also given keynote lectures at conferences and written several articles on the *Informal Economy*, a concept I contributed to development studies.

I have recently published a review essay on Marcel Mauss; and with Alain Caillé I plan to organize in 2009 a major conference on his relevance today. With Jean-Louis Laville and Marguerite Mendell, I am preparing a version of the *Dictionnaire de l'autre économie* (Gallimard, 2006) for publication in English. Chris Hann and I are editing *Market and Society: The Great Transformation today*, a collection

of essays focusing on Polanyi's relevance to economic anthropology in the neo-liberal crisis. Chris and I are writing a text book together: *Economic Anthropology: a Short History*. I will be giving the keynote lecture: *The Human Economy*, at a London conference in January 2008. *Rethinking Economies: a Human-Centred Approach* is the culmination of a workshop series I have helped to organize.

I am preparing a book that summarizes a lifetime's engagement with African development, *The African Revolution: Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century World*. I have just been appointed an Honorary Research Professor at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban and expect to be actively involved in research there and in India with my partner, the economist, Vishnu Padayachee. I have also agreed to join a proposed anthropological study of unions in Brazil and Argentina.

In September 2007, I gave a public lecture on my thoughts concerning the future of anthropology, *Toward a New Human Universal: Rethinking Anthropology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. More generally, my website is an experiment in online publishing linked to the development of a more publicly accessible anthropology.

## 2. You are trained as an anthropologist, but how come that you entered this field?

I always intended to be an academic; it was just a question of which kind. I was a student of classics at Cambridge in the early 60s, which I loved; but the job prospects seemed limited at a time when the social sciences were booming. I thought of sociology, but at that time it was part of the economics syllabus and, curiously given my later interests, I was put off by the association. I had a rowing coach, a geographer, who studied desert erosion in the Mediterranean basin and this allowed him to spend the winters in warmer places. I thought that social anthropology was a sort of sociology with travel possibilities and found that attractive. When I switched to that department, my professors worked in Ghana and I imagined I would be more

likely to be funded if I went there. I could concoct a more laudable explanation in retrospect, but my eyes were fixed on the prize of an academic career. Of course, if I had known then what I know now about the universities, my priorities might have been different.

**3. In your own work, the issue of money is central. This is also a field in economic sociology. Still, it is not at least my impression that anthropologists and sociologists cooperate on this important topic. Why is that?**

It is hard for anthropologists and sociologists to cooperate in anything, since their respective guilds overlap considerably and this puts them in competition. I have found it easy and profitable to collaborate with economists and engineers. The sociologist, Nigel Dodd at LSE has always given my work on money a fair hearing and I respect his. Geoffrey Ingham, on the other hand, promotes a state theory of money that is diametrically opposed to mine. I have indicated above that my main collaborators in Paris, Laville and Caillé, are economic sociologists. In France, the lines between disciplines are often fuzzier than in the Anglophone world. Thus Bruno-Théret and Jean-Michel Servet are both close colleagues whose work on money straddles political economy, sociology and anthropology.

In the book on Polanyi, Chris Hann and I commissioned chapters by Jens Beckert and Philippe Steiner, with both of whom I share an agenda for the development of cooperation across disciplinary boundaries in building up a viable alternative to mainstream economics. Someone like Viviana Zelizer is read and frequently invited to speak by anthropologists. There is considerable overlap between her intellectual agenda in *The Social Meaning of Money* (1994) and Parry and Bloch's collection, *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1989). I find that anthropologists and sociologists frequently emphasize the same personal and social aspects of money, leaving the more abstract and impersonal realms of economy to the economists. This is a common failing; but it is not grounds for an active division of labour between them. I should say that I have taught sociology and have been hired as an economist, so demarcation disputes within the social sciences don't mean a lot to me.

**4. Though the following quote from your homepage is taken out of context, I see many similarities to sociology: "Economic anthropology should aim to show that the numbers on people's financial statements, bills, receipts, and transaction records constitute a way of summarizing their relations with society at a given time". Could you clarify what you mean by this?**

(<http://www.thememorybank.co.uk/2007/07/15/127/>).

