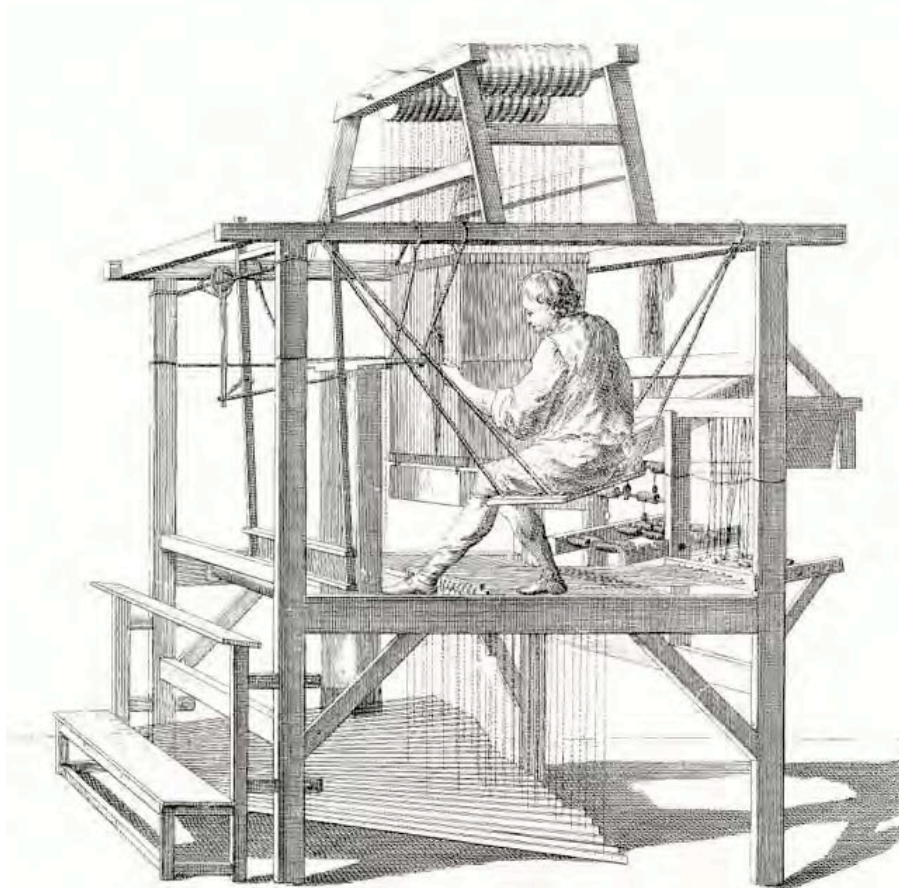


Reflections on

# WEALTH



Alan Macfarlane

Dedicated to the students who attended my lectures and to those whom I have had the privilege of supervising and learning so much from over the years.

**Published in 2015**

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## Preface

This is one in a series of short books reflecting on issues which have interested me through my adult life.

At school I had pocket money and started to look after my own finances a little, but otherwise had little interest in economics. At University I enjoyed economic history and did a special paper on the subject. I was also interested in population patterns and in the causes of the industrial revolution. But I was still pretty innocent about economics more generally.

It was really only when I went to Nepal and watched the grinding work in a pre-industrial community, and the effects of rapid population growth, that I became really interested in the field of economic change. Later, as I made studies of an English village over the centuries, and then examined the life of great thinkers, particularly the economist Adam Smith, I began to obtain a deeper understanding of the subject.

My reflections on wealth were crystallized when I decided in 2003 to try to explain what I had learnt in my forty years as an historian and anthropologist to my grand-daughter. I wrote a number of *Letters to Lily*, imagined to be about 18 years old, explaining what I thought on such questions as work, famine and inequality. These letters were published in 2005. Recently I decided to read them out and film them and these readings are included below.

In the year *Lily* was published, I was asked to give a set of four lectures for first-year students at Cambridge University who were starting either on the social and political science or archaeology and anthropology degree. This was my first attempt to lecture directly on economics and I decided to use the occasion to reflect and summarize what I had learnt over a period of teaching and researching on issues of power and its uses.

I assumed that my audience would be interested but that most of them, like me when I was eighteen, might not have considered these issues very explicitly in their previous schooling. So I tried to

keep the level suitable for very bright, but as yet untaught, young people.

\*

The lectures were filmed by Zilan Wang and have been roughly edited by myself. They were given as part of a series of eight lectures (the other four were on economic anthropology).

I received back 101 questionnaires after the second time I have the lectures, after I had also included four on politics, ranking the lectures in terms of Interest and Presentation on a four-point scale. Here is my brief summary of the comments sent to the Department.

“This was the first year of doing the 4 on politics (as well as 4 on economics last year). I think it went well and I certainly enjoyed giving them. The numerical ratings were:

*Interest:* Excellent (4) - 81; Good (3) - 18; Reasonable (2) - 2

*Presentation:* Excellent (4) - 91; Good (3) - 10

The students, as ever, particularly liked the level, the plan on the board, a short rest after 40 minutes. It was my first full use of a website behind the lectures and both from the very enthusiastic comments and the hundreds of ‘hits’ this seems to have been a good resources. The superlatives were perhaps higher than I have ever had. I look forward to next year! No real complaints repeated by more than one student, except two who said it was too fast, and one who said it was too slow.”

\*

It should be noted that the lecture notes are rough and unchecked. There are allusions to authors which are not fully documented. Thanks to the Internet it should be possible to follow up the references. For those who want to see the edition of the book I took the materials from, there is a catalogue of my library at:

<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/FILES/library.htm>

The basic readings I suggested to go with the lectures will become dated. But they may still be a useful start for those wanting to follow up some of the ideas in the lectures.

\*

Because I was lecturing in a new lecture room which had internet connections, I experimented with the idea of incorporating films and other materials into the lectures. I always allowed a five minute break in my lectures, and used this to show materials from my website, [www.alanmacfarlane.com](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com)

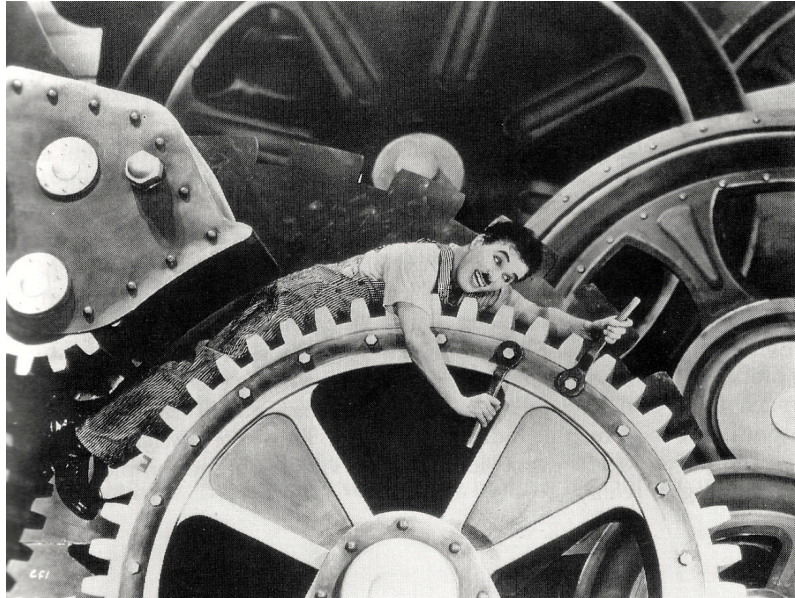
To give an idea of this experiment, and a few examples of economics in action, I have included at the end a few films which were taken as part of six part television documentary series broadcast in 2000. This was filmed in 1999 as background to the Millenium series 'The Day the World Took Off', made for Channel 4 by Windfall Films. I was an advisor and presenter in the series. The films are included with the kind permission of David Dugan, the Chairman of Windfall Films, and of Simon Schaffer, who appears in a film.

\*

The lectures and book for Lily were written within a couple of years of each other. So there is some overlap, and I used some parts of the book in my lectures, as will be seen.

# Letters to Lily

Why do many people work so hard?



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*I've always (for obvious reasons) loved the line in the Bible which runs 'Behold the lilies of the field, they toil not neither do they spin, but lo, I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these' (or words to that effect).*

*Most of us would like such a life of leisure, but usually people have to work really hard just to stay alive. So could you tell me something about work?*

*There are lots of things that puzzle me. One is why so many people throughout history have had to work so hard with their bodies? Why didn't they use machines and animals more? And indeed, as you've told me, did they often tend to have to work harder and harder as the centuries went by?*

*How and why, if hard slavery is the normal condition, did some of us escape through an industrial revolution, where each of us has many invisible 'slaves' (petrol, electricity, chemistry) working to make our physical lives (at least in the west) so easy. Why and how did the great split between what you've told me is called the 'industrious' and the 'industrial' ways occur?*

*There seem to be lots of ways of organizing workers – slavery, serfdom, factory work, wage labour. Lots of abstract terms which I've never really understood. What is the difference between a serf and a slave for example? Why do people talk of wage labourers being 'free' when they seem to be trapped by necessity?*

*You tell me that your school motto was 'per ardua ad astra' (by hard work to the stars). When most people have dreams of doing nothing and being waited on, why do we seem to have a history of valuing hard work? Why does the head of Microsoft, Bill Gates, go on working away when he could have retired long ago?*



## What are the limits to growth?



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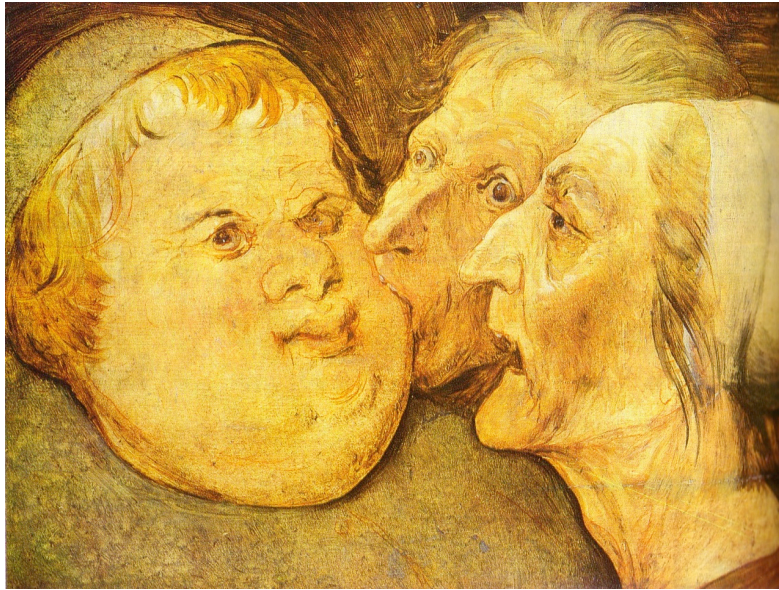
*We've just been doing a course in biology and ecology. There was a lot of talk about how resources are limited, eco-systems under strain, economic laws which lead us to produce less over time. Though I understood some of it, I'd really be grateful if you could again simply and without jargon explain some of the basic laws which control our lives as just one species of animal living on a crowded planet.*

*Could you tell me about the laws of population, of resources, of the ways in which we seem helpless as the deserts spread, forests shrink and seas become lifeless?*

*I know this sounds a bit dry, but I really feel that there must be some fairly strong forces which apply to energy and biology and which I need to know in order to understand other things. A crash course (very brief!) in basic biology, demography and economics would do me good as long as it is readable and gets to the nitty gritty..*

*Is it true that we are running out of all sorts of resources – water, oil, coal, wood? Is it true that most ways in which we produce wealth soon hit a ceiling and begin to become less effective? And does this even apply at a lower level to the things I do?*

## Why do so many people starve?



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1378434/1378439.m4v>

*I'm really upset – again! I was just eating a really good supper when I turned on the TV and saw hundreds of babies and children starving in yet another famine in Africa. How can we allow this to happen? How is it that in a world where some countries are awash with so much food that they do not know what to do with the grain mountains, in much of the world millions go to bed hungry?*

