

Review Essay

Lives, Works, and Conversations in Economic Anthropology

Scott Cook, *Exploring Commodities. An Anthropologist on the Trails of Malinowski and Traven in Mexico*. Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 246. 2021.

Stephen Gudeman, *Enlightening Encounters. The Journeys of an Anthropologist*. New York: Berghahn, pp. 144. 2022.

Keith Hart, *Self in the World. Connecting Life's Extremes*. New York: Berghahn, pp. 314. 2022.

Should economic anthropologists write about themselves? Since the “writing culture” debates at the end of the last century, we appreciate reflexivity. There was a time when the author’s presence in a monograph was perfunctory at best. Much more is expected in today’s dissertations. But should scholars of renown who have reached a certain maturity help their future readers by looking back, perhaps critically, and interpreting their own oeuvres in relation to their lives? Or should they stick to autobiography and leave it to others to hazard connections to specific academic accomplishments? Can a book about the self shed fresh light on disciplinary conundrums, on problems of representation, on an intellectual community, and on the direction of historical change? Such issues have long been raised in the study of religion, where to know the background and beliefs of the anthropologist can provide an additional interpretive dimension for the reader. But can similar dividends be obtained in the case of those who specialise in the study of production, consumption and exchange? These three works provide three different answers. Indeed, they differ in their aims and in the questions they ask.

Scott Cook (1937–2022): A Marxist Malinowskian

Cook adheres to the conventions of autobiography in his first four chapters. We learn that his father worked in the meat trade and the family moved to Texas when the author was a small boy. At least for this European reader, the first chapter conveys an all-American childhood, including coming-of-age rituals in border boystowns (an early exposure to Hispanic culture in the era of Jim Crow laws)



and in a campus fraternity. Attachments to toys, guns, bicycles, and automobiles are central to the narrative because the life of the author has been saturated with such objects, “a veritable cornucopia of handmade and machine-made commodities” (p. 3). The commodities that dominate the rest of the book are predominantly Mexican. Three more chapters take us through Cook’s career chronologically, while also conveying a lot of significant detail about his work. He majored in economics in Texas and Washington but converted to anthropology after marriage to Hilda, a native of Puerto Rico. He studied in Puerto Rico and Pittsburgh for his doctorate. His famous contribution to the 1960s “formalists versus substantivists” debate (the nomenclature was his) about the appropriate methods for investigating non-capitalist economies pre-dated his PhD. By the time he published *Zapotec Stoneworkers* in 1984, the ex-formalist was dissatisfied with the mainstream economics perspective and had converted to Marxism. Having moved from industrial East Lansing, Michigan, to the “bucolic” setting of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, he stayed there until the end of the century. He then moved back to Texas, gave his last class in economic anthropology in San Antonio in 2004, but remained extremely productive in nominal retirement. He died, a victim of long Covid, in February 2022.

The remaining six chapters (containing fewer pages than the first four) concentrate on Cook’s oeuvre, from 1965 down to the time of writing this autobiography-cum-memoir in the years of the Trump presidency. The intellectual odyssey is compellingly told, laced with anecdotes and a fair amount of self-criticism. The small-scale manufacturers of *metates* Cook studied over decades in Oaxaca exemplified the centrality of commodities in human history. Cook did not care for Stephen Gudeman’s dichotomy between house and market because, at least in Mesoamerica, artisans had been producing commodities in their households for thousands of years, long before the appearance of monetised markets. This was confirmed by archaeologists (with whom Cook cooperated closely, though he confesses to disappointment that he could never quite get them to view commodities the way he did). Later work on “Mexican brick culture” on both sides of the Mexico–USA border is less well known but just as meticulous and sympathetic toward both producers and their products. Cook expressed regret that he was unable to convey the latter dimension by writing in a more humanist mode. He greatly appreciated the Mexican stories of B. Traven. Towards the end of his life he wrote a lot about border problems and was scornful of the proposals of the forty-fifth president of the USA to resolve them with a wall.

