

Economic anthropology and development alternatives: rethinking and re-politicizing theory and practice

Mallika Shakya¹  · John Clammer²

Published online: 11 May 2017
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Editors' introduction

The genesis of this special number lies in a workshop convened by the editors at the 2015 IUAES conference in Bangkok, and its title reflects the theme of that original gathering: *Economic Anthropology and Development Alternatives: A Call to “Re-politicize” Theory and Practice*. Five of the papers originally written for that conference now make up the core of this issue.

At the end of the colonial era, now half a century ago, the notion of “development” emerged as a guiding principle in the making of a new global order. Looking back from the vantage of the present moment that period (essentially from the end of the Second World War) until the 1960s, must be seen as a watershed era which brought to us a new public imagination that went on to anchor a new global order upon the end of the colonial era: the creation of the Marshall Plan for Europe, the establishment of the Bretton Woods agreement and the international financial institutions that emerged from it, the creation of the UN out of the ruins of the failed League of Nations and the writing of its Charter, seen by many as a foundational document of the post-war geopolitical order, the drafting of the UDHR, and the serious beginning of what we might now see as the “development half-century,” a period the long-term effects of which are now being critically questioned. Perhaps the major reason for this is that, while lively debates about the meaning of “development” have prevailed since the mid-twentieth century, the end of the Cold War (and perhaps before) has seen the colonization of the concept by neoliberal economics and the increasing hegemony of its ideals and

✉ Mallika Shakya
mallika@sau.ac.in

John Clammer
jrclammer@jgu.edu.in

¹ Department of Sociology, South Asian University, Akbar Bhawan, Chanakyapuri, Delhi 110021, India

² Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat Narela Road, Sonipat, Haryana 131001, India

practices. It is true that possibilities of a different multi-polar global order emerged with the rise of organizations such as the BRICs and the AIIB on the one hand, and the ideations of “alternative” and post-development thinkers on the other. But in practice, it has proved difficult for grassroots level movements of workers, peasants, environmentalists, and other progressive or oppositional groupings to successfully counter the neoliberal hegemony on discourses of progress and prosperity.

Speaking of the global politics of foreign aid, Ferguson (2005) rightly pointed out that the hegemony of development as a “telos” which has assumed that formerly colonized countries can be like their former colonizers only if they walk a trajectory unilaterally prescribed for them, has fallen flat, to put it mildly. Alternative modernities and alternative development paths do seem to have emerged in only a few select countries. Much of the formerly colonized world seems to now think of development as a “status” that disguises the former exploitations of colonialism without adequately addressing or overcoming them. The 1970s oil crises and the capital crashes that have followed have only exacerbated the banality of “development” and aid as the First World’s commitment to their former colonies, and as even in many cases these commitments have diminished, have seen the triggering of new vocabularies of “self-reliant development,” “market-led growth,” and the like. Two decades after the Structural Adjustment era, solipsistic terms such as “growth,” “prosperity,” “productivity,” “innovation,” “competitiveness,” and even “happiness” and “sustainability” have still rooted themselves as the tropes through which the high priests of economic liberalization continue to overshadow alternative imaginations. Indeed, this creates the ironical situation in which even ideas of “post-development” are forced to define themselves against the conventional, neoliberal definitions of “development” and in which “alternatives” are seen as the deviation, not the mainstream.

The articles in this special issue question in various ways the assumptions on which neoliberal conceptions of development are based, through a combination of theoretical critique and ethnographic case studies. The potential agenda here is very wide and includes themes implicit in the following essays and certainly framing them in larger discourses of development coming from economics itself (the emergence of heterodox economics and environmental economics, for example), the sociology of globalization and world systems, of risk, of migration, and of industrialization, trade, and labor, from gender studies and from development studies itself, including considerations of such issue as aid, and its role in imposing both practices compatible with the neoliberal development theory and reinforcing the legitimacy of the theory itself as the hegemonic or “only” possibility (the content of economics courses in universities in the “developing” world is very revealing of this.) So here, we call for a “de-canonization” of conventional economic development theory and for the serious consideration of alternatives which themselves open up possibilities for new forms of meaningful engagement with a variety of philosophies and experiences from different parts of the world and in ways that rarely enter into conventional development studies discourse. The necessary questions then include those such as how do we bring back concerns with class, race, gender, and geography in envisioning “progress,” equity, and true prosperity and how to engage with notions of reciprocity and solidarity in promoting better societies? In problematizing development in this way, we hope that the contributions not only provide new case studies to give such critique an empirical basis but also explore and question