*I know there were terrible famines in the past, in Japan, India and even in France and Ireland. But how was it that even in the 1930's millions died of famine in Russia or even later, millions in China? Why is Africa now the land of famine?*

*Please explain the main theories of the causes of famine and what can be done about them. Are famines the result of man or nature, or both? How did certain countries escape from famine and why are some still stuck in its shadow?*

*Indeed, what **is** famine, and how does it differ from extreme malnutrition and what are its wider effects?*

*It is a terrible accusation against our world that anyone should be hungry, let alone suffer the agony of dying by famine. We should all have some simple knowledge of what the reasons for famine are. We hear a lot about the supposed harm done by things like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. Are they the cure or the cause?*

## Why are we diseased?



*Is it true that millions died of influenza in about 1917 – a disease which I easily get over? And is it true that influenza is caused by a virus which could only have developed when population began to get dense on earth only a few thousand years ago?*

*I really know too little about disease in different cultures and periods, even though my mum is a nurse and tells me a bit. I can't understand why it took so long for certain societies to deal with,, and why millions still die of, easily preventable diseases.*

*What are the worst diseases on earth? Are they AIDS, malaria and dysentery, as I would guess? How do diseases work, along what chains of cause? How was it that some of the great*

*diseases, like plague and malaria, were eradicated in certain areas of the world in the past?*

*Are we going to face new diseases, the Ebola virus or SARS, which could threaten all humans? Is it inevitable that in the end the viruses and bacteria will overcome all our defences? Can multi-resistant strains like MRSA which my mum talks about in her hospital, be dealt with?*

*I know you have some odd theories about what are the most important medicines on earth – wasn't one of them the humble cup of tea? It would be great if you could simply and shortly (no heavy science please!) explain the general outlines of how we live in a world where a very minor shift in the balances between us and microbes can lead to so much suffering.*



## Why is there inequality?



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1377803/1377808.m4v>

*I've just been arguing with a boy. He says that boys are not just different from girls but superior; stronger, cleverer, braver. He also said that it was good that some people were very rich and others poor – otherwise there would be nothing to aim for in life. He even had the cheek to argue that some races (he's white of course!) are better than others (brown or yellow). How should I answer him?*

*He did make some good points. He said that if I looked around the world, women were usually regarded as inferior, rich*

*and poor are becoming further apart,, that many people feel that their race is superior.*

*Could you explain whether inequality is something natural to humans, or whether we just invent it? And why does it often grow over time? What is the difference between a caste and a class, between slavery and freedom?*

*I'd really like to do something about all the terrible unfairness in the world. I find the treatment of women in many places weird. I hate the idea that some people are monstrously rich and other scavenge on rubbish heaps. The idea that in some places you can't touch a person or eat with them seems awful.*

*So let me know what you think about all this and explain why humans seem so mad on making trouble and division. And maybe you'll explain why some inequalities are necessary, for example those of age (in your favour), and beauty (in mine, I naturally think!).*



# FOUR LECTURES

It is always worth starting with a good text-book of anthropology to get an overview on theories and debates. I recommend:

C. Hann, *Social Anthropology* (1998), based on many years teaching economics and politics in Cambridge [hereafter cited as Hann]

George Dalton, *Tribal and Peasant Economies* (1967) (a useful reader with a wide range of theoretical and case studies) [hereafter cited as Dalton]

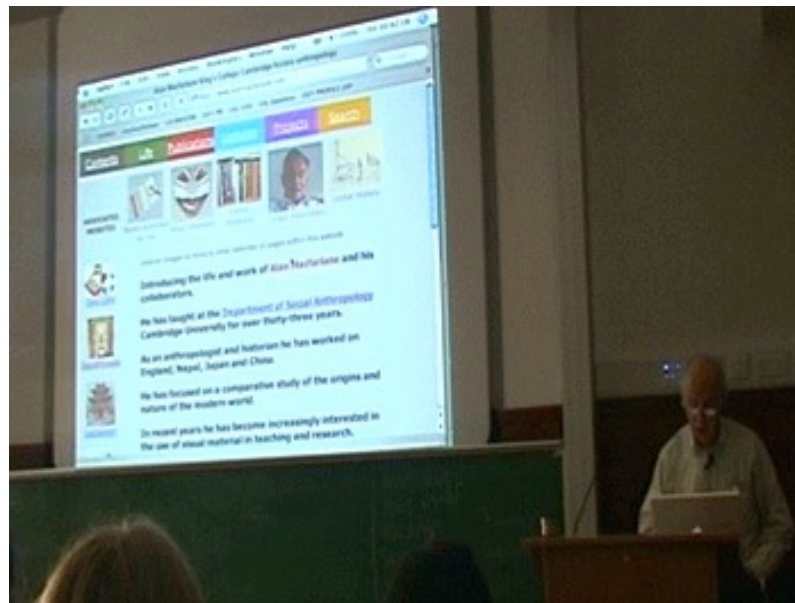
Edward E. LeClair and Harold K. Schneider, *Economic Anthropology* (1968) (another useful reader with theory and case studies). [hereafter cited as Leclair & Schneider]

Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (1974) – a classic [hereafter cited as Sahlins]

For specific topics it is almost always worth starting with **The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences** (1968) editions which usually contains useful overviews and can be found in the Haddon Library. Also there are some very useful articles in Tim Ingold (ed), **The Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology** (1994).

# 1. The production of wealth

A general framework of production systems, hunting, pastoralism and slash and burn, settled peasantries, industrial societies, and their subdivisions. Ways of making a living. The organization and nature of work. Some advantages and disadvantages of each and reasons for movement from one to another.



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1402979/1402984.m4v>

## Some readings

Hann, chapter 6; Sahlins, chs.2,3;

Karl Polanyi, 'The Economy as Instituted Process' in *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires*, eds. Polanyi et al (1958), reprinted in LeClair and Schneider, pp.122-167 (for further support for Polanyi's views, and two counter-criticisms, see the same, pp. 168-233)

## NOTES FOR THE LECTURE

### The long view

The earth is 4600 million years old;  
300m - early forms of life  
435m - fishes appear  
130m - birds and mammals  
65m - dinosaurs extinct

*Homo sapiens* -c. 100,000 or more years ago

"Between 40-30,000 years ago evidence turns up areas as widely separated as Europe, Borneo Australia of the emergence of fully modern humans" (Keesing, 18)

c.9,000 years ago domestication of animals and crops, the Neolithic Revolution : though now thought to be much more fragmentary and accidental. Why? (Alan in buffalo hut)

c.6500 first farming in Greece and Aegean  
8350-7350 Jericho founded (first walled town)  
(Hist. Atlas, 37, 12-13.)

c.3500 B.C. earliest Chinese city - in fact, probably well before this (extraordinary remains at Chengdu, see pic. )

Gradual growth of world populations

### Overview of modes of production

Various frameworks:

Four paradigms or approaches in economic anthropology (Hann, pp.54-60)

### Formalism: classical and neo-classical approaches

The C18 Enlightenment framework - Montesquieu and the Scottish philosophers.

A brief outline of the C18 framework:

(paraphrased from: Riddle of the Modern World, p.85: )

One of Adam Smith's most famous pieces of work was his elaboration of the four-stage theory of civilization, which has since provided the foundation for all of the social sciences. Basically, he divided the history of civilization into the four 'stages' of hunter-gatherer, pastoralist, settled agriculturalist and 'commercial' society. These stages were defined by the mode of gaining a living and were associated with many other features – the density of population, the development of government, the rise of private property, the development of arts and crafts.' [Smith, Jurisprudence, p.201ff] His ideas stem from lectures delivered in 1751.

p.86. 'The important of this stadial framework was immense. It was the foundation for Smith's thought and that of Ferguson, Millar, Kames and others. It was elaborated and developed by those who refounded the social sciences in the second half of the C19, strengthened and made into a unified picture of man and nature through the Darwinian vision. It helped provide the framework for the understanding of world history and in particular the mass of new knowledge generated by the expansion of Europe.'

It was based on 'homo economicus':

The growth of wealth and division of labour the consequence 'of a certain propensity in human nature... to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.' (Smith, 1, 17)

'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.' (I, 18)

This framework then applied everywhere:

'The first paradigm is the 'formalist' or 'decision-taking' approach. It amounts essentially to the generalisation of the modern economist's toolkit to the entire range of human societies. The fundamental axioms of neoclassical economics are scarcity and utility maximising. The constraints within which economic actors make their decisions obviously differ from case to case. However, at a certain level of abstraction it is assumed that African pastoralists, Australian hunter gatherers and European capitalist firms all make choices in fundamentally the same way, in order to maximise utilities given the information available to them.

## **Political economy**

The approach of Marx, and of Adam Smith. For Marx, the economy 'in the last instance' determined by the modes of production.

'The economic structure of society is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised, and to which definitive forms of social thought correspond: in short the mode of production determines the character of the social, political and intellectual life generally.' (Marx)

- globalise and global expansion.

### **Substantivism: a qualification of formalism**

Around the work of Polanyi. There were two senses of the word 'economic'. The formalist 'maximising utility in conditions of scarcity', However, in its 'substantive' sense economics was simply the study of how humans obtained a living from their environment.

While our society susceptible to formalism, in pre-industrial societies the major tools were reciprocity and redistribution. So turning to internalist, rather than comparative.

(Polanyi) 'The format of the substantive concept is the empirical economy. It can be briefly... defined as an instituted process of interaction between man and his environment, which results in a continuous supply of want satisfying material means.'

The move from one to the other occurred in the 'great transformation' (of the C18 according to Polanyi)

[He regarded modern economies as 'disembedded' and apparently devoid of social and cultural interest - a 'blind spot' (Ham)]

### **Culturalism: looking at the culture of the economy.**

Need to understand the *local* models of the people they study (including formalism, Marxism etc.)

A famous example is Weber's work on the 'Protestant Ethic', relating changes in the economy to the religious system.

### **Another way of looking at it historically:**

The C18 approach: modes of production (lecture 1), stages

The C19 amendment: Marxism and the relations of production: property etc. (lecture 2)

The C20 amendment: the nature of exchange and connectedness (lecture 3)

The C21 amendment: the nature of consumption and technologies (lecture 4)

## **HUNTERS AND GATHERERS**

"Of all the peoples who have ever lived, 90 per cent have been hunter-gatherers" (map, De Haviland, p.171); but now, currently less than 250,000 HG's in the world - (idem. Haviland,172)

Pushed to the marginal areas; 10,000 years (Atlas of Mankind, 22) ago, nothing but, now in the marginal areas such as deserts, arctic tundra, forests etc. (Photos, Haviland, 174-5)

*Some features:*

The two kinds of Hunter-Gatherers: (Woodburn)

Immediate-return - little storage, much exchange and sharing and reciprocity.

All HG's extract their food from nature; ie. harvest nature, rather than cultivating plants (though even HG's have bee hives, pets etc.)

Nomadic - high mobility, light shelters, required by the foraging economy

Men/women tend to forage separately; man the hunter, woman the gatherer, most of the food (c.60-70%) comes from the woman.

Fluidity of band composition - bands of about 25-50, which are constantly changing in their composition.

Very light work - 1-3 hours a day normally, in bursts

Food sharing - importance of camp as place of generalized exchange.

Controlled fertility, stabilize numbers well below the carrying capacity of the land. Population density seldom more than 1 person per square mile

## **TRIBESMEN**

The transition from Palaeolithic (HG) to Neolithic (food producers) occurred between 11 and 9 thousand years ago, though, in fact, much more spread out, probably over 30,000 or so years.

Why did it occur. Why one of the two great changes in productive systems (from hg to domestication? (the second being industrialization). [Alan in a buffalo shed on]

The basic features of tribesmen is that they produce food, rather than just harvesting it.

