

FORUM

The economic anthropologist as romantic bricoleur

Chris Hann

The spirit of the gift

More than 50 years after the writing of the papers assembled as *Stone Age Economics*, the author's voice has been silenced. That immense contribution has been the subject of numerous reassessments.¹ The volume contains all his important work in economic anthropology. Each chapter is teeming with ideas, and even seasoned teachers in this field will usually discover something new each time they revisit it. Looking at it again this year, I was astonished to realize that I used to use this book for teaching first-year undergraduates. Even for the brightest young sparks in Cambridge, to require the completion within a week of an essay evaluating Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (Mauss 2015 [1925]) in the light of the fourth chapter of *Stone Age Economics* (Sahlins 2004 [1972]) was asking rather a lot.

Marshall Sahlins begins that chapter by ruminating on how Mauss's essay "becomes his own gift to the ages" (2004: 149). The same can be said of Sahlins's commentary. "The Spirit of the Gift" is the hinge of *Stone Age Economics*, connecting the two previous chapters on the "domestic mode of production" (DMP) to the famous typology of reciprocities in chapter 5 and the concluding essay on "Exchange Value and Primitive Trade." The homage to Mauss opens with conventional academic modesty: Sahlins disclaims knowledge of Maori and denies any

original insights into the work of Hobbes and Rousseau, the political philosophers with whom he engages in the last section of the chapter (which had originally appeared as a separate article in *L'Homme* 1968). What follows is a virtuoso analysis of the Maori text that inspired Mauss and a subtle structuralist argument that reaches beyond Mauss to generate quite different insights. Mauss's essay had emphasized three sequential obligations in a fundamentally *binary* frame: to give, to receive, and to return. Yet the *hau*, the book's most famous example, as originally presented by Tamati Ranapiri had a *tripartite* framework. Sahlins explains why this is so by means of skillful structuralist analysis and then proceeds to draw a far-reaching conclusion about the primitive economy: it may not be egalitarian, but it stands firmly opposed to the profit-based accumulation that became the foundation of more advanced productive systems. For Sahlins, of course, this is attractive and entirely consistent with the "substantivist" orientation of *Stone Age Economics* as a whole.

The inadequacies of Mauss's interpretation are downplayed. In my recollection, most of the students whose essays I had to assess picked up with enthusiasm on the idea that the spirit of the gift is a mystical power that requires the object in question to find its way back to the original donor. They also warmed to the idea that this donor gives something of himself. A



closer inspection reveals that Sahlins dutifully lays out Raymond Firth's objections to these Maussian insinuations, which are unwarranted either by the particular text of Tamati Ranapiri or Maori ethnography more generally. The Parisian scholar imposed a mystification of his own when he attached the *hau* to persons. Yet after making this concession, Sahlins claims that it pales into insignificance in light of the larger lesson we learn about the nature of primitive economy. When we explore the full semantic range of *hau* in terms of the fecundity of nature, we reach the larger insight that it makes no sense even to demarcate a distinct zone of economy in societies of this kind. *Hau* is a totalizing concept that orders every domain of Maori life. Mauss might have been wrong concerning the "spiritual specifics," but he was right on the larger issues. Firth, the Maori specialist who also happened to be one of the most influential economic anthropologists of his generation, is left to score a few pedantic points in the shadows, utterly mistaken in supposing that primitive economy can be understood through the concepts of modern economics. Rather, economy must always be approached in the terms of a cultural order, which in this Maori case is exemplified by *hau*.²

