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Images of Public Wealth or The Anatomy of Well-being in Indigenous Amazonia

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Images of Public Wealth or The Anatomy of Well-being in Indigenous Amazonia by Fernando Santos-Granero (ed.), Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015. 236 pp., illustrations, references, index.

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Anthropologists have long argued that cultures vary in their emphasis on the accumulation of material possessions. Ruth Benedict, for example, famously claimed in *Patterns of Culture* (1934:160–205) that the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest cared more about prestige than material goods. Although Benedict's assertions about the Kwakiutl were cogently challenged (Piddocke 1965), ethnographic studies of foraging societies in the 1960s and 1970s (Lee 1979) showed that hunter-gathers place little value on the accumulation of possessions. The usual explanation is that the mobility of foraging groups makes having too many possessions burdensome.

In his introduction to *Images of Public Wealth*, Fernando Santos-Granero takes an innovative approach to cultural differences in attitudes towards material possessions. Santos-Granero observes that social scientists from industrial societies have compared the “public wealth” of different countries using measures of material well-being such as gross national product. In recent years attempts have been made to devise ways of measuring “development” that do not focus exclusively on material conditions. One example is the Human Development Index, which combines three indicators—life expectancy, average years of schooling, and per capita gross income. While Santos-Granero applauds the ideas behind these new measures, he thinks that they fail to capture aspects of public wealth important in indigenous Amazonia.

The authors of the ethnographic chapters in Santos-Granero's edited volume present detailed descriptions of ideas about “public wealth” and “well-being” in the diverse Amazonian societies where they have carried out fieldwork. Despite the lucidity of their analyses, framing them in the context of Western measures of “development” might be questioned. The social scientists who have devised these measures have concentrated on developing numerical indices that allow cross-country comparisons to be easily made. The contributors to this volume make no attempt to create such metrics, in part because they are concerned with concepts that are difficult to quantify. Their analyses might be better compared to the work of qualitative sociologists examining ideas about “community” and “public good” in large-scale, capitalist societies (e.g. Hochschild 2016; Putnam 2000). Nonetheless, the central question of whether ideas about public good differ greatly between small-scale Amazonian societies and contemporary capitalist states is an intriguing one.

The book begins with a lengthy introduction by Santos-Granero that discusses the concept of “public wealth” and compares and contrasts the findings of the authors of the ethnographic chapters. Although the groups described differ considerably in their integration into national economies, in none of them is wealth thought of primarily as the accumulation of material possessions. Both individual and public wealth is instead associated with having a “good life.”

Santos-Granero notes that such values might be challenged as indigenous Amazonians become more engaged in market activities and national politics. Nonetheless, the authors of the ethnographic chapters agree that this has not yet led to significant changes in ideas about the uses to which wealth should be put. In capitalist societies, the accumulation of material objects is often valued as a marker of prestige and power. Members of indigenous Amazonian societies, in contrast, value possessions primarily for ways in which they can be deployed for the public good.

The well-written ethnographic chapters of *Images of Public Wealth* are divided into three sections. The first section (“Health, Vitality, and Euphoria”) examines ideas about public wealth in three societies that until recently have had relatively little direct contact with nation-states. Anthony Seeger shows that large public collective musical perfor-

mances among the Suyá Kisêdjê of Mato Grosso, Brazil are a highly desired form of public wealth that provide individually experienced feelings of happiness, euphoria, and well-being. He compares the collective engagements of these performances with the feelings of fans attending soccer matches in large urban centers of Latin America. Fernando Santos-Granero discusses public wealth among the Yanésa of the Selva Central of Peru, focusing on the period between 1910 and the early 1960s. His emphasis is on how people establish wealth—conceived of as harmonious relations and “vitality”—through their own actions and the beneficence of gods. Beth Conklin reports a similar concept of public wealth among the Wari’ of Rondônia, Brazil, saying (p. 61) that affluence is judged by “the local abundance of food, the group’s productivity, vitality, and fertility, and their capacity to mobilize in collective activities, especially to host gatherings for other communities.”

Conklin’s comments about Wari’ attitudes towards material goods contrast with the assertion of some of the other contributors to the volume that indigenous Amazonians lack much interest in accumulating material possessions. She writes (p. 82) that “anyone who has spent time with native Amazonians knows that many express avid interest in commercial goods.” She goes on to say that when the Wari’ received money to spend in the 2000s, they joined the rest of Brazilian society in a spending spree. Nonetheless, Conklin concludes (p. 82) that Wari’ materialism is “relational and implicated in very indigenous modes of sociality,” meaning that goods are valued to the extent that they can improve interpersonal relations and the well-being of the community as a whole.