There are two main ways of doing this:

through domestication of crops - this leads to swidden and other cultivators (horticulturalists)

through the domestication of animals - pastoralists

Often, of course, the two overlap - e.g. in New Guinea, both yams and pigs. But for our purposes, we can differentiate.

### *General features:*

still relatively light work; seasonal bursts, 3-4 hours a day; light work and much leisure

Sahlins on: "The term 'tribe' is like the 'nation' a body of people of common derivation and custom, in possession/ and control of their own extensive territory...a tribe is specifically unlike a modern nation in that its several communities are not united under a sovereign governing authority, nor are the boundaries of the whole thus clearly and politically determined. The tribe builds itself up from within, the smaller community segments joined in groups of higher order.... The tribe is also uncomplicated in another way. Its economics, its politics, its religion are not conducted by different institutions specially designed for the purpose but coincidentally by the same kinship and local groups...such a cultural formation, at once structurally

decentralized and functionally generalized, is a primitive segmentary society" (p.vii)

Tribal societies are dominated by kinship and by ritual. [part of Gurungs shaman ritual]

"For in tribes, production, polity and piety are not yet separately organized, and society not as yet a holy alliance of market, state and church." (Sahlins, p.15)

"Western culture, with its differentiation of kinship, politics, religion and economics, does not properly equip us to understand a tribal segmentary order." (p.15)

## **HORTICULTURALISTS**

Shifting cultivation methods (swidden) on a cycle of clearing and then burning and then planting.

The villages move from place to place

Huge exchanges

Multi-crop system - often the fields are vertical through the forest

The productivity per man-hour is high - hence little labour

Great areas for: Forests of Amazon, Central Africa, SE Asia, Pacific Islands

## **PASTORALISTS**

They keep various livestock - cattle, sheep, goats, horses, camels, yak, reindeer.

They are particularly well adapted to heavy grasslands, mountains and semi-deserts. - great belt from N.Africa, through the middle East to Himalayas and Mongolia

Among the main features they exhibit are:

a division of labour according to sex: men herd animals, women milk, do the house-work, procreation etc.



A very close attachment to their animals - e.g. Dinka/Nuer

Pastoral societies are seasonally nomadic; moving with their herds over large territories - with high mobility (transhumant between lowland and highland), e.g. Baktiari (Haviland, p.183, nice description)

Fluid camps, with people joining and leaving.

High protein diets

Often age-grades (as in E.Africa), e.g. herding done by the young men.

Warlike and a lot of feuding and raiding.

. Previously politically powerful (e.g. Mongols rule two thirds of Eur-Asia, Genghis Khan), now reduced by drought & settled peoples with their military superiority

### **PEASANTS: c. 6000 years or so dominant**

"We may mark the beginnings of the state and hence of a peasantry at around 3500 B.C. in the Near East and around 1000 B.C. in Middle America".

Firth - "By a peasant economy one means a system of small-scale producers, with a simple technology and equipment, often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produce. The primary means of livelihood of the peasant is the cultivation of the soil".

Redfield - "the culture of a peasant community, on the other hand is not autonomous. It is an aspect of the civilization of which it is a part. As the peasant society is a half-society, so the peasant culture is a half-culture."

Thorner: need to be -

1. more than half the population must be engaged in agriculture
2. a peasantry can only exist where there is a State
3. almost inevitably towns with markets with a different culture to the countryside
4. "our fifth and final criterion, the most fundamental, is that of the unit of production. In our concept of peasant economy the typical

and most representative units of production are the peasant family households."

### **Simple model of some of the economic features associated with peasantry**

Hard, back-breaking work for long hours – cf. Japan, India, China etc.

The basic unit of production is the extended household, rather than tribe

The basic unit of consumption is the extended household

There is a very strong emotional link between land and family

Villages are usually almost entirely self-sufficient

Production in the village is mainly for immediate use

There is, within the village, little 'market rationality'; that is, production is not mainly for exchange (opposite to Marx, where production for exchange, then for consumption)

There is an ideal of a multi-generational and complex household

The fertility rate is usually, traditionally, high

There is little geographical mobility, except in times of chaos

Part-societies in relation to the State etc.

Usually illiterate, in relation to literate city dwellers etc.

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## **INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES**

### **Economic organization:**

Work: at first, back-breaking work (as in British, now Chinese industrial revolutions; then knowledge economy)

In the capitalist form, the concentration of wealth into fewer hands

The widespread use of money and markets:

Change from a largely non-monetized to an almost completely money-dominated system of exchange.

Fully privatized property and free inheritance

Machinery replaces human labour

Use of fossil fuels replaces human and animal energy

Urbanization. & specialization of labour.

High social and geographical mobility as people no longer tied to a specific lord.

*Weber on main characteristics:*

separation of business from the household "which completely dominates modern economic life"

- the destruction of the "domestic mode of production" and the growing separation of public and private domains in politics, economics and elsewhere

- growth of rational accounting - everything is done in terms of balances: of probable profitability

- under capitalism, accumulation, saving, profit-seeking had become ethically and emotionally attractive, an end and not a means:

"Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship...is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence."

- calculable law, for capitalistic industrial endeavour must be able to depend upon calculable adjudication and administration

- a new attitude of distance and mastery over nature; Weber adopts Schiller's phrase, "the disenchantment of the world"

Political organization: the nation-state,

Communications/intellectual organization: the new forms of organizing distance and space through advanced science and technology - eg. trains, telegraphs, money, computers, clocks, telephones etc., all coming together.

### *Conclusion*

This is a first approximation, concentrating as the C18 and C19 did on the ways in which wealth is produced – the forces of production in Marx's scheme. To summarize very briefly.

#### **HG: Immediate and Delayed Return**

two types, both of whom harvest nature, but then have differences depending on their storage strategies. Direct return, and delayed return. Furthermore, considerable difference between the kinds of harvesting, hence fisher-gatherers, different from forest gatherers, different again from desert gatherers. And Australian Hags very different from Africans, on the whole. But very important as we are basically Hags.

#### **Tribesmen: Swidden and Pastoral**

all using plants and animals after domestication; two main types again, depending on the ecology; the swidden forest dwellers (Pacific, South America, Central Africa, South East Asia etc). And the pastoral nomads, particularly of North Africa, the Middle East and the whole of central Asia.

#### **Peasants: Real and Individualistic**

now using more sophisticated technologies of production; settled agriculture with ploughs, advanced crafts, cities and writing; basically of two types.

The 'real' peasants of India, China, Mexico, the Mediterranean, with all the features (as Wolf). And the rather peculiar agriculturalist, non-peasants of England, Holland, early North America, Australia and, to a certain extent, Scandinavia. Individualistic peasants.

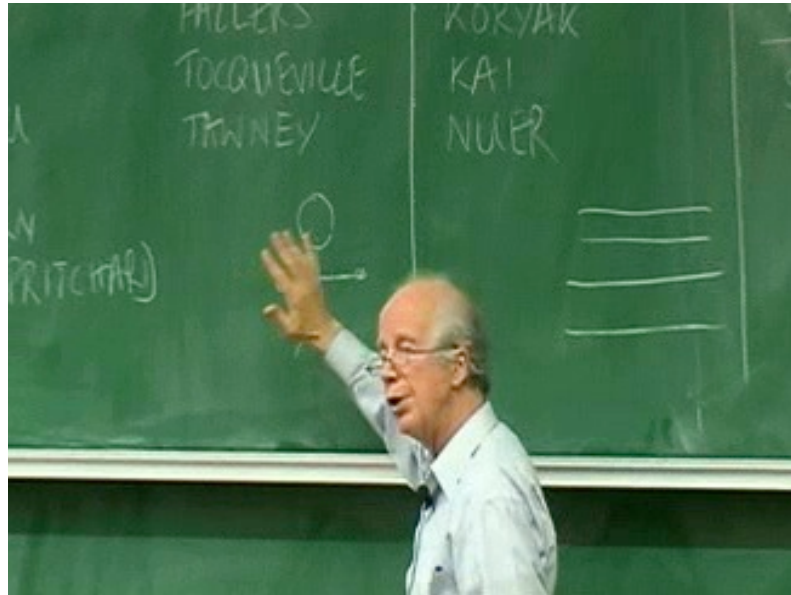
## **Industrial societies: Capitalist and Socialistic**

all based on two features. The conversion of the energy of the sun through carbon, coal, then oil etc. Using up locked up treasures of the earth over a long period. This through machinery, whose major features are efficient conversion. Also using the division of labour to increase production. Also using scientific advances to ever increase production.

There are two major forms, which existed fully in the C20, basically to do with property. In one, the individualism of the quasi-peasants of England was taken a step further into capitalism. In the other, the communalism of pre-peasantries was attempted and all property was owned by the state.

## 2. The distribution of wealth

A general overview of types of property and stratification in the four major types of civilization: hunters and gatherers, tribesmen, peasants and industrialists. The normal tendencies in systems of property and stratification. The relations of production and the production of relations.



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1411580/1411585.m4v>

### Some readings

Hann, C., chapter 8.

Woodburn, J., 'Egalitarian Societies', *Man*, 1982, vol.17, no.4., pp.431-451

Hann, C.M. (ed.), *Property Relations: renewing the anthropological tradition* (1998)

A.Beteille (ed.), *Social Inequality* (1969) esp. chs. 1, 11,12,13, 17

## **NOTES FOR THE LECTURE**

### **What is property, and what is it considered to be?**

N & Q: 'Ownership is best defined as the sum total of rights which various persons or groups of persons have over things; the things thus owned are property. Property thus defined in terms of the relations of persons to things...'

Types of rights: rights of use; rights to control the use or disposal of property by others; rights of disposal; rights to derive an income or other benefit from the use of property by others; rights to be described as a titular owner of property without further benefits. Several such types of rights may be simultaneously over the same piece of property by different persons or groups'

(Enc. Soc.Sci, 1935) Types of property: ' Property is a euphonious collection of letters which serves as a general term for the miscellany of equities that persons hold in a commonwealth. A coin, a lance, a tapestry, a monastic vow, a yoke of oxen, a female slave, an award of alimony, a home, a first mortgage, a railroad system, a preferred list and a right of contract are all to be discovered within the catholic category'.

What is the nature of the property?

Who holds the property; the basic property-owning unit?

How is the property transmitted?

What effects does this situation have?

### **What are the questions to be asked about stratification?**

There is a deep ideological divide between two views of humans. One is that by birth they are unequal, men and women, free and slaves, upper caste and lower caste. It is written in the stars or a former life.

The other is that we are born equal, even if we may end up unequally. The latter has become the dominant ideology in the world, as the following quotations suggest.

We now live in a time and a part of the world where there is a basic premise that men are born equal. As Gellner notes (Plough, 211), "A marked feature of modern societies the basic egalitarianism".

Equality is a sort of religion - contrasting America and Japan, Ruth Benedict wrote that "Equality is the highest, most moral American basis for hopes for a better world". (Benedict, *Chrysanthemum*, 31).

As Kristol (in *In. Enc. Soc. Sciences*, s.v. Equality) writes: "It is a distinguishing characteristic of the modern age that "equality" should be not merely an abstract idea but also a politically aggressive idea...Every inequality is on the defensive, must prove itself against the imputation of injustice and unnaturalness".

Or as Dumont writes, "For us, every man is, in principle, an embodiment of humanity at large, and as such he is equal to every other man, and free." (Dumont, *Mandeville*, 4)

Finally we may quote one of the most perceptive of modern writers on equality, George Orwell, who wrote that "The whole English-speaking world is haunted by the idea of human equality, and though it would be simply a lie to say that either we or the Americans have ever acted up to our professions, still, the idea is there, and it is capable of one day becoming a reality." (Orwell, *Lion*, 119).

But what is the 'natural' or real system; *homo hierarchicus* or *homo aequalis*?

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF FORMS OF SOCIETY IN RELATION TO PROPERTY AND STRATIFICATION**

### **Hunter-gatherers: immediate return**

In the simplest hunting and gathering societies, now only dimly reflected in groups such as the Hadza, Kung and Naicken, there was very considerable equality in every sense.