Scott Cook was well read in classical political economy. Among contemporaries, his friendship with Maurice Godelier was especially productive. He also discusses a number of his graduate students, including William Roseberry, whose work came to influence Cook’s own perspective. Cook was deeply concerned with the methodology and epistemology of economic anthropology. He appreciated rigour, which he found lacking in the work of Karl Polanyi and the substantivists generally. Bronislaw Malinowski, whose last ethnographic project, shortly before his death, had been an inspiration during Cook’s early work in Oaxaca, was evaluated more

positively. Collaboration with Malinowski's biographer Michael Young in the 2010s excited him greatly, especially when it emerged that his Polish predecessor had taken a particular interest in the *metates* a generation earlier. As Chris Gregory pointed out (2005), Oaxaca and Trobriand exchange patterns have come to share comparable renown in the short history of economic anthropology.

Stephen Gudeman (1939–): Economy Is Ritual

Stephen Gudeman also specialises in Central America, and he too underwent training in mainstream economics paradigms (in his case earning an MBA from Harvard)—but there the similarities to Cook end. Perhaps reacting against his father, who gave up a senior position in the real economy with retailer Sears Roebuck for a career on Wall Street, Gudeman junior chose to study social anthropology in England and, within anthropology, to follow a distinctive culturalist path. Eschewing the formalisms of both mainstream economics and their Marxist critics, he also kept his distance from British structural-functionalism, and from substantivist economic anthropology (though he confesses to being a “devotee” of Karl Polanyi, as well as Thorstein Veblen). A bifurcation in his mind (perhaps related to his privileged upbringing?) leads him to identify “economy’s tension,” which turns out to be a tension in human social life in general: between short-term money making (theorised in later work in terms of rent-taking) and the making of long-term relationships that can sustain human communities and their ecosystems. Life and work are completely intertwined in this engaging account. Gudeman’s wide reading in western economic theory cross-fertilises with ethnographic data to open up new “conversations” that illuminate the failure of our economic thought to safeguard the world and its people.

As a young man, Gudeman was attracted by the charisma of Edmund Leach at King’s College, Cambridge, but also by that of Ted Kennedy, with whose Senate campaign in Massachusetts his father was able to place him in the summer of 1962 (Cook acknowledges similar debts to his father, though at a very different level). The influence of Gudeman senior, wealthy but frugal, often making family meals from leftovers, seems to have been considerable. Gudeman junior served the anthropology department at the University of Minnesota for half a century. His memoir contains relatively little about interaction with other scholars but is full of amusing anecdotes about the physical travails of his fieldwork. As an undergraduate he landed by accident in a remote settlement in Chiapas (Mexico). In the mid-60s, accompanied by his wife Roxane, he lived in a Panama village for doctoral research funded by USAID. He had more colourful escapades in the 1980s when on the road in Colombia with Alberto Rivera, his former student. The Colombian travels brought moments of revelation that crystallised understandings that had been fertilising ever since the Panama research, notably concerning the *base*, and the *vital energy* that holds house, society, and ecosystem together.

Stephen Gudeman also collaborated with Rivera in shorter sojourns in Guatemala and Cuba (Castro’s island was also visited fleetingly by Cook). He focused

on those living at the margins of society, whose house economy was becoming increasingly precarious in a global capitalism dominated by the USA. (Unlike Cook, who notes having to cope with negative attitudes toward a *gringo*, Gudeman does not mention having to cope with anti-American sentiment.) His fascination with socialism as a form of house economy writ large continued when directing a post-graduate team based at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, which investigated economy and ritual after socialism. The interest in ritual may owe something to the influence of Leach in Gudeman's formative years. It has gradually come to replace "local models" and "culture" as his encompassing concept. But if all economic activities are best approached as ritual, elaborating mystical enchantment through metaphors and only incidentally concerned with production and reproduction, how do we distinguish those particular activities to which the term ritual is more conventionally applied?

