



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
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White House and Trump Tower: US Exceptionalism, Eurasia and the House Economy of the Planet

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Introduction: A Cloud Over the AAA

The American Anthropological Association held its 115th annual meeting between 16th and 20th November 2016 at the Minneapolis Convention Center. This year primatologist Frans De Waal was honored for his pathbreaking work on “the myth of human cooperation as a ‘huge anomaly’”. De Waal argues that chimpanzees too are characterized by empathy, joint intentionality and a sense of fairness. Far from being specific to humans, cooperation is found throughout the animal kingdom and assumes developed forms not only among primates but all mammals.

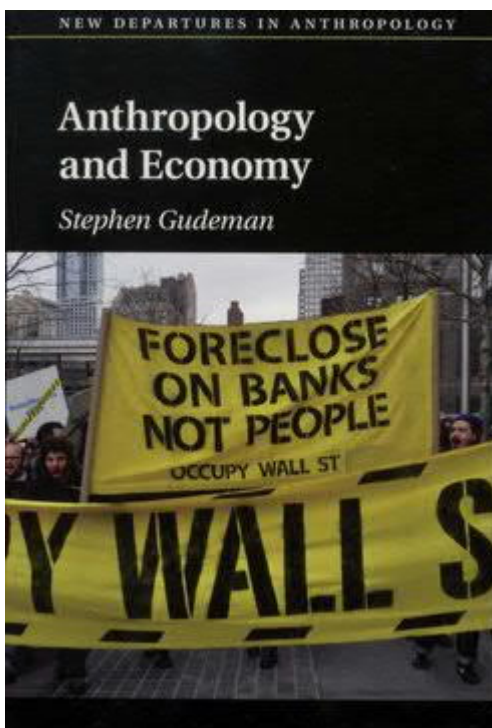
De Waal’s distinguished lecture on the last full day of the meeting was delivered to a sparsely populated auditorium. As usual, the programme was dominated by a vast range of cultural topics. This year the anthropocene attracted a lot of attention; ontologies and precarities continued to score well; and as always there was no shortage of sparkling gems among the panels: my favorite this year was the “anthropology of bad advice”.

But this year was not quite business as usual in all respects. The vast auditorium was full to hear Melissa Harris-Perry, a black public intellectual who received a standing ovation after her opening keynote address “Making Sense of the Election and Social Policy Priorities in the Post-Obama Era”. It is probably safe to say that not many of the 5000+ participants had voted for Donald J. Trump the previous week. Anger, bewilderment and concern punctuated informal conversations and surfaced in many of the formal sessions as well. What can an often unorthodox and radical, predominantly “soft” discipline such as anthropology expect from a man who scoffs at the results of the “hard” sciences, e.g. concerning climate change? “Donald Trump does not read,” quipped Jason Weidemann, an editorial director at Minnesota University Press, during an evening reception, “but that is not his main problem.”

Anthropology in the USA has seen better days. Though still huge by European standards, the number of participants was down this year. The discipline is apparently attracting fewer students, there are fewer Faculty positions, and increasing exploitation of precariously employed graduate students or postdocs. But what is the victory of Trump likely to mean for US society more generally, and for the planet?

Conversations in Minneapolis

I was in Minneapolis to join a group of colleagues, students and friends to mark the recent retirement of Stephen Gudeman, who has been a regular visitor to my institution in Halle for many years. It was gratifying to hear that the main products of our collaboration in the *Economy and Ritual* project (2009-2012) are being widely read and debated (Gudeman and Hann 2015a, b). During these years in Halle Steve also worked on a single-authored book, which builds on several earlier volumes in which he has honed dichotomies between the corporation and the house, and between the market and the base or community. *Anthropology and Economy* (Gudeman 2016) can be considered the fullest account so far of his philosophy of economy, updated to include a new framework with which to analyze the importance of finance and “the finance of finance” for the global capitalism of the 21st century. The copies available at the book exhibit sold out very quickly.



For my own contributions to the festivities I appropriated two of Steve’s best known titles. His study of economic transformation in Panama *The Demise of a Rural Economy* (Gudeman 1978) came just too late to influence my analysis of rural transformation in Hungary. In any case, my story in that era was one of efflorescence in the flexible conditions of “reform socialism”. But Steve’s title is an apt characterization of what has happened in the postsocialist

countryside. By probing a little further, we can see why disillusioned villagers have been a key power base for the Hungarian equivalents of Donald J. Trump.

Following the AAA meetings, a Sunday Symposium at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs allowed participants to present more substantial papers. I used this opportunity to salute the attractive epistemology and innovative textual devices of what is perhaps the most cited Gudeman volume, his collaboration with his student Alberto Rivera in *Conversations in Colombia* (1990). I argued for a double extension of this conversation between New World (Andean) peasants and post-medieval European inscribers in the history of economic thought. It should be opened in space to include Asia, and it should be pushed back in time as far as the urban revolution of the Bronze Age. Xenophon and Aristotle have their equivalents even earlier in China. I also argued that the dichotomy between house and corporation was too restrictive. For a fuller understanding of economy we need to include other institutions, notably the state, and to pay attention to redistribution and notions of inclusive citizenship. The self-sufficiency of the house economy of the Agrarian Age in Eurasia was complemented by redistribution, the scale of which increased over time to culminate in the 20th century in various forms of socialism, democratic as well as dictatorial.