There was equality between men and women, parents and children, the more successful and the less successful.

This was the 'original affluent society', affluent not only because means and ends were conjoined, but also because there was no sense of relative deprivation, little cause for envy.

This world approximates most nearly to those Utopias which we find in the archetypal myths of western thought - the Garden of Eden ('When Adam delved and Eve Span, Who then was the gentleman?'); in Rousseau's vision of the natural equality of men; in Marx's primitive communist society.

There was no class, no caste, barely perceptible ranking. The ethic was one of sharing.

This continued over tens of thousands of years and, in this sense, man is 'naturally equal', in that in his original state, and for the longest period of his time on this planet, s/he has lived in a state of almost equality.

Of course, it is a little more complex than this; there was some idea of private property (e.g. beehives), or private territory, or the private ownership of certain knowledge and skills.

It was certainly not a communist Utopia. As Robert Lowie (Prim. Soc, 216) wrote of the Torres Straits, there was very highly individualized private property, "every rock and waterhole had its owner, the only common piece of common land being the village street'.

e.g. Andaman Islanders: magic, songs and legends are private property: 'A song that has been received with applause may be repeated by request at lesser gatherings, but irrespective of its popularity no one dare sing it except the composer himself' (Lowie, p.225) Among Koryak, 'When a woman sells an incantation, she must promise that she gives it up entirely, and that the buyer will become the only possessor of its mysterious power'. - among Kai,

idea of copyright in poems. – likewise, certain carvings not to be copied without special consent.

But in general it is roughly the case that most of the property is in intangible things, and that in material terms people were as equal as they could possibly be.

The reasons for this lie in absences: there was no way to store inequality and pass it on, no technologies of war or wealth which made it possible to institute inequality. Even the kinship system, often ego-centred and bilateral, was atomistic and flexible.

### **Stage 2: The foreshadowing of ranks: delayed return Hunters.**

In Woodburn's well-known distinction, there is another form of HG who does not just live "hand to mouth", but because of the nature of his ecological relations, particularly the seasonality of food, has developed systems of storage - for instance the North West Coast American Indians with their salmon and deer cultures. Here it is both possible and necessary to create a surplus in one part of the year and then use it up in another.

The goods so saved, meat, fish oil, nuts and berries, are the 'property' of a person or family.

This leads to the emergence of some form of ranking; political ranking of chiefs and commoners, competition between wealthy and poor etc. Since, however, the ethic is still one of distribution and consumption, of exchange and display, of 'potlatch' and the competitive destruction of differences of wealth, there is little long-term institutionalization of rank, a subject we shall come back to under 'exchange'

It is possible to talk of temporary differences, achieved differences in peoples view of each other but not of instituted ranks, classes or other orders. And it is possible to think of rough territories belonging to groups, but not instituted property.

### **Stage 3: Tribesmen - pastoralists.**

At something like ten thousand years ago, humans began to move from merely hunting and gathering, to active intervention in nature through two types of cultivation. One was through the domestication of animals. This led to that phase of civilization which we term 'tribal', of which one branch is the 'pastoral', i.e. the major concentration on the keeping of animals.

Of course there are many different kinds of pastoralism depending on the ecology and type of animals kept - cows, reindeer, camels, sheep etc. But what seems to be common to all of them is that this mode of production again inhibits the development of ranks in any serious form.

There are several features of property here to be noted. Firstly, it is only residually held by the individual, or even the small family group. The unit of ownership is a group of related kin, a lineage or clan. So, beyond some ornaments and household furnishings and things people have acquired or made, it is difficult to speak of 'private property'.

Secondly, the major form of property is a mixture of animals and people. Women, their labour and reproductive rights in particular, are famously 'property' who are exchanged between groups. It is rights in people that are the main concern, for ultimately whether a group survives or is wiped out depends on social relations and investment in people. It is not what you have, but who you know, so to speak.

Finally, the distribution of property, that is the number of animals and other good things, is fairly even between competing sub-parts of a tribe. One of the very notable feature of pastoral nomads is how very strong the pressure is against the development of property inequalities.

If we look at the classic monographs on pastoralists, E-P on the Nuer and the other East African works, work on the Bedouin, work on Persia and the Pathans by Barth, work on reindeer etc., we find that in that whole belt from East and North Africa across to Siberia, we have a band of very egalitarian societies - fiercely egalitarian. Within a

typical band there may be richer and poorer, and within the family there may be strong patriarchy, with male dominance and parental dominance.

But the main principles of ranking tend to be limited to two; by sex and by age. The latter, while giving grades, enables people to move through the system as they move with their age grade.

Again it is tempting to see the reason for this as lying largely in the mode of production; the laws of diminishing marginal returns soon set in with herding.

A man or a family can only look after a certain number of animals. The mobility and uncertainty of animals makes it difficult to institute ways of creaming surplus value off retainers.

The care and protection of animals leads people to cultivate strength and independence.

#### **Stage 4: Tribesmen - horticulturalists.**

At roughly the same time as the development of domesticated animals, humans began to domesticate plants. Here we enter that long period of tribal cultivators who are so well represented in the literature, from East African cultivators like the Bemba, those in New Guinea like the Melpa, those in South East Asia such as the Nagas.

Here we see the incipient ranking of the storage Hunter-Gatherers becomes more obvious and explicit. Basically an individual can, with the new technology of digging stick or hoe, by the application of fire (swiddening) and axe, and through the improvements of seed, begin to produce real surpluses - surpluses which it is difficult to conceal or move.

But we see roughly the same principles in relation to property as in pastoralists. Wealth is produced by human labour, the group is defended by men and increased by the fertility of women. So the major property people have is held by groups of kin, usually defined by descent through males (agnatic) or females (uterine), who share resources and labour. It is again who you know, rather than

individual ownership that is important. And again the possibilities of setting up very large amounts of private wealth are limited, and the ethos is competitively egalitarian.

In this stage it may be possible to build up small hierarchies of rank - with Chiefs and commoners, slaves and free, and the conspicuous display of wealth differences.

The available literature, however, emphasizes the instability of these systems. The 'Big Men' complex of New Guinea is archetypical of the way in which, in each generation, men make their way through competition to the top. Power comes through the control of people, through manipulation and the forced reciprocities of exchange and indebtedness. It is difficult to maintain this power over the generations or to institutionalize it in any way. It is constantly undermined by rivals, by the uncontrollable effects of weather, disease, demography etc.

Roughly speaking, each generation starts anew; it is like the world of marbles at school. One starts with very little, then with skill and luck builds up a huge collection and huge prestige - which are then conspicuously 'thrown away' at the end of term...

There is thus differential prestige, but we still cannot speak of class, caste, estate.

Up to this point, in these four systems, which constitute more than half of anthropological literature and something like 90% of man's life on earth, if we ask the question, is man by nature thought to be born equal or unequal, then the answer would be 'equal'. Equality is the premise, the *de jure* situation; the inequalities are the consequence of accident and skill.

In essence, life is like a game where the players start equal, and the rules are reasonably fair. Through their competition in the game, they end up with winners and losers. But all alike to go heaven, and their children start the game anew.

Thus we can roughly say that HG and Tribal societies are based on the premise of equality, which is rendered into *de facto* inequalities as

a result of various events and activities. The only exception lies in the marginal presence of slavery in some tribal societies, e.g. the Nagas, though I don't know how old this is. The other exception is that there is already, particularly in pastoral and Big Men societies, a strong division between men and women in terms of their role and formal position - so that it would be possible to argue that there is already some gender inequality.

And if we ask the question, 'Is there private property', the answer is that there is, but it is much overshadowed by property in people and group property.

## **AGRARIAN CIVILIZATIONS**

About three thousand years ago, a number of technological and organizational developments allowed the emergence of a new set of opportunities to which we give names such as 'civilization', 'agrarian civilization', 'peasantries' etc. Among the most important new features were; the possibility of storing and transferring value - money; the possibility of storing and transferring information - writing; the possibility of storing and transferring power - weapons; the possibility of storing and transferring people - cities; the possibility of extracting greater wealth from the earth - ploughs, animal traction, wheels etc.

This led into various forms of 'civilization' which we still see around us in India, China, South America today, and which dominated the globe from about 3000 B.C. to about 1800 A.D.

The organizational and technological changes now made it possible to produce substantial wealth surpluses, which could be used to maintain an increasingly complex division of labour. The form which the system of stratification took as a result of this obviously varied very considerably.

In essence, it always seems to have reflected what were now perceived to be the three major functions - Gellner's plough (production), sword (destruction and rule) and book (cognition and religion). But the ways in which it did this varied enormously.

The following schemata seem to be the most obviously ones that come out of the huge literature - they correspond reasonably well to Marx's famous modes of production:

### **Classical (slave) peasantries.**

In terms of property, the ownership is no longer based on kinship, but nor is it privatized. It is ultimately held by the State, and by those who are powerful in the State. They themselves tend to hold it as representatives and heads of families, and their rights of disposal are limited.

Furthermore, property still has a heavy emphasis on rights in people as 'things', as well as in what we tend to think of as 'property', that is inanimate objects. The most obvious example is in relation to slavery.

The 'Ancient' or slave mode - where the basic division is between the free and the unfree. This roughly encapsulates classical civilizations and those in S.America and some of those Marx terms 'Asiatic'. The civilizations of Egypt, Syria, the Aztecs and Incas, Greece, and, to a certain extent China, might fit within this term. Here we basically have a system of stratification which is:

Free citizens - encompassing the literati, rulers etc.

Unfree workers - slaves.

The basic premise here, of course, is that man is by nature unequal; some are by nature or birth or sometimes conquest inferior to others. This is the basic premise of Greek political philosophy - Aristotle and Plato in particular.

The Chinese case is really a variant on this - where there is still a two-fold division into literati and peasants, but where the degree of legal un-freedom is not quite so great as in some slave societies.

The 'slaves' have become a factor in production - they are a chattel which is to be used rather like any other animal, a beast of burden etc. They can be bought and sold, killed or maimed, depending on their master's need. This continued in the southern part of the

United States until the middle of the nineteenth century, and is still quite widespread in the world, often with slightly milder forms like bond or indentured labour.

### **The 'Caste' system.**

A second variant is what is called 'caste', which is defined usefully by Kroeber as "an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions". (Enc. Soc. Sc.). Among the essential features of the system one can immediately note:

- a. the major division is between four groups. There were the top three who reflected the three main functional groups, the Kshatriya (rulers), the Brahmins (priests) and the Vaisya (common folk - farmers and merchants). These were all 'clean', 'White' and free, possibly the groupings of the Aryan peoples who conquered India. To this was added not a slave, but an unclean layer, the 'Blacks' or Sudra, the conquered ones, the Untouchables.
- b. There was an added dimension in caste differences on top of endogamy etc., namely that the castes were ranked in terms of their ritual purity rather than their wealth, power etc.
- c. The system was 'hierarchical', not in the sense that there was a set of layers, like strata, but rather in terms of the inter-connections, the relations between the parts was similar to that of a body - each caste being an organ which had no meaning except in relation to other parts. (this is what hierarchy means; as Dumont)

This system is, of course, to be found famously in the Indian sub-continent. There is much dispute about whether when we find the principles that maintain the caste system - e.g. endogamy and the idea of 'untouchability' elsewhere, as in Black-White relations in South Africa, or the 'Eta' and 'Burakamin' in Japan, we have a 'caste' system. For the moment, it is probably safest to look on caste as a system as limited to India during the last 1500 years or so.

In this system, the property system is heavily based on assets being owned by smaller groups, either with some assets (e.g. forests, water,



waste) by a village community, or in terms of land and other means of producing wealth, by households, by the 'domestos' or family group usually consisting of parents and all their children, married and unmarried.