In general my approach aims to go beyond the 20th century dualism of structure and agency. That is why I emphasise money's ability to span the universal and the particular, abstract and concrete, collective and individual. Although I do not develop the argument in the piece you refer to, I hope to emulate Kant in developing a cosmopolitan anthropology *from a pragmatic point of view*. I understand by this the search for what we need to know about humanity as a whole if we want to build a world fit for everyone. But, beyond that, to make what we discover available to people in a form that they can use for practical purposes.

The method I advocate is summarized in a trio of sentences. The one above is followed by: "The next step is to show where these numbers come from and how they might be manipulated in the actor's interest. Then it will become more obvious how and why ruling institutions need to be reformed for all our sakes." In a highly compressed way, I am outlining a programme for economic anthropology as a kind of political education and perhaps also as a sociology in Durkheim's sense of making our connections to society more visible.

The issue is how money might be approached in a less alienated way. This includes not just the money fetish, but a number fetish also (here I draw explicitly on Spengler). There is an obvious parallel with Marx's argument in *Capital* I ch.1, except that I remove the illusion that the commodities relate only to each other and keep the *magic* of seeing goods and prices as personalized powers, except that these powers are social as well as personal, (a position I take from Mauss).

I am glad that you picked on this sentence, since in many ways it is the crux of the essay. In order to have a conversation about it, a lot more needs to be unpacked on both sides.

## 5. What do you see as the main findings of economic anthropology that should be known also to outsiders?

Among the abiding questions at the intersection of economics and anthropology are the following: Is the economists' aspiration to place human affairs on a rational footing an agenda worthy of anthropologists' participation or just a bad dream? Since economics is a product of western civilization – and of the English-speaking peoples in particular – is any claim to universality bound to be ethnocentric? If capitalism is an economic configuration of recent origin, could markets and money be said to be human universals? Can markets be made more effectively democratic, with the unequal voting power of big money somehow neutralised? Can private and public interests be reconciled in economic organization or will the individualism of *homo economicus* inevitably prevail? Should the economy be isolated as an object of study or is it better to stress how economic relations are embedded in society and culture generally? None of these questions is exclusive to economic anthropology.

Chris Hann and I approach economic anthropology through three historical periods. The first covers from the 1870s to the 1940s, when economics and anthropology emerged as modern academic disciplines. A bureaucratic revolution concentrated power in strong states and corporate monopolies, yet economics reinvented itself as the study of individual decision-making in competitive markets. Later, when a rapidly urbanizing world was consumed by economic disaster and war, anthropologists published ethnographies of remote peoples conceived of as being outside modern history. Neither branch of study had much of a public role.

The period since the Second World War saw a massive expansion of the universities and the rise of economics to the public prominence it enjoys today. An academic publishing boom allowed anthropologists to address mainly just themselves and their students. Economic anthropology sustained a lively debate between formalists, substantivists and Marxists from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the welfare state consensus was at its peak and European empires were dismantled.

The sub-discipline has been less visible since the 1980s, the era of *neo-liberal globalization* in world economy. A lot has been produced on exchange, money, consumption and privatization, but, as with much else in contemporary anthropology, the results are fragmented. Economic anthro-

pologists have generated a critical commentary on capitalist civilization at a time when the market economy became truly global. There has been greater theoretical self-awareness, even a degree of openness to the history of economic ideas; but anthropologists have so far avoided making a direct challenge to the economists on their home territory of national and global economic analysis.

At the same time, although most anthropologists still rely on fieldwork as their distinctive method, the ethnographic model of research has come under considerable pressure as a result of theoretical developments sometimes labelled *post-modernism*. This has led to new approaches to the economy using experimental methods; but these efforts have generally stopped short of offering an anthropological perspective on our moment in world history.

This is a pity, since the end of the Cold War, the birth of the internet and the globalization of money markets cry out for comprehensive historical treatment. The result, however, is that economic anthropologists now study the innermost workings of capitalism at its core and in its global spread; the privatization of what were recently communist economies (*post-socialist transition*); and the plight of poor people in non-western countries, as defined by international bureaucracy (*development*).

## 6. If you were to recommend one text, besides your own, to a non-anthropologist, who would like to get into economic anthropology, what would that be? [please motivate your choice!]