the boundaries and overlap between economic anthropology and sociology, economic history, comparative politics, and migration studies.

Economic anthropology and neoliberal development

This stakes out a large area. The specific contribution of this special number is to explore the relationship between economic anthropology and the analysis of neoliberal development. This too is a multilayered issue and encompasses the history of anthropology's engagement with capitalism, with non-monetized societies encountering monetary economies, with the nature of both the "anthropology of development" which has emerged as a significant subdiscipline within the subject, and with "applied anthropology," many examples of which are also to do either directly with development or with cognate issues such as community development, health, sanitation, or agriculture. Likewise, within this discourse have been debates about the relationship of anthropology to Marxism, attempts to theorize the relationship of a critical form of anthropology either to development issues (for example, Escobar 1995) or by relating the "traditional" ethnographic based nature of anthropology (as understood by some and possibly a majority of its practitioners) to larger issues of political economy (Marcus and Fischer 1986), studies of capitalism as a sociocultural system in its own right (for example, Taussig 1980 or more recently Miller 1997). The first essay that follows, by John Clammer, reviews some of these links between economic anthropology and neoliberal development and also suggests some potentially fertile possibilities of dialogue between economic anthropology and a range of "alternative" approaches that are now emerging. The second essay, by Mallika Shakya, offers an ethnography of knowledge and practice which offers a glimpse of complex political dynamics that emerge while pursuing the possibilities of alternative development.

This volume is offered as a contribution to this debate, which both provides a range of new case studies and which attempts to extend the debate in fresh directions by both suggesting new directions and by revisiting older issues to explore what can still be mined from them and polished up to provide a new active vocabulary for anthropology to address these large and, given the current state of the world, critical issues. In terms of the essays which follow (on which more specifically shortly), a range of these possible directions can be discerned, and here, we will briefly, allowing the individual contributions to speak for themselves, attempt to summarize some of the main ones.

Older debates about disciplinary boundaries often sought to define a clear line between anthropology and sociology (and some of us will recall the different books by Durkheim that we read depending on which side of the great divide we were situated, the *Elementary Forms* if we were in anthropology, and *Suicide* and the *Rules of Sociological Method* if in sociology.) Today, given the "multi-disciplinary" nature of the problems that confront the planet (environmental, governance, resources, poverty, militarization, religious fundamentalism, terrorism), such boundary defending is hardly relevant, if it ever was. But specifically in the context of neoliberal development, it should be clear that all the tools of the social sciences are needed, and the essays in this volume, while approaching from the perspective of economic anthropology, do so in a holistic spirit. Of course, anthropology has always claimed to be the most holistic of the social sciences, and here, hopefully, we see some creative forms of this expressed, questioning the disciplinary lines not only between anthropology and sociology but also between anthropology and history, while constantly promoting debate between

anthropology and economics, especially in its neoliberal forms and in terms of critically examining the assumptions (many of them cultural) of such apparently hegemonic economics.