A person born into such a society automatically has equal shares in the property with all members of this basic group – though men may be preferred over women, and women's property is usually of a different kind, usually movables of some kind which they can take as a 'dowry'

### **Systems of estates or orders.**

It is tempting to lump all the forms of agrarian societies which are not caste or slave societies, to treat medieval Europe and early modern Europe as one, alongside China or Turkey or whatever. This is what many historians who write on the subject, e.g. what Mousnier does in 'Social Hierarchies', and likewise anthropologists like Eric Wolf in his useful book on 'peasants'. And indeed, in some ways, this is what Marx did, when he merely separated out Classical, Asiatic and Feudal - lumping a good deal.

In practice, however, we probably need to distinguish three different ideal types, which we might term:

- i. *Patrimonial* - which encompass Islam and China (& Russia, Eastern Europe?)
- ii. *Classic Feudalism* - which encompasses much of continental Western Europe
- iii. *Centralized feudalism* - which encompasses England and Japan (and, to a certain extent, Holland and Scandinavia).

Let us try to say a little more about each of these.

***Patrimonial*** - this system, which is sometimes also given terms like 'Oriental despotism' (Wittfogel), or 'Absolutism'.

Weber described the system as an ideal type as follows (summarized by Bendix, *Max Weber*, p.100, note - "Weber used the term to refer to any type of government that is organized as a more or less direct extension of the royal household. Officials originate as household servants and remain personal dependents of the ruler as long as patrimonialism remains intact.")

### *Classic feudalism*

Weber contrasted this with feudalism, in which government is organized on the basis of a fealty relation between the ruler and his vassals, independent, self-equipped warriors who exercise the authority of government in more or less autonomous fashion in the lands granted to them on a hereditary basis." (cf. also Bendix, pp.334 ff)

This is the system which, for instance, has been well documented for western Europe by Perry Anderson. It starts with Bloch's "dissolution of the State" feudalism, in which all previous orders have been decomposed into small warrior groups held together by bonds of fealty and loyalty.

It is basically a contractual, flexible, system which emerged after the collapse of the Roman Empire. It lasted from about the 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century, then moved towards four orders (functional, as in caste: nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, peasantry)

### *Centralized feudalism.*

We have two cases to examine, one in England, one in Japan.

Some preliminary features which one could see in both:

- a. A very large 'middling' group, neither elite nor serfs - consisting of townsmen, craftsmen, wealthy farmers (yeomen etc.).
- b. Primogeniture - which forced younger children to move out into other occupations.
- c. Absence of a blood nobility.

- d. Absence of a proper peasantry (and later of a proper working class).
- e. Widely diffused literacy; no real gap between literati and others.
- f. absence of a proper bourgeoisie, that is one that is separated off from others.
- g. very considerable possibility of social mobility - rank dependent on wealth rather than blood.
- h. a balance between the power of the centre and of the periphery - a balanced solution to the problem which both Machiavelli and De Tocqueville drew attention to, the tension between de-centralization and absolutism.

Now the question of why and how this happened is a large one, which might be developed later. Certainly, if we put the question in the form of a 'normal' tendency, of the kind on the Continent and China, the fact of being an island, and hence the absence of the necessity for a standing army etc. is clearly very important. Likewise the presence of water & hence trade is clearly another factor.

Whatever the reasons, what one has, particularly in the English case (and Holland likewise), is that odd phenomenon, a quasi-class, quasi-order system. There was undoubtedly de jure stratification, a differential evaluation of the separate ranks. But there were so many, and the rungs were so close, that de facto it was possible to conceive of a great deal of mobility.

This was the system which compels our attention because:

- a. it was the one upon which 'modern' industrial capitalism was based - and hence our world.
- b. it was the one upon which modern democracy was based - and hence our world.

c. it was the one upon which America was based - and hence modern capitalism, and hence our world.

It was that "long arch" of which the late E.P.Thompson spoke, starting from at least the twelfth century and giving rise to something new.

But the central feature - the premise of equality overlaid with the actuality of inequality - upon which class societies are also based was already present. This premise is cross-comparatively very odd.

### **Class societies.**

#### ***a. The Western case.***

One feature in common as between all three of the systems of 'estates' or 'orders' was that they were based ultimately on prestige, on status etc - they fitted with Weber's model of status groups, arranged on occupational lines.

With the emergence of a far more powerful technology (industrialism), where machines began to replace humans, and where vast surpluses could be created, so that individuals could now own the means of production in a new way, there emerged the possibility for a new kind of stratification.

It was really at this point that the metaphors changed, as Fallers points out, from organic (hierarchical - parts of a whole, the body etc.), to mechanical or geological ones, layers of a cake etc. The new prophets who analysed this change were divided on what was happening.

On the one hand, De Tocqueville saw the effects as one of an inexorable move towards greater equality - and warned of the dangers of this in various ways. On the other, Marx saw a period of growing immiseration and inequality - but of a conflict and resolution which would overcome this. Others - e.g. Adam Smith - had their own views. Weber saw the tendency towards a new form of inequality within the iron cage of bureaucracy.

What is clear is that there was the same contradiction within the system - see Orwell and other quotes on this ambivalence. That is to say, it became an absolute premise that men (and women) were born equal and free. This could be found in such things as equality of opportunity, equality before the law, a movement for equal voting rights, equality of opportunity to move etc. There was much effort to give the impression of a "level playing field".

Yet, somehow, at the end of each game, as Tawney and Orwell among others stingingly remind us, although all (animals) humans are equal, some are definitely more equal than others. Hence, for instance, the description of C19 Britain by Taine - the land of opportunity and equality, but in practice.... (cf. description).

This continues, in many ways, the pattern of English society from at least the twelfth century. What is new? Perhaps the pyramid is a little flatter - and the life chances have been levelled out a good deal. With universal affluence, there are few things that wealth can now buy which are not available to at least half the population.

As for property in this system, there is a strange contradiction. On the surface, it seems that we have reached extreme private property. That is to say, the individual is now the property-owning unit and can do what he or she likes with his property - in theory. At the extreme, a rich old lady can disinherit all her heirs and leave her property to a dog's home.

In practice, however, the sphere in which we can exercise this has been shrinking, at least in most countries. If you examine your own lives, you will find that you have very little. Most of what you use is owned by a larger grouping - transport, medicine, law, policing, education, housing, sports etc. Unlike peasants, who may be constrained by relatives, but have control over most of what they need in life, we pretend to be individualistic property owners, but in practice this does not amount to much. Even the Bill Gates' of this world, with all their wealth, tend to travel on other people's planes, go into other people's hospitals, and watch other people's televisions, and send their children to other people's universities.

This paradox is reversed in communism, where the pretence is that everything is in common, but people spend their time trying to carve out areas of individual property – defined widely – to make their lives tolerable.

## **b. Communism**

The other major form of industrial society, historically, was that of communism. Basically, Marx and his disciples clearly saw that property and stratification were linked. If it were possible to abolish private property, then it would be possible to destroy class or other differences. The theory was based on the central concept that what determined life was not the forces of production (as in C18 political economy – how the society produced – but the relations of production.

It sounded a good idea at the time, but the communist experiment has been tried in two massive and expensive cases, the Soviet Union and China. In both cases, for reasons which you will no doubt learn about, it failed. While *de jure* property was abolished, *de facto* in the wider sense it could not be. Rights and privileges flourished, even if, on the surface some things were equal. As Orwell famously put it, ‘All men were equal, but some were more equal than others’. And instead of the state withering, it took on a monstrous life.

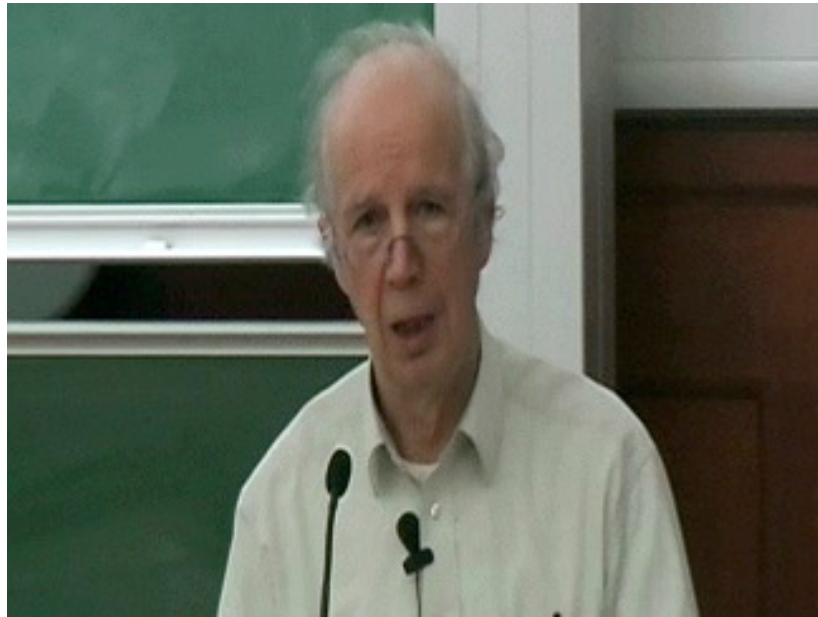
### *The future?*

The egalitarian thrust of capitalism is easy to maintain. America appears to be moving back towards a semi-caste system, with Blacks and Hispanics as the lower caste, a vast ‘trailer trash’ white group, struggling middle classes, and a growing group of super-affluent.

Future historians may see the premise of equality and some fairness of distribution as only a short blip in a the world, roughly between about 1800 and 2000 in some countries. We shall see.

### 3. The exchange of wealth

The variations in different economic formations, including gifts, barter, reciprocity, commodities, special purpose and general markets. The embedded and dis-embedded market economies and the theories of the transition to capitalism.



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1411600/1411605.m4v>

#### Some readings

Hann, chapter 7; Sahlins, chs. 4-6  
Malinowski, B. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) [essential extracts in LeClair and Schneider, pp.17-40]  
Mauss, M., *The Gift* (reprinted 1974)  
Gregory, C., *Gifts and Commodities* (1982)  
Dalton, George, 'Primitive Money', *American Anthropologist* (1965), vol.67, reprinted in Dalton  
Drucker, Philip, 'The Potlatch' from Philip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast*, pp.55-66, reprinted in Dalton.

## NOTES FOR THE LECTURE

### **Introduction: the basic propensity to exchange.**

Adam Smith's famous opening of *Wealth*: quote: 'a certain propensity in human nature; the propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another... is common to all men, and is to be found in no other race of animals...' (*Wealth*, 1, 17)

In other words, an innate commercial mentality.

Based on psychological absolutes: the desire to out-do, something to do with games and competition, to make marginal advantages.

Robbins' famous definition 'Economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources between alternative ends.' (Hann quoted, p.54)

Looking at the thing in an evolutionary perspective, I will give a brief exegesis of the famous theories in anthropology about the nature of types of exchange in societies:

### **Reciprocities and gifts**

The essence of the gift societies, as opposed to commodity societies, is that the former have multiplex social relationships, while the latter have single-stranded ones. So that in the former, the objects exchanged carry a whole weight of disparate meanings of a symbolic kind, and are the channels for rich social relationships, while in the latter an object is single-level, largely of functional utility, and carries little in the way of other relationships. Putting it in another way, in the former the relationships are 'total', embedded, many-level. In such an undivided situation how does one transact?

Using Sahlins distinction between three types of reciprocity, there are (leaving on one side negative reciprocity, as in feud etc.) two major kinds. In much of our market world, we use money, a pure form of direct and balanced exchange. I give you £5, and you



give me something directly in exchange, a book or food. The relationship is balanced, immediate, soon ended.

This kind of thing is not appropriate in multi-stranded situations. We can see this in our one strong set of experiences of this – through family and friendship. If we pay for things within these spheres we cause offence and rather than bringing people closer, fend them off. If I pulled out my credit card after my wife had cooked a meal or a friend had helped me mow the grass, it would be insulting.

Yet we do need to bind people to us, to exchange with them. We do this by moving along the continuum towards the end which is called the gift.