The domestic mode of production

Chapters 2 and 3, which together make up "The Domestic Mode of Production," draw on very different sources both empirically and theoretically. Marxism figures among the latter, but Sahlins's engagement with French neo-Marxist contemporaries is shallower than his engagement with Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists. He declares nonchalantly and without supplying references that the DMP is a reconstruction of "the 'independent domestic economy' of Karl Bücher and earlier writers—but relocated now somewhat *chez* Marx, and redecorated in a more fashionable ethnography" (Sahlins 2004: 76). In footnote 26 on the same page, he distances his use of "mode of production" from

both Emmanuel Terray and Claude Meillassoux, without bothering to note the latter's dissatisfaction with the way in which this concept was operationalized by Althusserian Marxists who lacked fieldwork experience in a precapitalist society. Meillassoux was an early critic of Sahlins, arguing that his focus on the domestic unit was too strong and that generalization about very different forms of precapitalist relations of production was inadmissible. Sahlins was right to follow Polanyi and the substantivist school in rejecting the universalist aspirations of the liberal economists, as represented by Raymond Firth; but he was mistaken in his postulate of a generalized DMP and should have differentiated more carefully between the precapitalist systems he examined (Meillassoux 1972, 1981).

In any case, Sahlins relies primarily not on any of the neo-Marxists but on the approach developed by A. V. Chayanov to the analysis of the pre-revolutionary Russian peasantry. This is curious for a number of reasons. First, the empirical materials analyzed by Sahlins are drawn from quite different forms of agricultural production (mainly shifting cultivation). Second, as Sahlins recognized, Chayanov's aim was to develop a rigorous "marginalist" model to understand the decisions taken by the peasant household (Sahlins 2004: n. 29). This was a model of rational action that any liberal economist would appreciate, the antithesis of a culturalist perspective. The Chayanovian tendency to explain statistical inequalities in land use with reference to the changing composition of the household as it moved through the developmental cycle also contrasted sharply with the Leninist emphasis on the increasing penetration of capitalism into the Russian countryside.

The chapters devoted to the DMP are the most rigorous, almost "formal," in *Stone Age Economics*. Sahlins proposes the general notion of the "anti-surplus" economy to cover everything between the "zen" hunter gatherers of chapter 1 (who constitute the "original affluent society" by the liberals' own criteria, since they are able to satisfy their wants with so little effort) and the kind of economy that is driven by

consumption, markets and profits, which must be analyzed from the perspective of “business.” By the time *Stone Age Economics* was published, Sahlins had moved on from his early evolutionism; yet notions of complexity, technological progress, and expanding needs remain implicit.

Given these generalizing objectives, one cannot expect in the chapters on the DMP to find the same careful attention to any particular cultural order that one finds concerning *hau* in “The Spirit of the Gift.” A more telling criticism would be that, like Chayanov himself, Sahlins exaggerated the extent to which households (however defined locally) functioned as independent units of production and consumption. True, he entered qualifications. He allowed for redistribution, such that the surpluses produced by some units might be transferred to others in need, either directly or via a central power of some sort. He also allowed for cooperation between households in the form of collective work parties. But he considered this to be “a technical fact, without independent social realization on the level of economic control” (Sahlins 2004: 78). This dismissal is inadequate because it fails to consider the possibility that the “excess” labor power available in some households could be reallocated according to local conventions of power and dependence. Following Meillassoux, Donald Donham showed in his meticulous investigation of Maale households in Ethiopia that this was possible when older men controlled the labor of their juniors (Donham 1985). In short, the notion of the DMP has no satisfactory theoretical grounding and obfuscates both the intricate supra-household interdependencies of lineage organization and the role played by households following the emergence of social classes within tribal society and the impact of the capitalist mode of production.

Sahlins’s place in the history of economic anthropology

There is something Frazerian in the sweep of *Stone Age Economics*. Almost nothing is based

on the author’s field research. Sahlins does occasionally mention his early work on Fiji, but he relies for the most part, as James Frazer, Karl Bücher, and Marcel Mauss did before him, on texts produced by others. The textual nature of the research is strongest in “The Spirit of the Gift,” in which the enigmatic utterances of a native are transcribed by a colonial researcher and then reinterpreted in Paris, first by Mauss and then by Sahlins himself as a guest of Lévi-Strauss almost half a century later. Other chapters, notably those exploring the DMP, draw on the field research of specialists in economic anthropology, which came of age in the inter-war decades through studies by Malinowski, Firth, Melville Herskovits, and others. But the details are presented magpie-like without close attention to the local cultural order, not to mention the breathtaking assumption that the evidence from remote places in the twentieth century, whether gathered scientifically by professionals or not, might somehow stand for the whole of humanity in the Neolithic or earlier. Even when he utilizes recent studies, Sahlins’s method is closer to that of Frazer, Bücher, and Mauss than to that of Malinowski. What does this tell us about the development of our (sub-)discipline, in which *Stone Age Economics* is still one of the most widely used books for teaching? Why has no one written a volume called *Stone Age Religion*, with a comparably long shelf-life?³