The obvious one would be *The Gift*, but it is quite allusive and you need a lot of background to make sense of it. Mauss's intellectual programme here is taken from Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society*, especially the chapter on the *non-contractual element in the contract*, but this too is rather hard going. To my mind, the most revolutionary book written by any of the founders of modern social theory is *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Money is the God of capitalism and economics is its false religion. But then this might not take my hypothetical reader directly into economic anthropology. Weber's *General Economic History* is a wonderful introduction and the last chapter again makes the link between economy and religion. But one book never fails to enthuse readers and it opens up the sort of economic anthropology, history and

sociology that interests me: Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. I said I was once a classicist and this way of answering your question should make it clear why I prefer to enter a discipline through its formative texts. I share an intellectual heritage with most sociologists.

**7. You have worked also on normative issues. Students are normally told that they should separate what one ought to from what is. Most social scientists accept this, but what I am interested in is if, and if so, how, normative work can further "traditional" scientific work?**

Max Weber should be turning in his grave, if you talk like this. The issue is the relationship between politics and science (or the intellectual life more generally). Weber's two great essays on *Politics as a Vocation* and *Science as a Vocation* show that the line between the two is hard to draw firmly and perhaps one should not try. Politics, he says, is the pursuit of power and its means is passion. But a politician who is indifferent to reason will soon lose his credibility. Equally science is the pursuit of knowledge by means of reason. But all the best scientists are passionate about their work. Weber's work is incomprehensible except as an attempt to find ways of combining science and politics. This may involve compartmentalising each activity to a degree, but they feed into each other over time.

All the great thinkers I have learned most from drew inspiration from a desire to make a better world. Most of these changed the world through what they wrote more than by their political achievements (Locke and Marx, for example), but their intellectual work was still inspired by their political engagement. I have spent most of my adult life in the field of *development*. Whatever scientific aspirations one might have in this field, the only way forward is to identify the possible in the actual (Rousseau, Hegel).

The kind of science you identify as *traditional* is a pastiche of real science, backward-looking and conservative, more worthy of the label *ideology*. If *social scientists* had paid any attention to real science in the twentieth century, they would have been directly influenced by scientific modernism (relativity, quantum mechanics) or by the non-linear anti-reductionist sciences of complexity. But on the whole they have not. Economics is still fixed in a seventeenth-century epistemology. The only twentieth-century social thinker of any significance who was open to contemporary

scientific ideas and methods was Keynes. And he was not much bothered to distinguish between politics and science.

**8. Economic anthropology, much like economic sociology, has related itself to economics. Do you think anything is gained by this? [or not]**

Economic anthropology is the product of a juxtaposition of two academic disciplines in the twentieth century. It would be wrong to speak of the relationship between economics and anthropology as a dialogue. From the beginning, economists in the neoclassical tradition have rarely expressed any interest in anthropology and none at all during the last half-century, when their discipline has become the dominant ideological and practical arm of global capitalism. Anthropologists, on the other hand, when they have been concerned with *the economy*, have usually felt obliged to address the perspective of mainstream economists, sometimes applying their ideas and methods to exotic societies, more often being critical of the discipline's claim to be universally valid. Since anthropologists in this period based their intellectual authority on the fieldwork method, discourse in economic anthropology has generally been preoccupied with the interpretation of economic ideas in the light of ethnographic findings. But civilisation is often thought of as an economy these days; and some anthropologists, drawing on a variety of theories and methods, have offered alternative visions of the economy's past, present and future.

When I completed my doctorate, I joined a group consisting mainly of development economists. This required me to talk to them. Our exchanges would go something like this:

*Economist: Is the marginal productivity of agricultural labour zero in Northern Ghana?*

*KH: What does that mean?*

*E: I am thinking of Lewis's dualistic theory of labour migration between traditional and modern sectors. It is assumed that people could leave the former without reducing total output there.*

*K: Does it make any difference what income they get from working in agriculture?*

*E: What do you mean?*

*K: Well, most of the farm work is done by young men, but their elders control the distribution of the product. So, if they leave to work in the towns, whatever they get there is their own and more than what they have at home.*

*E: What do you call that kind of organization?*

*K: Lineages or unilineal descent groups. A French Marxist, Pierre-Philippe Rey has written about the lineage mode of production in West Africa.*

*E: And you say economists like jargon too much! There is a new version of the Lewis model by Harris and Todaro that hinges on rural-urban income expectations.*

*K: Maybe we should collaborate on an article, The lineage mode of distribution: a reflection on the Lewis model...*

In this and other ways, I learned that I could make a satisfactory academic living by acting as a broker from anthropology to economics and back again. But I wanted to change both disciplines. I realised that I would have to learn to communicate in the economists' language, since they were professionally dominant in the field of development. So for three years I worked part-time as a journalist for *The Economist*, producing reports of West Africa. Through this work, I learned *economese* – how to sound like an economist without any formal training in the discipline. This served me well, when I launched the concept of the informal economy. My original paper had two parts: the first was a vividly written ethnographic account of life in an Accra slum (I have been there and you haven't); the second drew on my conversations with economist colleagues to present my argument in terms they could understand.