In the gift we cast our bread upon the waters, hoping perhaps that it will come back to us one day, but with no guarantee. We freely, without obligation, give someone something considered valuable by us – and presumably them. We ask for no immediate or even specific return. Yet the gift always has implications. There is no such thing as a free gift, as there is no such thing as a free lunch.

The formal features of how gifts work are described by Sahlins under delayed or generalized reciprocity (it is generalized because it can circulate, as with Kula valuable, A – B – C – D – A) and it can be reciprocated, indeed it must be, after a delay. It should, if possible, be allowed to linger and be paid back by something equivalent (plus a little interest as time has passed), but different. You are not ‘paying back’, but giving a counter-gift.

It should be reciprocated because, as Mauss famously described in ‘The Gift’, the gift not only has a physical body – the animal, plant or whatever – but also an inner essence or spirit. Drawing on the famous Polynesian concept of the ‘hau’ or spirit of the gift, Mauss showed how when we give a gift it has two parts. The physical shell, and the inner spirit. So when a person received a gift s/he consumes the food, it is all gone. But the spirit remains, an intangible substance having in the air.

*Maori hau and Maussian gift:*

‘Mauss argued, following, so he thought, the local model, that to give something was to give a part of oneself. The ‘spirit of the gift’ was a link between the object given and the donor, which ensured that the object would eventually be returned to the donor. Mauss emphasised the sense of obligation involved in all gift transactions. There was an obligation to give, but there was also an obligation to receive and to repay, and from these various obligations a kind of social order emerged.’ (Hann, p.77)

‘The total prestation is quite distinct from an act of voluntary generosity...’

This idea of delayed, multi-level, exchanges, can be seen in all spheres of life in non-money economies, but it has not disappeared in ours. One example is in relation to religion. The central idea of sacrifice is that it is a communicative exchange, but not between humans, but between the human and spiritual world. Where I work in the Himalayas, if a person is sick or troubled, a cockerel is sacrificed. The blood is splattered on the shrine – a gift to the godlings which surround humans. The flesh of the cock is then eaten by the family, but the spirit or soul (plah) is given to the godlings. They are then under a strong obligation to repay by lifting the sickness, ensuring good harvests or whatever.

So you cannot force or buy godlings, just as you cannot force or buy other people in multi-stranded societies, but you can coerce them through gifts.

A central feature of gifts is destruction – the annihilation of the gift. You have given away, lost, destroyed something. A particular application of this can be seen in the competitive gift-giving which can be seen in the potlatch of the North Coast American Indians such as the Kwakiutl. There, famously, status competitions between rich kin groups take the form of destroying precious assets – jars of oil, precious woven objects etc, all thrown onto a fire. As each

object is destroyed, those on the other side lose status and are challenged to destroy an even greater amount. The obvious modern analogy is the huge, wasteful competition of the international arms race, particularly during the MAD period, but even today, with built in redundancy and national status competition.

Another element of the gift and its long-term nature is as a way of banking or storing valuable things. If a person gains a surplus at a point in time, there is no way in many societies to store the small surpluses since there are no banks, building societies, money or property market. In the future, however, they may need suddenly to call in their assets, for a wedding, funeral, in sickness or old age.

The best way to store things is to give away things – have a pig feast, a huge wedding, shower people with presents, endow a University or whatever. ‘Lay not up for yourselves treasure upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt’, but don’t go to the biblical extreme of laying up treasures in heaven – bank on and in other people. Invest in human beings by giving them gifts, which they will have to repay later.

This is the quintessence of family life, even in our society. Parents ‘give’ love, shelter, food, clothing etc. to their children over their first twenty years, in the hope that they can get this back later. In our society, as John Locke put it, ‘the honour due from a child places in the parents a perpetual right to respect, reverence, support, and compliance too, more or less, as the father’s fare, cost and kindness in his education has been more or less’ (Govt., 34) But of course, it seldom works out that the children pay this back directly. It is generalized exchange. They pay their taxes, which goes to support many other people’s parents, and they invest in their own children. If parents try to force love and support from their children, as of right, or even with direct bribes, it can go horribly wrong, as in the case of King Lear.

### **Barter and markets**

It is reported that even in the simplest HG societies there is usually some barter, that is not barter in the sense of haggling, but

rather of bartering or exchanging one thing for another. A forest HG may bring down some honey, or fruits, or animals and sit on the side of a village, or leave things in a clearing, and then, if something useful is put back, the exchange is done. The exchangers may not meet, and there may be no-one there, but people know the deal.

A little more developed are very specific, peripheral, markets. These often develop alongside other things, at a religious festival people may bring some goods and wait for buyers. The main characteristic of these markets is that they lie on the edge of peasant life and deal with peripheral things, not basic foodstuffs, but extremely useful things which may not be made in the village like baskets, pots, maybe salt, maybe long-distance traded items. The central economy is not marketized. But often what starts as an infrequent and marginal event, on a river crossing (Cambridge, Oxford) or place where people meet, turns into something settled and permanent. Towns become markets. Nevertheless, most production is directly for consumption and only surpluses and certain extras are marketed. It is not a market society, but a society with markets.

These market systems often form layers, as Skinner famously showed in China. There are small intermittent markets, linked to regional more permanent markets, and then central city markets. A hierarchy which is very delicate and like a network.

In many ways the closes we get to these kinds of peripheral markets in our society is the world of car boot sales, which I have only seen in passing, but looks at least on the surface very like this. Only a few people actually make a full-time living from car-boot sales, but many people make money on the side, plus enjoying the excitement and social contacts. They constantly exchange items, filling their garages with things, and then trading them on, going for a day here and there.

Somewhat different is a different marketing solution, the fair. Cambridge is an excellent place to talk of fairs as it is an ancient centre of what became one of the greatest fairs in western Europe, Sturbridge Fair. This was held every year for several months on the

meadows off the Newmarket Road north-east of Cambridge. Goods were brought from all over Britain, and even many parts of western Europe, and even Russia. Cheeses, animals, cloths, spices, metal goods all sorts of things were brought to this hub along the rivers ending up with the Ouse and the Cam. They were set out in streets of stalls, still remember in street names along that road 'Cheddar Row', 'Garlic Lane' etc. There was a special hospital – still there, and a special judicial court. Defoe describes it in a long piece in his Tour of England.

This was part of a great fair-based civilization, with famous fairs in Germany, France and elsewhere. It was only really killed off in the nineteenth century with the rise of the railways and of shops. This is one of the ironies:

*Markets and spheres of exchange* (Hann, pp.83-5)

Bohannon and Dalton in *Markets in Africa* distinguished between societies with 'peripheral markets' and societies where the 'market principle' was the dominant mode of economic integration.

They 'pointed to the apparent paradox that the rise of a capitalist *market principle* often spelled the decline of traditional forms of peasant *marketplace*' (cf. my films in China of this happening in market streets) 'The replacement of traditional street markets by new forms of chain store retailing is a product of the same tendency...'

And now the shops are being killed off by the rise of the all-purpose, one-stop, supermarket, which, ironically, may soon turn back into permanent fairs...

### **Market economies**

But what has this got to do with a 'market economy'? There is a link, but not homology. A 'market economy' is not to be confused with the physical market, as in Cambridge market. It is instead a mentality and morality, a type of integration in which the great transformation which Marx talked about has occurred. People basically orient their lives to exchange everything – their labour,

their skills, their personalities – as a primary obligation. They work for money first, which is then exchanged into what they want. Almost everything is translatable and purchasable. So when they have been paid in cash, rather than in kind, they use that money to obtain what they need. The change, in Marx's notation is from C (ommodities) – M (oney) – C, to M – C – M.

In the pre-market society market world, the market is a neutral zone in which economic activities can take place, rather like the bounded field of a football pitch in which other rules apply. Here almost purely economic exchanges, unclouded by the other strands of life, can take place. The physical market abides by market rules. If a priest, or landlord, or kinsman turns up, they should, ideally, be treated just like any other buyer or seller, and not given the wildly preferential treatment which would occur outside the market. Shops and stalls might have their special clients; kin may patronise a shop (as in Pokhara). But prices are prices. Trying to set up this neutral zone in a village is very difficult – as we found when we tried to set up a co-operative store in Thak which conspicuously failed because the shop-keepers could not say no to their impecunious neighbours.

The market here is an insulated area free from the embeddedness of life. But in the modern market-economy, almost all of life is conceived of in this way. Underpinned by the huge paraphernalia of the State, of the Law etc., it is possible to transact as a 'free individual', to make profit, lend at interest etc.

The difficulty of doing this in embedded societies is shown by the history of the Jewish ghetto. Because of the embeddedness of Catholic morality, the banking and marketing systems were greatly hampered – lending at interest for example, usury, was technically forbidden. So the Jews, who had sorted out their ethics to allow them to carry out such activities, were placed in a 'ghetto' where they took on them all the pollution and danger of acting as bankers etc. (cf. my film in Venice). Periodically they were massacred and the slates were wiped clean. Gradually this has broken down in a world of divisions.

Finally, what about the peculiar case of China. Here you have a nominally Communist system, with State control, some pressures against individualistic solutions yet the most rip-roaring capitalist system in the world. This is achieved by rigidly separating the political from the political (see some of my film). A similar sleight of hand was practiced in Islamic societies, in the great souks or bazaars of the middle East and India. For instance the Great Bazaar in Istanbul was one of the trading hubs of the world. The Arabs were great traders throughout the Indian ocean area. Their founder, a tradesman, had set them up with a system which allowed the subtle distinctions in ethics which encourages trade – even if often the religious and political system then made the profits made from trade vulnerable.

Finally there is the question of how the changes from gifts to barter to limited money, to full money have occurred. No-one really knows how this happened, or why it happened. Even the biggest transformation, that from ‘pre-capitalist’ to ‘capitalist’ is disputed. Polanyi thought it happened between 1750 and 1850, in England. Marx and Weber between 1450 and 1650 in England. E.P. Thompson and others the ‘long arch’ from 1200 to 1800. I believe there was never a revolutionary change, but a slow evolution from well before 1200. This obviously affects our views of what caused the shift.

What is certain is that if we examine our own lives, they are full of all the different forms of exchange, gifts, barter, limited purpose money, full money. Also, even in our capitalist world, the market is kept in check. There are wide swathes which we try to preserve against the flattening tendencies of the money – where money should not enter – love, art, games etc.

So we live in mixed worlds, but with a number of forms which have been glued on top of the gifts and exchanges of the Trobriands, including money, stock exchanges etc. The mixed forms of the Trobriands were as follows:

(Hann, p.53) Malinowski’s Argonauts:

Types of exchange:

*ginwali*, haggling (roughly similar to market exchange as people tried to do as well as they could)

*urigubu* seasonal giving of yams by a man to his sister's husband  
'Such transfers served to maintain marital alliances and enabled chiefs, who often had several wives, to accumulate yams for ostentatious storage and eventual distribution'

*kula* 'ring', 'through which Trobrianders were linked to a number of other islands, including mainland Papua, individuals exchanged shell necklaces (known as *soulava*), which could only be passed in a clockwise direction and armbands (known as *mwali*, which circulated counter clockwise).

'The *kula* rules left individuals with plenty of room to manoeuvre, determining the size and timing of their gift in order to gain as much prestige as possible.'

*kula* continues to flourish

'Its origins probably owe much to its political functions in the age when there were no effective states in this region. Without the 'umbrella' of security created by ceremonial *kula*, the simultaneous (but separate) organisation of utilitarian barter might have been too risky.'

And we are still moved by mixed motives, and not by the fully rational single-stranded profit maximization theories beloved of some economists.