It is not possible to summarize all the diverse acts of homage rendered to Steve during that chilly Minnesota weekend. I was especially struck by the paper of Gísli Pálsson and Heather Ann Swanson, "More than a Home: The House, the Anthropocene and the Earth," which asked how the traditional task of replicating the self-sufficient house or *oikos* can now be translated into sustainability at the level of the planet, not only for humans but also all other forms of life. In the setting of the Humphrey Forum, surrounded by images and magnified newspaper articles documenting the career of the great Minnesota Democrat, it was hard to avoid feeling pessimistic about the damage DJT is capable of doing to our fragile collective home.



Stephen Gudeman delivering his final remarks.

(Photo: Michael Herzfeld)





Stephen Gudeman (left) and Alberto Rivera.

(Photo: Michael Herzfeld)

“You didn’t make that!”: Debasement or Community?

Can Stephen Gudeman’s core concept of the house economy help us to grasp the causes of the US election result and predict what happens next? It is well known that the property magnate Donald J. Trump runs his vast empire by delegating a lot of responsibility to members of his close family and affines. But beyond this, might we argue that his vision for making America great again appeals to a house model? After all, his campaign did not consist solely of inflammatory racist rhetoric, the boorish insulting of opponents, and denial of science. DJT also addressed the anxieties of many millions of citizens, including concerns over livelihoods put in jeopardy by the forces of global capitalism. Sometimes it seems to me that members of the AAA, liberal, well-educated and highly mobile intellectuals, like their equivalents in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary and Theresa May’s Britain, are out of touch with these realities. Instead of muttering about racists and Fascists, it behooves us to understand just why so many people cast their vote for DJT, and for Viktor Orbán’s anti-Brussels referendum in Hungary, and for Brexit. Trump managed to present himself as a candidate who would protect jobs by curtailing free trade and immigration, and who would spend money to improve the infrastructure of the great American house.

Working class and rural citizens who voted for DJT because they feel betrayed by financialized global market economy will probably feel that he too has betrayed them before very long. Trump’s personal house economy is a perversion of the Aristotelian-Gudemanian ideals: a shady corporation that specializes in “debasement”, epitomized by the fiasco of Trump University. Stephen Gudeman put it nicely in his comments at the end of the symposium. DJT, a property tycoon who has never actually produced anything, is a Big Man who likes to emblazon his name on every hotel and golf course he owns. Barack Obama, by contrast, during his tenure of the White House, has held on to a vision that we are a cooperative species, motivated by notions of fairness. The Big Man who thinks that he can operate outside social relations, beyond the reach of his community, needs to be reminded: “You didn’t make that!”ⁱ

One of my most interesting conversations with a non-anthropologist on this trip was with an eloquent taxi-driver of Bangladeshi origin. He was an admirer of Obama and a beneficiary of Obamacare. He expressed confidence that, whatever his campaign commitments, President Trump would not repeal this legislation. After all, he said, the USA was the richest and most powerful country in the world. It had an obligation to provide for all of its citizens at least to the same standard that Germany and Britain do (by this time in the cab-ride he knew enough of my biography to single out those two countries). Eurasian conversations about welfare states and

inclusive citizenship invoke ideals that many Americans clearly support.ⁱⁱ Yet somehow, in contrast to the evolved patterns which still shape more inclusive welfare practices across Eurasia, the USA still has a problem in translating the obligations of the house up to the level of the nation-state, let alone that of the planet.



The conversation between Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera continued later on the streets of Minneapolis.

(Photo: Ken Smith)

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Notes

ⁱ Under Barack Obama the US economy has recovered from the meltdown of 2008 (which arguably followed directly from the policies of his Democrat predecessor in the 1990s, Bill Clinton). But this recovery has been very uneven, black lives remain especially vulnerable, and the levels of violence in Obama's Chicago metropolitan base are higher now than when he was elected. Some Europeans ask whether the President who bailed out the banks, who breaks international law by deploying drones in his "war on terror", is really in a position to lecture Donald Trump about "core values". When it comes to dealing with postsocialist Russia, where a well-established house model collapsed with the end of the Soviet Union, might "realpolitik" from DJT serve both nations better than the expansion of military spending under hawks such as Hillary Clinton?

ⁱⁱ Let us not forget that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, and that she was committed to retaining and gradually extending the provisions of Obamacare. But this has always been a fragile edifice, dependent on the vagaries of private insurers and other actors in a health care system structured by the logic of market rather than house.

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