I had a close friend at this time, the economist John Bryden. We later joined together to collaborate on *A New Approach to Rural Development in Europe* (2004). My current research partner in South Africa is the economist, Vishnu Padayachee with whom I have worked on Indian businessmen and relations between India and South Africa more generally. So I continue to derive great benefit from these conversations.

I also note with some enthusiasm the development of a critical alternative to mainstream economics within the discipline, *post-autistic economics*. I am hopeful that an interdisciplinary conversation could be opening up after the sterile interlude of the twentieth century. Even if it

doesn't, I intend to be in one. Despite my anger against economists' abuse of a gullible public's trust, I still believe that humanity would benefit from being able to place our common economic affairs on a rational footing.

## 9. What, if any, shortcomings do you see with contemporary economic anthropology?

The main shortcomings of economic anthropology are those of academic anthropology in general – over-reliance on the fieldwork method, refusal to engage with world history, professional introversion within a self-protective guild, and being closed to the kind of interdisciplinary conversation that might lead to the development of a genuine alternative to mainstream economics today. I see signs of improvement in this respect and I place my own initiatives at this time within such a project.

## 10. Assuming that we can do it, and your answers suggest and give hope that we can do this, on what topics would you like to see sociologists and anthropologists cooperating?

I have indicated that I find it personally easy to collaborate with individuals from other disciplines who are of like mind and are interested in similar questions. But building the institutional and interactive framework for a coherent alternative to mainstream economics is more important than finding topics to investigate together on an ad hoc basis.

Assuming that anthropologists and sociologists really do different things, what might make collaboration between them mutually advantageous? For me the routine story of their difference is deeply misleading. Anthropologists are supposed to study the others and to place a premium on getting close to the people, whereas sociologists work closer to home and are more theoretically and methodologically rigorous. The anthropologists often resent what they see as sociologists' arrogance – the failure of a remote and over-formalized bourgeois caste to take our incursions into the study of global capitalism seriously. But there is some truth to the stereotypical contrast. The anthropologists are often messier – they could use some of the intellectual rigour that sociologists insist on – and they do have

a wider framework of comparison that should perhaps be more readily accessible to those who only study the West.

There are many schools of anthropology and I come from one that always thought of social anthropology as a form of comparative sociology in a line of descent from Montesquieu. So I would recommend economic sociologists to find out more about what anthropologists really do and how our practices and assumptions vary. For example, Kalman Appelbaum's *The Marketing Era* (2003) is an anthropological work of remarkable originality that combines historical comparison between the development of marketing in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and early 20<sup>th</sup> century USA with an ethnographically based commentary on the global diffusion of marketing practices today. I am sure that the possibilities for exchange and co-operation with economic sociologists on this topic would be greater if the author were not an outsider to the latter's guild. So the first priority is to open up chances for dialogue, of which your initiative in commissioning this interview is obviously one.

In recent years I have been exploring a version of anthropology that, rather than taking its form from the contemporary academic discipline, is inspired by the liberal philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and especially by Kant's cos-

mopolitan example. *Anthropology* would then mean whatever we need to know about humanity as a whole if we want to build a more equal world society. I hope that this usage could be embraced by students of history, sociology, political economy, philosophy and literature, as well as by members of my own profession. Many disciplines might contribute without being exclusively devoted to it. The idea of *development* has played a similar role in the last half-century. It matters less that our separate academic guilds should retain their monopolies of access to knowledge – or even find ways of occasionally working together – than that *anthropology* should be taken up by a broad intellectual coalition for whom the realization of a new human universal – a world society fit for everyone to live in – is a matter of urgent personal concern.

### **11. If you were to give advice to a young social scientist today, who is interested in the economy, what is the most important lesson you have learned?**

Study the economy in every way that the economists don't; learn to speak and write *economese* so that you can enter a conversation with them.