In practice of course, it never has been fully hegemonic: Marxist economics has long stood as both a critique and an alternative, and economic anthropology itself stands as a testimony to the fact that there are and have long been highly successful economies that fall quite outside of neoliberal and market paradigms and which measure economic “success” by entirely different criteria and in which economy, culture, and society are embedded with each other along very different lines than within consumerist, capitalist ones. The essays in this issue explore, among other things, cases in which that hegemony is not and has never been complete. In doing so, they also raise interesting theoretical questions. Certainly in the 1980s, the main oppositional stance was Marxist. In development studies and specifically in development sociology, this was very much the case until an “impasse” was announced as a result of neo-Marxist approaches having seemingly run out of steam theoretically at the same time as they were failing to make much of a dent in the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy, and Marxist inspired regimes were imploding after 1989, leaving a political vacuum with no or few actually existing alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and leading conservative commentators such as Francis Fukuyama to announce the “end of history” and the victory of capitalism—an idea so aptly summed up in then British Prime Minister’s infamous remark that “There Are No Alternatives.” But paradoxically, in the ironical way in which history seems to enjoy undermining its most confident predictors, at that very moment, a whole set of crises began to emerge. Capitalism was no longer delivering its promises, globalization seemed to be leading not to “one world” but to radically unequal ones, new displacements, and inequalities, and “growth” was delivering not only wealth to the few but also environmental disaster, new forms of poverty, and social exclusion, and while more and more societies were turning to the Right, inevitably with anti-immigrant policies, the number of refugees was rapidly increasing. “Mobility” was no longer the privilege of the few, but the desperate recourse of the many.

A major question posed by this issue is in what ways can anthropology begin to address such issues, which are no longer of simply academic interest, but are rapidly becoming matters of civilizational survival. We have hoped here to have opened a number of avenues. It is clear that the political and polemical applications of Marxism require a newer and more nuanced rereading for it to remain. There are a number of reasons for calling for a new reading of Marxism. These include the protean nature of capitalism and its ways of endlessly reinventing itself and inserting itself in modified forms into different sociocultural systems (Japanese, German, North American, and many others), changing class structures in the industrialized countries, the emergence of attractive alternatives—environmentalism, the “transition” movement, de-growth, no-growth, or “small is beautiful” initiatives, ideas of post-development and post-materialism, the emergence of new economies with very different histories from the mature capitalist societies (the BRIC countries, for example) and shifts in economic power globally and the “financialization” of much of the world economy as old industrial states such as the UK move from manufacturing to the provision of financial services. It may indeed have been the case that anthropology, while it may not have always been complicit in the colonial enterprise, certainly benefitted from it, as Talal Asad and others have argued (1975). But we now live (hopefully) in a post-imperial world, leading to a complex situation in which there is both a need for anthropologies of post-imperialism and the emergence of post-imperialist anthropologies. Both the editors live in Delhi, capital of a country with a very large and active indigenous anthropological community,

and one facing both the problems of severe under-development (extensive poverty, child malnutrition, illiteracy, endemic mosquito-borne diseases, uncontrolled urbanization) and the problems of selected pockets of “over-development.” Even as we wrote the draft of this introduction, the air in Delhi was almost unbreathable with a pollution index of almost or exceeding 500 particles per cubic meter of air, the result of unmanaged motor traffic, extensive and often illegal construction activity, massive use of fireworks during the just-concluded Diwali festival, and coal burning power stations (the comparable index at the same time for the large cities of Chennai was about 92 and of Kolkata 96, pollution in Delhi being counted as “severe” and “hazardous”, and in those cities as “good”), the fruits of a particular path of “development.”

The possibility of exploring alternative perspectives beyond the common Marxist and neoliberal approaches to development is one theme that runs throughout these essays. Furthermore, they pose the question of there being not only different forms of capitalism but also forms of what we might term “quasi-capitalism”—systems and locations in which either far from complete penetration of capitalism is found or in which the “commodities” traded are not the usual market ones—sex, human trafficking, and extensive smuggling economies in which, while the goods traded may be conventional, the means of transport, valuation, payment, barter, haggling, and exchange are very different from those in the mainstream capitalist marketplace, and in which different patterns of social relationships prevail—of trust or of distrust, of credit-worthiness, of ethnicity and gender—from the “normal” abstract transactions of a “regular” capitalist economy. At the same time such systems, many illegal by the canons of the mainstream economy and the legal norms with which it enforces its hegemony may well be major forces in local level development, as they represent a substantial or even majority dimension of local “informal” economies. Frontiers and borders prove to be not just geographically and politically defined lines on a map, but dynamic zones of interaction between economies, sites of “mini-globalization”, points of culture contact, and in effect “markets” operating by no rules to be found in a conventional economics textbook.