### **Theory of development of market: the conventional view**

'The circulation of commodities is the starting point of capital. The modern history of capital dates from the creation in the C16 of a world-embracing commerce and a world-embracing market' (Marx, Capital, 1,145)



‘In England, the mere fact of the development of a market as such and alone, destroyed the manorial system from within...’ (Weber, Econ. Hist., 86)

Anderson, Lineages, 138-: in C16 the rise of a market economy and rise of wage labour

Polanyi: takes England’s history as the example of transformation from non-market to market economy in the C18

‘Market society was born in England... The nineteenth century, as cannot be overemphasized, was England’s century. The Industrial Revolution was an English event. Market economy, free trade, and the gold standard were English inventions’. (Polanyi, Transformation, 30)

Pre-conditions of modern ‘capitalism’ (according to Weber, Economic, 208)

- rational capital accounting, freedom of the market, rational technology, calculable law, free labour, commercialisation of economic life – thinks happens in C17

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An appendix on money: from Letters to Lily

### ***Why does money matter?***

‘Time is money’ is an old saying, showing the connection between two of our obsessions. What then is money, this strange thing which, like time, consumes much of our attention and dominates our lives to such an extent?

Money is a trick or a fiction; it is a symbol which has no intrinsic value. Gold, silver, jewels, bits of paper or cowrie shells are in themselves useless and valueless. Value is injected into them by humans. This explains why almost anything can be ‘used’ as money.

At school money was sometimes marbles, sometimes white mice, sometimes sweets. In many parts of Asia, tea blocks are still used as money. They are in many ways a good form of money since they can at least be boiled up and drunk in an emergency. In others, salt, pepper or spices are used, or precious incense. Elsewhere it is shells or stones. These items seem to have intrinsic value, not merely something injected into them.

Whatever form it takes, it turns into full-blown money when the object can simultaneously be a store and measure of value and an item of exchange.

### **Types of money (Hann, p.85) [take in my tea money]**

Dalton 'drew a clear distinction between 'general purpose money' and 'limited purpose money', the latter being more common in most forms of preindustrial economy.

The latter does not have all the functions, and technically deficient compared with coins and paper 'in terms of divisibility, portability and 'fungibility' (fungible - to take the place of, supply the office of: a sack of grain and a pile of coins may be 'fungible' as they have exactly the same value)

'For example, the Rossel Islanders had a sophisticated shell currency system, in which shells had numbers, with the higher number having the greater value. But the fact that it was not possible to convert a large quantity of low value shells for one of higher value meant that this money was lacking one of the fundamental features of a general purpose money.'

Bohannon on Nigerian Tiv in later colonial years. 'The Tiv used iron bars to facilitate the exchange of a range of luxury goods, including tobacco, cattle and slaves. However it was not considered appropriate to use this currency either for the purchase of subsistence goods or for the acquisition of wives'.

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Money stands for a relation of power over others. It is like oil in a machine, for it allows the parts to function without grinding

against each other. It is a translation device, a leveller, it makes objects in different spheres exchangeable. It allows us to create one commodity and then to exchange this for another. It has no morality, no inner essence, but it can enter almost all of our life.

We do try to protect specific areas with invisible signs 'No money here'. Certain beautiful things are beyond the reach of money. I cannot sell King's College Chapel, or even the hundredth part which I appear to own as a Fellow of the College. I cannot buy or sell true love or friendship. I cannot buy or sell truth or religious salvation, although the Catholic Church did at one time sell indulgences. I cannot buy part of the public park in the centre of Cambridge. I cannot buy a place in a cricket team, an orchestra or a chance to study at King's College if I have no talent.

Yet in much of our life, money holds us to ransom. It slips through our hands in a slithery way. The more we have, the more we seem to need. Few people admit to having too much and many have less than they need or want. Indeed much of our capitalist world is propelled by an apparently unavoidable shortage of money. This is created by the desire for the substance itself. It seems, as in many fairy stories, to turn into dust when it is touched.

In comparison with most of the world we are 'affluent' or rich in Britain. Our world is awash with the things that money can buy. Yet few of us feel satisfied. At the other extreme there are some simple societies where people wander about in forests and savannahs. They appear to have hardly anything at all, yet it is reported that they feel satisfied with their lives.

This paradox arises from the fact that satisfaction comes from the relation between means and ends, income and expenditure. This was immortally put by Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. 'Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery'.

Some simple hunting and gathering societies had a finite need for food and water, for shelter and clothing, and for leisure and

social relationships. There is more than enough of all of these; 'income' exceeds demand. We, on the other hand, often reach for the stars, have an open-ended demand and a deep craving for more and more.

Very soon we forget that what made us happy yesterday would not satisfy us for a moment today. I met a Chinese man in his thirties. He said that as a country boy all he wished for in life was one day to be rich enough to have boiled dumplings every morning like his city cousins. Now his daughter wants a Ph.D. from Peking University. The 'revolution of rising expectations' condemns many of us to eternal dissatisfaction. Buddhism calls understanding this the second Noble Truth.

Each choice we make is a minor deprivation. At the restaurant of life we can only gorge ourselves on a certain amount. If we choose the curry, there is sadness that the pizza or stew is untasted. The Romans made themselves vomit so that they could enjoy the taste of more food, but in the end even they were satiated and could not eat everything. We always want more. Happiness is seen as lying in some future bonus or better job.

Yet we are constantly brain-washed to think that money really exists, and that the more we have of it, the happier we will be. The whole capitalist consumption machine, would crash to the ground if we could not be persuaded to spend, spend, spend. The billboards, television advertisements, life styles of media and sporting heroes constantly shout 'Money, Money, Money' at us.

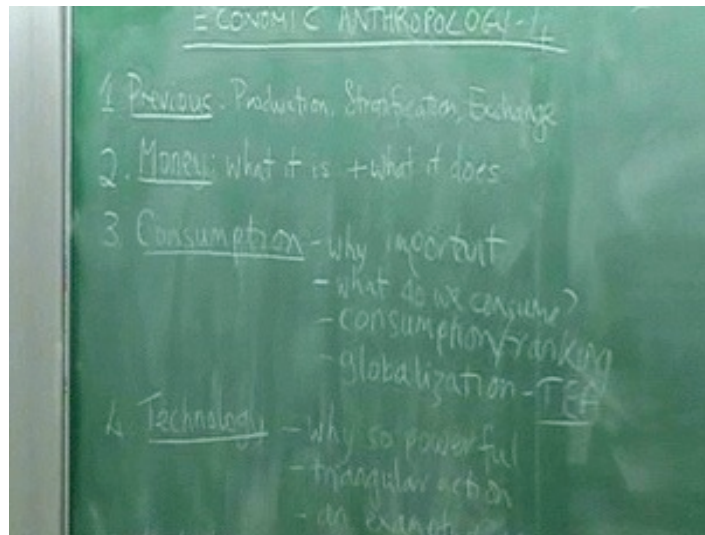
It is therefore sensible from time to time to stand back. We can try tasting a bit of money in our mouth. It tastes (unless it is tea or pepper) of nothing. Nor does it last. As the Irish philosophically put it, 'a shroud has no pockets'. That wise economist Adam Smith, pointed out that if we want to escape from the trap of anxiety and dependency on money, the thing to look at is not how to get more money, but how to spend less.

For though we can never earn enough to satisfy our ever-expanding cravings, through frugality we can learn the pleasure of being free from care. We certainly need sufficient money in the

present world and, as the comedian Woody Allen observed, 'Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.' We can also perhaps start to enjoy one of life's greatest delights, which is seeing how a little of the extra which we have saved can give relief and pleasure to others. For, as the philosopher Francis Bacon wrote, 'Money is like manure, not good unless it be spread'.

## 4. Consumption, technology and final overview

Some features of consumption, both why people consume and how their consumption shapes their world – with special reference to particular consumables. The effects of technology on our world, and how technological ‘progress’ occurs – the long curve of human technologies.



<http://downloads.sms.cam.ac.uk/1411620/1411625.m4v>

### Some readings

Hann, C., chapter 9; Sahlins, chapter 1

Mintz, S., *Sweetness and Power: the place of sugar in the modern economy* (1986)

Macfarlane, A and I., *Green Gold: the empire of tea* (2002)

Mokyr, J., *The Lever of Riches: technological creativity and economic power* (1986)

M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods; towards an anthropology of consumption* (1979)

D. Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption* (1995)

## NOTES FOR THE LECTURE

### **Some preliminary thoughts on consumptions and technology lecture**

Some things to cover.

We are what we consume; from problems of production to those of consumption.

Veblen's leisure class and the affluent society.

Ratio of production to consumption: Sahlins and tragedy.

The social life of things

Materialism.

Commodity histories – tea and glass and how they shaped the world

An overview of the history of technology. What technology is, and how it works (extensions of man). The Gerry triangle and the Gerry graph. The invention of the method of invention.

What has the anthropology of economy contributed?

- documentation of different systems
- embeddedness of economics in all societies, even our own though we live by a different myth
- a critique of capitalism and communism from outside

The previous lectures took us through the C18 (production), C19 (relations of production) and C20 (exchange) frameworks. This last lecture will take us briefly into the major framework of the end of the C20 and the C21. It is the current fashion.

I shall look at this in the first quarter of the lecture – approx 15 mins.

Then I shall look at the wider consumption theories about how desire and consumption affects the world as much as production. This is about 15 minutes, about half of which will be on the example of sugar (Mintz), the other half on tea (Macfarlane)

This leaves the second half of the lecture for two things.

The first half will be a very brief overview of the history and power of technologies. This again can consist of two parts

What technology is, the whole assembly of things that are encompassed in it, from spades to computers

What technology does, Gerry's graph and the idea of the triangle.

The last seven minutes could be summaries of the lectures, in particular to the ways in which people have thought of economics, from A. Smith to D. Miller.

N.B. consumption and the world of goods – show some film of contemporary streets and supermarkets in Shanghai and Beijing. Why like this?

Why do people desire things?

Joel on McDonald's, Alan on from HG to HG....

Perhaps something on consuming societies and saving societies (Weber thesis) and reasons for.

Perhaps write the Economics lectures rather like specialized, slightly higher level 'Letters2Lily', i.e. after 30 years teaching and wandering around the world, this is what I have found – am handing on to you...



Section on technological growth & inter-section with the world of goods. Glass and thought.

### **How does technology help?**

What is special about human beings is that, more than other animals, they can transfer what they learn from their individual brains to the external world. They can store and transmit ideas through an elaborate cultural system. This makes knowledge grow quickly. This essential skill of human beings, their 'culture' can be either immaterial (language, songs, myths, traditions) or material (writing, physical tools, rituals and ways of working). Part of this vast realm, which is most dramatically changing your life, is the effect of technology.

One way in which technology alters our world is through the storage and expansion of ideas. New ideas become embedded in tools, which then, in turn, help us to think better. It is a triangular movement.

There is an increase in theoretical understanding, reliable knowledge about the world. This first point of the triangle is vital. The repeatable and dependable information about how the world works is almost always obtained through disinterested research. This is then sometimes embedded in improved or new physical artefacts or tools, the second point on the triangle. These artefacts, if they are useful and in demand and relatively easy to produce are disseminated in huge quantities. This multiplication of objects and their mass dissemination is the third point of the triangle. This then changes the conditions of life and may well feed back into the possibilities of further theoretical exploration.

This triangular movement has occurred in many spheres of life. The speed of moving round this triangle and its repetition lie behind much of what we describe as human development.

It is a general principle that as each piece of reliable knowledge is added it leads to the possibility of doing dozens of new things. Just as adding a wheel to a 'meccano' or other construction set transforms the potentials of all the previous pieces, so it is with

many technologies, including wheels, printing, clocks, glass, photography and computing.

Unless something gets in the way of this process, reliable knowledge about the world and effective action to improve life should expand ever faster. This has been the story of the vast growth of the last three hundred years. Human understanding and control of nature have grown amazingly.

### **What did glass do?**

Glass has changed the world. That it has done so appears to be the result of a giant accident, the fortuitous side product of other developments. The history of glass shows the way in which many of the increases in human knowledge through technology are the result of the unintended consequences of something else. It also shows that once the process of putting increased knowledge into artefacts becomes a conscious aim, it can lead to very rapid and impressive developments. It is an excellent illustration of the triangle of knowledge, leading through new artefacts and back to further knowledge by way of the multiplication of new tools. It also illustrates the meccano effect because glass itself has not just been one added resource for humans, but allowed changes in so many other technologies.