Keith Hart (1943–): A Mercurial Mancunian

Keith Hart has written "the book of my life in both senses—my own story, but also the one book that I must get right" (p. 272). *Self in the World* is a *Bildungsroman* laying out one anthropologist's attempt to connect the self to the group and ultimately to the world. It is full of personal detail, ranging from catholic tastes in literature and music to serious bouts of illness (some caused by a particular form of bipolarity) and anecdotes from a peripatetic career. Hart is simultaneously concerned to address the present condition of our species and what it would mean to be fully human. This is anthropology in the sense of eighteenth-century philosophers rather than Malinowski. For Hart, the key founders of modern anthropology are Kant, Vico, and Rousseau, though none of these writers figure in conventional histories of the discipline. He singles out CLR James as his mentor and he reveres Marcel Mauss as much for his socio-political writings, unknown in the Anglo-sphere, as for his ethnological writings.

Part One deals with a range of "ancestors," including poets and novelists who have pioneered innovative representations of the self. The memoir/autobiography comes in just over one hundred pages in the ten chapters of Part Two. The bright lad who learned to look after himself on the streets of Old Trafford, Manchester, owes perhaps even more than Gudeman to Cambridge University, where he initially read classics. A specialisation in Ghana brought him closer to Meyer Fortes and Jack Goody than to the Leach faction at the Department of Social Anthropology. But the reader does not learn much about these scholars, or the many others with whom the author worked and collaborated in later years. The list includes John Comaroff, Marshall Sahlins, Roy (Skip) Rappaport, Anna Grimshaw, John Bryden, Jean-Louis Laville, David Graeber, and John Sharp, the last proving an ideal partner for the "human economy" project that enabled Hart to make South Africa his second home (after Paris) in the twenty-first century. Part Three, "World," presents Hart's mature thinking on topics that have engaged him for decades, including inequality in world history, the digital revolution and the future of Africa. Part Four, "Lifelong

Learning,” includes fine chapters on transnational histories and on money, a topic to which he has returned repeatedly since the 1980s.

Field research has been less important for Hart than for Cook and Gudeman. He is dismissive of its methodological centrality since Malinowski. Only one chapter out of twenty is devoted to the two years he spent in Ghana. Instead, he has lots to say about textual interlocutors and the ideas that have animated his work. Unlike Cook and Gudeman, he cannot be pinned down to a continent—or even to a discipline, let alone a subdiscipline. For Hart, anthropology isn’t really a discipline at all. It is an umbrella designation allowing practitioners free rein to discover themselves and join long-running intellectual conversations about their common world. Hart prefers nowadays to be known as a writer rather than as an anthropologist. Even in years when he published little due to health issues, he was a charismatic teacher and motivator. Readers will sense this in his prose, and one hopes that many will go on to sample the impressive corpus he has made available online (helpfully outlined in an Appendix). Those familiar with his pioneering contributions in the 1970s to the study of informality and the “development industry” and his later work on money and the “human economy” will learn much from the memoir section of this book. Those unfamiliar with the professional contributions will appreciate his synthesis of self and world: a man of his times, rooted in Manchester and Cambridge, with a unique handle on the long-term history of our world and of humanity. The future of anthropology is a paradoxical subtext throughout: Hart does want to be read by anthropologists, and to help return the subject definitively to the humanities, after the dismal failure of the last century’s experiments with social science.

Conversations and Cacophony

All three books can be recommended for their readability. None involves the laborious scrutiny of old field notes, exhaustive self-citation, or systematic fact-checking. Instead, the authors offer their (sometimes self-critical) perspectives on their personal journeys, mostly in the last century, from the vantage points they have reached at the time of writing. *Enlightening Encounters* is the shortest of the three and might work better than the others in an introductory course thanks to its accessible style. *Exploring Commodities* will be devoured by students who already have some familiarity with the stakes of economic anthropology and the author’s standing in that field. In *Self in the World*, Keith Hart takes aim at wider audiences. His mix of eccentric egoism, erudition, and laconic prophecies of a new world society will doubtless inspire many; but the mesmerising intellectual bricolage of Parts One, Three, and Four makes demands on the reader (not least at the very end when he signs off by establishing a familial connection with the idealist philosopher Collingwood). All three authors might be superficially categorised as left-leaning humanists, who see the future of humanity in terms of some combination of liberalism and social democracy (in Hart’s formulation). At another level, all three wish to raise their voices in a long-term human conversation that goes back at least to Aristotle and the origins of *oikonomia* as the orderly management of a self-sufficient estate. At the

same time, all three are men of their generation in the Anglosphere, who grew up in households where the father was the breadwinner. Hart reflects caustically on the inequalities of gender as well as class and race. Cook covers the last two.