The three groups described in the chapters in the first part of the book have not experienced significant shortages of land and game. From an economic perspective, their scarcest resource is labor, which might account for the emphasis that members of these groups place on the ability to mobilize people in community activities. The groups described in the three chapters in the second part of the book (“Land, Money, and Care”) are all encountering scarcities of land and other resources as a result of their immersion into nation-states. Unsurprisingly, their notions of “public wealth” include the ability to ensure access to property and other resources controlled to a certain extent by outsiders.

María Guzmán-Gallegos discusses the Kichwa (Runa) of the Upper Napo region of Ecuador in the context of colonization and the expansion of the oil frontier. She says (p. 122) that for the Amazonian Runa “land, forests, and rivers as the habitats of plants, game, and fish are just as scarce as vitality and life and therefore are also central to economic and cosmological concerns.” She notes that formal education is valued as a way to gain access to scarce resources. Although the Runa regard such access as “the base of wealth and well-being” (p. 136), accumulation of material goods by individuals is thought to “endanger and eventually destroy the social fabric.”

Juan Pablo Sarmiento Barletti reports that among the Ashaninka of the Peruvian Amazon the concept of public wealth includes materials that the community receives from timber companies, nongovernmental organizations, state agencies, and oil companies. The Ashaninka also receive communal spaces such as soccer fields and medical centers through their dealings with these entities. Sarmiento Barletti adds that the reorganization of communities into villages has “altered the game of sociality” and created a situation where the distribution of public goods is crucial.

Giovanna Micarelli focuses on ways in which the availability of money from development projects affects ideas about individual and public wealth among the Ticuan Uito of the Colombian Amazon. She conducted research among a group near the city of Leticia that seems to be the most integrated into a cash economy among those discussed in the book. Micarelli comments (p. 170) that community leaders refer to development project money as *cavería*, a Spanish word for “hunting” or “game.” Although leaders avidly search for such money, their ideas about its proper public use are similar to those in the other groups discussed in the book.

In the final chapter of the book (in a separate section called “Living Well”) Norman Whitten and Dorothea Scott Whitten examine the meaning of two terms used synonymously in the 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution. The Spanish term is *buen vivir* (“good life”), which the Whittens say is based on capitalist wealth accumulation aimed at the common good. This contrasts with the Quichua term *sumaj kawsay* (or *sumaj causai*), which means “beautiful life force.” According to the Whittens, *sumaj causai* (p. 193) subsumes concepts of “community, conviviality, kinship, integration with nature and supernature, and a shunning of capitalist wealth accumulation. Their close discussion of these two terms

aims at elucidating distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous ideas about public wealth.

The contributors to the volume carefully place their analyses in historical context. Each of the groups described has been affected for centuries by epidemics, relocations, and colonial exploitative enterprises. Seeger and Santos-Granero explicitly restrict most of their discussion to a period before the deepest immersion of the groups they describe into market economies. Conklin attributes many of the cultural features of the Wari' over the past hundred years to an epidemiological situation in which survival was dependent on maintaining interethnic boundaries. The other contributors discuss contemporary ideas about public wealth with reference to groups' contact with nonindigenous people and organizations.

The authors agree that indigenous Amazonian concepts of public wealth emphasize vitality, work, conviviality, fertility, and the ability to host large gatherings. While their findings differ with respect to attitudes towards individual accumulation of material goods, they all say that the proper use of such goods is for the public benefit in activities such as food production and community-wide celebrations. I wonder about the degree to which these findings reflect the particular time periods covered by the research. Would such conceptions of public wealth have been so widespread prior to European colonialism, when Amazonian societies varied considerably in their degree of sociopolitical complexity? Are they likely to persist as groups become ever more immersed into national economies?

Most contemporary ethnographers have abandoned explanations based on function, adaptation, and cultural evolution. The contributors to this volume are no exception. With the exception of Conklin, they have few suggestions about why indigenous ideas about public wealth might have been useful in the past. The contributors also have little to say about the extent to which the concepts of public wealth they describe are particularly characteristic of indigenous Amazonia. There are many small-scale societies in tropical areas in other parts of the world that have experienced the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. I would guess that members of these societies share a good number of the ideas about public wealth found in indigenous Amazonia.

In his introduction, Santos-Granero (p. 5) frames the chapters in the books in context of "a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction with postindustrial societies and a generalized craving for alternative models to achieve happiness and well-being." The authors all either implicitly or explicitly share this concern, with Conklin, for example, writing (p. 84) that "the question of how we treat our collective resources, risks, and responsibilities overflows the boundaries of economics and goes to the heart of the world in which we want to live." *Images of Public Wealth* is in the final analysis a laudable contribution to the longstanding anthropological study of and respect for alternative human moralities.

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