I am laboring the obvious point that going to the field and living among the people makes a big difference when it comes to formulating theories about how human societies concretely organize the production, circulation and consumption of goods to meet their needs. Sahlins’s theorizing of both gift exchange and the DMP abstracts from the myriad constraints and complications that one finds in the works of ethnographers, from Malinowski and Firth to Meillassoux and Donham. There is a telling passage in “The Domestic Mode of Production” in which Sahlins complains that “the classic distinction between ‘production for use’ (that is, for the producers) and ‘production for exchange’ was, from the beginning of an economic anthro-

pology, at least in the Anglo-Saxon countries, interred in the graveyard of prehistoric concepts” (2004: 82). The charge is that Malinowski and those who followed his lead failed to hold on to the elegant concepts developed by their precursors. One sees here how unfair it would be to dismiss the mature Sahlins as a cultural relativist, a scholar who insists that each and every economy be studied according to its unique cultural order. Sahlins wishes to combine such particularism with a European tradition of conceptual analysis that dates back well before Marx and ultimately derives from Aristotle.

Aristotle’s notion of the *oikos* is not cited in *Stone Age Economics*, but it probably should have been. In the decades immediately prior to the “fieldwork revolution,” the most relevant scholarly production was that of the German Historical School. Bücher’s work in Leipzig was particularly significant (both Malinowski and Chayanov attended his lectures). Sahlins makes only the briefest of nods to Bücher’s conception of “independent domestic economy” (Sahlins 2004: 76, 83).⁴ But this is the tradition in which *Stone Age Economics* should be located. Its author is open to embrace all those European strands of thinking about economic organization that run counter to the “Business” perspective of modern economics. Those who, following Malinowski, documented actually-existing economies on the basis of their field research were sure to muddy the waters if they attempted to understand them in the language of neoclassical economics. They would lose the purity that was still possible when you merged domestic economy and classical political economy (including the key concept of use value) with cultural idealism.

If this analysis is correct, it may help to explain Sahlins’s aversion to fieldwork, in an era in which the last surviving “anti-surplus” economies were being engulfed by globalized capitalism. Not for him the path taken by Eric Wolf (whose friendship and collegial influence are noted in the original Acknowledgments to *Stone Age Economics*). Wolf wanted to understand the world in which he lived, as is clear from his early

volume on “peasants” (1966) to his mature work exploring global history (1982). The anthropological study of the economy does not have to turn its back on fieldwork in the contemporary world and confine its sources of theoretical inspiration to graveyards in the history of European concepts. Stephen Gudeman has echoed Sahlins’s preference for “anthropological economics” to “economic anthropology” and applied this perspective on the basis of years of field research in Latin America.⁵ Attention to local cultures is entirely compatible with the development of general frameworks, whether in contrasting the household “base” (and more inclusively “community”) with “market” (Gudeman 2008) or in identifying the multiple spheres of the hyper-financialized global capitalism of the twenty-first century (Gudeman 2016).

Together with a group of postdoctoral researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, between 2009 and 2012 Gudeman and I investigated the renewed relevance of Aristotelian ideals of self-sufficiency in the rural sectors of six post-socialist countries (Gudeman and Hann 2015). For Sahlins, both “peasants” and “primitive peoples” are antithetical to “the bourgeois entrepreneur with an interest in exchange value” (Sahlins 2004: 83). In our collective project, we found that the post-socialist households we investigated were by no means averse to making a profit. Many would have welcomed more opportunities to be entrepreneurial in order to accumulate. The sharp dichotomy between use value and exchange value, between provisioning and profit, may be overly romantic elsewhere as well. There is no need to chide Raymond Firth for seeing how far he could get in his analysis of Tikopian economy with the “liberal” or “neoclassical” version of western economic theory (Firth 1965). Applying the classical binaries of the Aristotelian-Marxist tradition does not solve the problem of how to transcend the conceptualizations of European thought. An economic anthropology that turns away both from fieldwork and from historical and evolutionary analysis can still be very attractive to critics of contemporary capitalism. My students

were most enthusiastic about Chapters 1 and 4 of *Stone Age Economics*. But we should also make them aware of the pitfalls.