All this suggests that economic anthropology is not only driven by its own internal dynamics (or those entering it from other branches of anthropology), but very much by the evolving nature of its subject matter, especially when that matter is as complex, shape-changing and self-defensive as neoliberalism in its various manifestations—as economic theory, as a particular predatory form of capitalism, and as a theory and practice of development based on that theory and its concrete expressions in the world. The essays that follow set out various approaches to these problems and illustrate in different ways the forms that anthropological responses to neoliberal development can take.

The essays

The five essays that comprise this special issue represent five very different approaches to the problem, while unified in taking that very problem as their common point of interest. That unity in diversity will, we hope, generate further theoretical reflection as this collection is not meant to offer any closure on the issues, but with the objective of stimulating yet further thought and analysis on a subject that is not going to go away and in which the “ethnographic present” is an ever shifting field.

The introductory essay by John Clammer is intended to provide a context for the ethnographically substantive papers that follow. It essentially contains three elements—a survey of

some significant aspects of the history of economic anthropological engagements with neo-liberal capitalism since the major reemergence of economic anthropology as a lively sub-discipline in the late 1960s, a discussion of the main themes that emerged during that period and subsequently, and a proposal for more anthropological engagement with “alternative” modes of analysis of neoliberalism and its developmental manifestations, many of which share many potential points of contact with economic anthropology. Such movements as that of solidarity economy, for example, share something of a common vocabulary with anthropology and certainly represent, without revealing any explicit knowledge of comparative ethnography, attempts to create or re-create forms of social economy that echo many of the anthropological accounts of actually existing or historically recent societies.

Mallika Shakya's paper complements the theoretical questions raised in the introductory essay with an ethnography of knowledge and practice. She shows how “re-politicizing” development has as much to do with the discursive politics of meaning-making as with the internal power struggles within the aid organizations. In her paper *An anthropological reading of the policies of international development: export competitiveness as a conjunctural case study*, she discusses the ‘developers’ at the heart of the neoliberal enterprise – notably through her own personal experiences in the belly of the beast, of the operations of the World Bank. Based on a fieldwork based account of the work of a number of World Bank departments she shows the actual internal operations of one of the major multilateral agencies actively engaged in promoting the neoliberal agenda, and indeed in many respects in creating it. The World Bank itself is not a static institution, and this case study enables her to also show the ways in which the Bank is changing as a response to outside pressures (its many critics), to changing global conditions, and to the politics internal to a huge development institution. In our original conception of this special issue, we invited contributors to consider the “re-politicization” of development studies. Here this can be seen in action, not only in terms of the examination of the internal politics of *the* Bank, but equally because, given its nature and the nature of its mandate, the Bank is both swayed by and influences the international politics of development. Shakya's paper then raises the methodological possibility of moving in anthropology between knowledge and practice, micro and the macro, between the ethnography of the organization *as* an organization, and its embeddedness in the international politics of development.

Fraser Sugden moves the debate in yet another direction in his paper *A mode of production flux: the transformation and reproduction of rural class relations in lowland Nepal and North Bihar*. He raises a set of important theoretical questions, some with roots in past anthropological and historical analyses of rural social structures and others pointing to some of the issues raised above in this introduction. Among the former are still relevant questions about the utility of the Marxist concept of modes of production and its application to South Asian rural societies, something which has parallels with the French work of scholars such as Claude Meillassoux, Emmanuel Terray, Georges Dupre, and P.-P. Rey and its impact on English speaking anthropologists in the 1970s (Clammer 1984) who were struggling with the question of the relevance of Marxist categories to the analysis of largely “kin” based societies. Significant too in Sugden's paper is his re-opening of the debate about the application of the concepts of feudalism and semi-feudalism in contemporary agrarian societies. His paper, as suggested, also points the debate forwards in important directions. Do such “hybrid” forms of economy that he identifies in Nepal and Bihar constitute a form of nascent capitalism or do they represent a kind of “third way” for which adequate analytical terms do not yet exist? The empirical issues involved and which

he describes in detail are of great comparative interest—the formation of new rural elites, decline in monopoly land holdings, new forms of accumulation, and reduced dependency on landlords as the mainstay of the rural social structure.