Of the three, only the late Scott Cook was comfortable with the label economic anthropologist (he was, after all, a founding member of the Society for Economic Anthropology). He was also keen to retain the mantle of science for his specialisation, on the basis of ethnographic data. “Properly done, data collection and analysis in economic ethnography require a longtime commitment in one setting by the researcher,” he writes in his Introduction (p. 11). Hart’s path has been very different. Rather than consolidate economic anthropology as a scientific discipline, he wants to transcend the modern divides and resume ancient philosophical conversations. Gudeman too questions the very concept of economy (like Marshall Sahlins, he prefers the label anthropological economics to economic anthropology). He notes differences between the natural scientists and the economists he observed during a stay at Princeton. While classifying neoclassical economics as just another local model, he notes that its practitioners have aspirations to be scientific. In anthropology, by contrast, ethnographic data are loosely invoked to support whatever theories are fashionable at a given moment. Yet Gudeman’s own longtime ethnographic commitment has been interwoven with a systematic intellectual journey: “I wanted anthropological findings to be theoretically informed, and I wanted to interweave economics with anthropology in a more thorough way than had previously been done” (p. 85).

If sociocultural anthropology taken as a whole cannot be a cumulative science, might we nonetheless claim that the work of each of these individual scholars *progressed* during each productive life course? Has progress been made in the subfield of economic anthropology as a whole? I certainly thought so in the 1970s and 1980s, when it seemed that the inadequacies of the formalist-substantivist debate had been recognised and new frontiers were being opened up. These three authors were already among the major figures we read. But their personal trajectories were very different, and it has been hard to maintain any sense of collective progress in the neoliberal decades. Most branches of anthropology nowadays are highly individualist, and the genre of autobiography inevitably turns the spotlight on the self. Among these three, only Cook makes a consistent effort to connect his work to economic anthropology as an academic community (he cites Gudeman, Hart, and numerous other contemporaries). In his final chapters he offers an assessment of the present state of the field. He finds it to be a “cacophony” rather than a conversation and objects to the dominance of “discursivist” trends. It is good to know that a large proportion of his data and papers has been archived and digitalised for others to use (perhaps including a future biographer). Gudeman and Hart provide no information on this point. (It should be pointed out that their books contain indexes, lacking in *Exploring Commodities*; but Cook’s book is the only one of the three to illustrate the life course with appropriate photographs).

Cook’s Mexican juxtaposition of Malinowski with the enigmatic anarchist B. Traven (his Central European contemporary) provides food for thought. Traven

was the author of a dozen novels, including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. He revelled in anonymity—and succeeded to the extent that even his real name has never been definitively clarified. One aphorism attributed to him is, “The creative person should have no other biography than his works.” More provocatively, he proposed, “If one cannot get to know the human through his works, then either the human is worthless, or his works are worthless.”¹ Whether or not this is true for storytellers, these three books establish that the effort of an economic anthropologist to look back on his solid accomplishments in the light of a personal journey can be rewarding. If the goal is a better grasp of the individual’s contribution to anthropology as a discipline, not every chapter in these books serves this utilitarian purpose. But many do. In all three, the personal detail opens up new interpretive lenses. Each is well crafted and likely to inspire sympathy not just with the author but for the questions addressed and their settings. Moreover, each can be read and appreciated as a work in its own right by those who prefer a more substantivist way of acquiring wisdom and pleasure in the human economy of knowledge.

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Note

1. Both quotations taken from B. Traven’s Wikipedia entry, accessed on 10 July 2023.

Reference

Gregory, C. 2005. “Review of: Scott Cook. Understanding Commodity Cultures.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 47, (4): 892-893.

Disclosure

The author looks back with affection on many years of friendship and collegiality with Gudeman and Hart (he has written and edited books with both). He did not know Cook personally but read the book reviewed here for the publisher and enjoyed a brief correspondence with the author shortly before his passing.