Conclusion

Marshall Sahlins was still based at Michigan when he wrote *Stone Age Economics* (he only took up his appointment at Chicago in 1973). Although certain chapters (and the general spirit of bricoleur romanticism) reveal the influence of 1960s Paris, I have always thought of this book as the most powerful substantivist counterblast to Chicago economics. This is why so many students have found it inspiring. I was seduced myself for many years. But Eurocentric cultural idealism is an inadequate basis for understanding human economies, either historically or in the neoliberal present (see Hart 2015 for an outline of the “human economy approach”). The examples that Sahlins gives in his new Preface to the 2004 edition are revealing: the “anthropological economics” of societies like our own should investigate how we shop and how we dress. I suspect Sahlins himself realized that this was inadequate. Having written off economic anthropology in the early 1970s, all his later scintillating contributions to our discipline were in quite different fields.

Chris Hann is director emeritus at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), and Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Prior to joining the Max Planck Society in 1999, he taught economic anthropology at the Universities of Cambridge and Kent (Canterbury). His field research in the socialist decades led to monographs about rural development in Hungary and Poland. Later work in Turkey and China (Xinjiang) was carried out jointly with Ildikó Bellér-Hann and resulted in two co-authored books. Hann is editor of *Work, Society and the Ethical Self* (Berghahn 2021) and co-author (with Keith Hart) of the introductory

text *Economic Anthropology. History, Theory, Ethnography* (Polity 2011).

Notes

1. The most recent is the symposium “Marshall Sahlins’s ‘Stone Age Economics’, a Semi-Centenary Estimate,” published in *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* (Volume LV/I, 2021). It combines reappraisals by well-known economic anthropologists (including James Carrier and Chris Gregory) with numerous contributions to illustrate Sahlins’s wide-ranging influence on heterodox economics and other disciplines.
2. Sahlins criticises Firth’s commitment to economics more explicitly in the opening footnote to the next chapter of *Stone Age Economics*, in one of the clearest formulations of his theoretical position (it was published several years before the articles woven together to form “The Spirit of the Gift”):
 “Professor Firth upbraids Malinowski’s imprecision on a point of economic anthropology with the observation that “This is not the terminology of economics, it is almost the language of the housewife” (Firth 1957: 220). The terminology of the present effort similarly departs from economic orthodoxy. This may be justly considered a necessity born of ignorance, but something is to be said as well for the appropriateness, in a study of kinship economies, of the housewife’s perspective” (Sahlins 1974: 186).
3. I speculate that one reason for the enduring popularity of *Stone Age Economics* is demand in the market place. Students as well as many senior scholars are attracted by the primitivism, the romantic “otherness” that Sahlins offers, a radical contrast to the world in which they themselves live and work.
4. Gerd Spittler (2008: 91–97) provides a sympathetic discussion of Bücher’s concept of *geschlossene Hauswirtschaft* and further exegesis. I suppose Sahlins did not read German. It is regrettable that, for political reasons, the early German contributions to economic anthropology were largely lost in the course of the last century.

5. I have never been convinced by this argument concerning nomenclature, which Sahlins repeats in his Preface to the second edition (2004: xiii). It is no doubt desirable that economists pay more attention to the diversity of human societies in space and time than they do at present. University departments of economics should hire more anthropologists. The same logic would apply to other disciplines (e.g., psychology). But a good deal of the knowledge produced in those disciplines would inevitably remain beyond our reach. We should be a little more modest and realistic. For me, “economic anthropology” serves well enough.

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