Patrick Neveling in his essay *The political economy machinery: toward a critical anthropology of development as a contested capitalist practice* once again invokes the World Bank, but from a very different perspective from that of Mallika Shakya in his examination of development practices in Mauritius. His paper has a number of levels—an examination of the ways in which the World Bank, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the old colonial sugar plutocracy as well as its continued adherence to late British imperial development policies have shaped the development path of independent Mauritius. This leads him to a debate with the thesis of James Ferguson and his influential idea of the “anti-politics machine” as Neveling argues that far from the de-politicization of the state, it is precisely its explicitly political role in development policies that is at the basis of the country’s recent and post-independence history. His key argument is that development is one major manifestation of capitalism’s political economy machinery which leads him to the theoretical conclusion that a “historical materialist approach is well positioned to replace recent calls in anthropology for researching development as a category of practice,” a suggestion that might both rehabilitate historical materialism and create a new mode of economic anthropological analysis. Arguing that World Bank programs have always been about politics, his tripartite model of linking capitalism, development, and politics leads him to raise searching questions about large-scale programs and how these might be analyzed by the anthropology of development and leads him to engage both with Ferguson and with Mosse who has proposed a model of the anthropology of development at variance with that being recommended by Neveling (Mosse 2013).

The final paper by Swagato Sarkar brings up yet another example of “quasi-capitalism”—practices of smuggling along the very porous Indo-Bangladesh border and raises a number of significant theoretical questions. These include the question of how neoliberalism is linked to securitization and the policing of quite literal boundaries, in this case a geographical one between two countries that were once united and which between Bangladesh and West Bengal share a common language and history until Partition. Sarkar argues that neoliberalism assumes a coherent state apparatus, but is incomplete or weak in border zones such as the Indo-Bangladesh one where it is consistently subverted by smuggling, non-payment of customs duties, people trafficking, movement of illegal items or substances, and lack of any clear demarcation of territory from the point of view of those who constantly cross back and forth across what is technically an international boundary, passage through which officially requires passports, visas and other documentation, currency controls, and the keeping of statistics. Yet as Sarkar illustrates, while the formal state apparatus might be weak, it is liable to be reinforced by local politically connected syndicates which for their own reasons wish to control and monitor cross-border traffic, especially those from which they take a profit. While Sarkar’s case study is a South Asian one, it is clear that such an analysis has both wider geographical application to other porous border zones (in Latin America, for example) and raises in a fresh form issues of “multi-sited” ethnography and of networks, and of the anthropology of border areas and their complex structures of movement, trade, ethnicity, attempts by the state at control, refugees, and even religion, as at the border between southern Thailand and Malaysia.

Revitalizing economic anthropology

It can be argued that economic anthropology has experienced both a substantial revival since the late 1960s as a very visible and vibrant part of the total anthropological enterprise and has substantially changed its nature over that same time period. Going all the way back to the ancient idea of economics as “oikonomia,” or the wisdom on household management, with the rise of capitalism we saw the rise of the “market” as the center of the economy in modern societies. It was certainly not the same when Adam Smith invoked the idea of political economy to argue that the feudal lobby inflating the prices of agricultural produce should be dismantled, compared to a more recent application of political economy, for example, by Khan and Sundaram (2000) who has argued that patronage must be differentiated from corruption or rent-seeking.

The conversation between economists and anthropologists (or ethnologists) has not been smooth, although periods of collaboration did manifest sporadically. Mill’s utilitarian liberalism captured in the form of *Homo Economicus* seems to have offered the standing ground for the rise of methodological individualism in the emergent social sciences. Alfred Marshall’s *Principles of Economics* (1890) signaled the end of the opposition between social and corporate definitions of rationality, and from then on, it was assumed that firms and households would share a common economic logic. Much of the sociological thinking that examines the relevance of ethnographic data—including the works of Edward Tylor and Emile Durkheim—was largely ignored by economists. Perhaps the major exception to this was Karl Marx (together with Engels) who extensively referred to the ethnological works of Lewis Henry Morgan (1877). Economic historian Karl Bucher (1901) later proposed a three-stage theory centrally examining how the “household” emerged as a key coordinating unit of production and consumption in pre-industrial societies. Alexander Chayanov (1925) took up the idea of householding from within a Communist perspective, but it was not until the publication of *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi (1944) that an alternative outlook on economic organization was adequately proposed, and he must be credited with popularizing a new view of the flow of material goods, although he built heavily on Marcel Mauss’ earlier (1925) ethnographic work on the Gift.

It is easy today to think of the 1960s as the golden age of economic anthropology for its stimulation of a meaningful conversation between economists and other social scientists on the question of how economics overlaps with or relates to other dimensions of society. Polanyi’s seminal book argued that the economy is an “instituted” process and lay the foundations for challenging the dominant (economist’s) view that all exchanges are rationality-based in a commercial sense. His work has inspired a number of significant works that have explored the concepts of reciprocity, distribution, and householding (for example, Bonannan and Bohannon 1968, Willis 1977, Hart 1982, Parry 1986, Gudeman 2001, Graeber 2011). However, the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s muffled the substantivist-formalist debate in favor of the methodological individualists. A sorry end to this fruitful debate echoes in the leading substantivist spokesman George Dalton’s “confession” that Polanyi’s theory was only apposite for “aboriginal” (pre-colonial) economies and also in his claim that Polanyi had no intellectual connection to Marxism.

Hann and Hart (2011) arguably revive the Polanyian style of economic anthropology for today. It seems about time that it is pointed out how Polanyi has been misunderstood and wrongly interpreted as being a tool of neoliberal doctrine, rather than as pointing to an

alternative way of looking at our economies and societies. A case in point is Jens Beckert's meticulous documenting of the economic and anthropological use of the word "embeddedness" (Beckert 2009). Although the word only appeared as a footnote in Polanyi's book, Granoveter (1985) squarely attributed it to him and yet ironically produced a paper now considered to be seminal which argued that embeddedness can be measured, and based on this, economies could be categorized as either "over" or "under" socialized. In that account, the "coordination" problem involved in managing economic transactions could then "employ" its embeddedness features to maximize corporate style profit-seeking. The irony could not have been greater for a man who originally envisioned that profit-making is a value that should be restricted to just one of the three domains of the economy, the other two being reciprocity and redistribution. Beckert seems right on target in calling for a "macro-social" reading of the other social sciences by economists for any meaningful debate to emerge. Some of these issues are reviewed in Shakya's essay featured in this collection.

From a preoccupation with "primitive" economies, anthropologists' attention then has increasingly turned to peasant economies, those of the urban poor (often under the rubric of informal economies) and the multiple issues thrown up by "development" as well as the nature of capitalism as a subject in itself. Some of these issues are reviewed in Clammer's opening essay. This evolving shift in emphasis and it will no doubt continue to shift as the world economy does—the considerable literature on the anthropology of globalization being an example of this—is reflected in the essays in this special number. Collectively, they demonstrate the continuing vitality of economic anthropology, provide new case studies upon which further comparative analyses can be built, models of different kinds for examining the multiplex nature of neoliberal development, points of contact with some of the major examples of alternative thinking and post-development discourses including human economy, and suggest methodological tools, some rooted in much earlier work and here refurbished and others emerging out of the empirical case material, which, when examined with an anthropological lens, suggest intriguing ways of seeing, critiquing and perhaps transcending the forms of neoliberal development that continue to hold such a sway over so much of the world, the "developed" as much as the developing.

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