It began to be obvious to Islamic scholars from the ninth century, and to western European thinkers from the twelfth, that glass was more than just a marvellous substance for holding cool liquid and enhancing its beauty. It let in light but not cold. It could be manipulated to alter vision.

The idea of examining microscopic objects through glass and of bending and testing the properties of light was present from at least the ninth century. As the knowledge about the nature of light and of the chemistry of glass improved, so the tools of glass also improved. The most dramatic impact of this occurred at the end of the sixteenth century.

There is still a mystery about how people happened on the idea that by placing two suitably shaped pieces of glass near to each other

it would be possible to see faraway things, or very tiny objects. Both the telescope and the microscope seem to have been developed in the Netherlands around the start of the seventeenth century and were obviously related to the making of spectacle lenses.

Without the telescope Galileo could not have developed and proved his fundamental theories. Without the microscope, the world of bacteria would never have been discovered. The developments had other side-effects, on optics, on the discovery of the vacuum, which was only made possible with a large glass flask within which a vacuum could be created and observed.

Because glass is an inert substance, which is not corroded easily, and it is possible to see through, it became essential to the progress of chemistry using glass retorts, flasks, thermometers and barometers. Nowadays almost all scientific disciplines depend on glass, not to mention almost all transport systems, electricity, watches, televisions and much of what makes our civilization work. Our lives have been transformed. Look around you and you will see how glass is everywhere.

At a more fundamental level it is arguable that without glass the philosophical and emotional bases of both the Renaissance and modern scientific thought would not have been established. Sight is humankind's strongest sense. By providing new tools with which to see an invisible world of tiny creatures, or to contemplate distant stars invisible to the naked eye, glass not only made possible particular scientific discoveries, but led to a growing confidence in a world of deeper truths to be discovered.

It became clear that, with this key, people could unlock secret treasures of knowledge, see below and above the surface of things, destabilize conventional views. The obvious was no longer necessarily true. The hidden connections and buried forces could be penetrated.

It is also clear that the spread and improvement of glass technologies through Europe from the fourteenth century had profound effects on mathematics and geometry, and hence on perspective and art. So glass is a perfect example of the movement round a triangle. There is some new knowledge, then some new

artefacts, and finally the mass dissemination of these artefacts which can lead back into further new knowledge.

### **Does technology always help?**

Good glass-making techniques, including the blowing of glass, were known in China and Japan almost as early as in the west. Yet in those two countries there was little use for the substance. The major drink was hot water or boiled tea. For drinking tea, the excellent pottery and porcelain manufacture provided a perfect set of containers, from the humblest beaker to the most precious tea-bowl. Thus there was little market for glass containers which were much more fragile. In Europe glass was particularly developed in order to satisfy the demand for wine goblets.

Glass making was developed in the cold northern part of Europe for letting in light but not wind. Some of the earlier glass could only be afforded by rich religious institutions and this was often partly decorative, stained to the amazing colours we can still see in Chartres Cathedral or King's College Chapel in Cambridge. The use of glass for ordinary windows spread rapidly in the sixteenth century, particularly in the wealthier houses of northern countries.

In China and Japan, however, window glass was not developed because it was not desirable. In Japan, the frequent earthquakes would have shattered the glass. The buildings made of bamboo and wood would not have been suited to glass windows. There was the presence of an excellent and much cheaper alternative, mulberry paper, which could be made into movable walls. All these combined to make window glass unattractive. Furthermore, here and elsewhere, glass making requires kilns fired to a very high temperature where the glass is kept continuously molten. It is very fuel intensive so can only be made in areas of thin population and thick forests. China and Japan seldom met these conditions.

Another use of glass is most directly linked to the tools of thought, that is its use for spectacles. It is one of the ironies of life that just as many reach the peak of knowledge, in the mid forties and fifties, they find it impossible to continue reading. They have to hold a book at such a distance away from their eyes that they cannot

distinguish the characters. This was a serious drawback up to the fifteenth century, especially for bureaucracies and institutions where the most skilled in literacy and accounting could no longer read. It became an even more serious disability after the printing revolution made books for scholarship or private enjoyment widely available.

It is exactly around the time of the printing revolution that the making of spectacles developed rapidly. The increase in knowledge arising from this development was enormous, lengthening the intellectual life of some of the best trained minds.

### **Section on tea: the effects of consumption.**

(\writing\tea-ecology)

[Draft of article to be published in the *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History*, Berkshire/Routledge, 2003]

Human beings consume more tea than any other substance except air and water. It is the most important medical plant on this planet and its effects have been enormous. There are several varieties of tea, but they all derive from a species of camellia (**camellia sinensis**). Green and black tea are from similar leaves but are processed in different ways. The tea bush originated in the area where India, China and Burma meet, in the hot wet mountainous regions of the Eastern Himalayas. It was originally eaten and drunk by tribal groups in this area. Over two thousand years ago it was used as a medicine and aid to concentration in China, being helped by the expansion of Buddhism. By the eighth century it was very widely drunk through most of China. In the thirteenth century it spread to Japan and by the fifteenth century had become a central part of Japanese life, particularly in the tea ceremony. During the same period it spread through central Asia. As 'brick tea' (compacted lumps) it became the most important trading object and absolute necessity in the form of 'brick tea' to the Tibetans, Mongolians and Manchurians.

Rumours of tea reached the west in the sixteenth century, but it only began to be imported in any quantity from the middle of the seventeenth century. Its importation took off from the 1720s when

the direct clipper trade to China was established by the Dutch and British. While it had early success in much of north western Europe, it was in Britain that it became the central drink. By the later eighteenth century it was drunk throughout this Britain and by all social groups. It was drunk both in the home and in tea houses and gardens. As the British Empire grew it was re-exported and became the favourite drink of the white Empire, though after the Boston Tea Party (1773) when tea chests were thrown into the harbour as a protest against taxes, there was a diminished trade from Britain to the United States. India itself only took to tea drinking when it was introduced by the British in the first half of the twentieth century. The growth of tea drinking continued so that by the late twentieth century it was the main drink of the inhabitants of the three quarters of the globe who live in East Asia, the former British Empire, Russia and much of the middle east.

Tea originally grew wild. When it was domesticated it was grown as a peasant product. The manual labour was intensive and based on the family. The leaves were picked, dried, rolled and crushed. Failures to introduce the bush into the west led the Dutch (in Java) and the British (in Assam and then Sri Lanka) to experiment with tea production. By the later nineteenth century the application of industrial methods, capitalistic funding and rigid discipline had created the tea plantation system. Huge profits were made by the British and Dutch. The labourers on the tea estates suffered enormously, with horrendous conditions and very high mortality rates. Yet the system was so efficient that it undercut the Chinese production and destroyed the Chinese export trade in tea by 1900. In fact, China had already been weakened by the Opium Wars of the 1840s which had also been linked to the British desire for tea, which they had increasingly only been able to purchase by selling opium to the Chinese.

\*

Much of Chinese and Japanese life has been influenced by tea drinking, most famously in the aesthetics and ritual of the ornate tea ceremonies with their effects on ceramics, furniture, architecture, gardening and literature. Similarly in the west, the introduction of tea gave a great boost to the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, in particular the development of pottery

and porcelain, furniture and tableware. Through the development of tea gardens in the west, tea drinking encouraged new forms of sociality which stimulated music, literature and garden design. It also added greatly to the influence of oriental civilizations on European cultures in the eighteenth century.

Tea has altered the relations of social classes, gender relations, relations within the family. For example, it gave a new role to women as tea mistresses and encouraged family meetings over the tea. It changed the patterns of eating, altering the nature of breakfast, allowing the evening meal to be later. It encouraged the growth of clubs and social recreations outside the home. It led to the elaboration of a great deal of social ritual around the serving of tea.

The trade in tea created the first large scale global market, and the promotion of tea in the west was the first example of modern consumer marketing. It made the fortunes of Dutch and British merchants and in particular the East India Company so that, ironically, without Chinese tea it is doubtful whether the British would have absorbed India into its Empire. The extra energy supplied by tea with sugar and milk helped sustain the enormous effort needed to create the first industrial revolution in Britain between 1750 and 1850. In Asia the effects were no less great, for tea provided the energy needed for the gruelling work of intensive wet rice cultivation in China and Japan.

Tea was originally recommended for its effects on health. It is known to contain substances (polyphenols, caffeine) which kill water-borne bacteria, which supplements the fact that it encourages the boiling of water. So it has had a massive effect on dysentery, typhoid and other water borne diseases. It has recently been suggested that it also has beneficial effects on many other disease. Various cancers, heart attacks, strokes, muscular problems, tooth decay, influenza are just a few of dozens of conditions which are currently being investigated in relation to tea.

If we add up these and other effects hardly touched on here, for instance on politics and religion, it is not difficult to argue that this apparently small and insignificant plant has had more impact

on human happiness and misery than any other on this planet. In turn its cultivation changed the ecology of the considerable areas of Asia, Africa and South America where it was grown.

### *Final overview*

The real problem of economic anthropology is that there is no such thing. The first lesson of anthropology is that the division out of spheres, 'the economy' as an instituted process, 'religion' as separate etc., is a very recent, modern, and implausible myth. Even the distinction between 'things' and 'humans' is evaporating as we hear about 'the social life of things', and blend things together after the gross mechanistic materialism of the Cartesian separation.

This is one of the primary findings of looking at human history and trying to fit it into an 'economic' box. The gross distortions of the capitalist (and communist) way of looking at things becomes obvious. Even in the most advanced supposedly rational economies in the world, much of our activities is muddled – anyone watching people making money or on the floor of the stock exchange could soon see that something is going on which is much more than about making money.

But certainly looking at the world as a whole, it does become clear how skewed our lives have become. Every system needs a basic infrastructure; in most it is kinship, in some it is religion, in a few politics. Ours really has no infrastructure, or, if there is one, it is money and markets.

This infrastructure shapes our lives. We are all caught in a world where we know the price of everything, and the value of very little. Where our desires are constantly being excited, and where the satisfactions are never to be found.

In some ways this is what Max Weber was about. His famous Protestant Ethic thesis is about the construction of an unbounded, open, restless, anxious, never to be satisfied world. At the heart of it, of course, was the famous paradox. In the closed worlds in most societies, either you were predestined to heaven and hell, or you



could buy your way there. Yours status was roughly fixed at birth, ascribed rather than achieved.

Weber's attempt was to try to understand how the open world of the C16 and C17 grew out of this. By pronouncing that people were damned or saved, that salvation by works was impossible, the Calvinists had the opposite effects of what one might expect. In order to prove one's salvation, one saved and acted prudently and modestly. One ordered time and social relationships, one separated spheres. One became 'reasonable' in all one's life. So, for the first time in history, people lived below their means – and saved a great deal. They also developed 'rational' (i.e. labour saving) technologies.

Although anyone can pick holes in Weber, he does seem to show something odd about the world that we now inhabit. We can never have enough, we are never certain that we have arrived, we constantly seek to prove something. Bill Gates after the first hundred million does not retire. We do have a leisure class and untold affluence, but we also strive constantly. And we are caught in the Sahlins paradox that HG. Live in affluence, and we live in poverty.

Another thing which I think economic anthropology does in terms of putting up a mirror to our selves is to show how much of our behaviour is still mixed. Much of our lives – friendship, family, sport, leisure, gardening, love, art, all sorts of things which we most relish may depend on 'the material base', but in the end we try to exclude money from them. We try to keep out the levelling and deadening effects of money which Simmel so brilliantly illustrated.

Added quotes:

A central contradiction of our world: capitalism demanded a Protestant ethic in the area of product – but pleasure and play in consumption (Bell, Contradictions, 75)

'The cultural transformation of modern society is due, singularly to the rise of mass consumption' (Bell, Contradictions, 65)

Consumption – not limited to objects, but also of people and relationships (Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 81)

‘Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production’  
(Smith, *Wealth*, 2, 179)

‘Publicity throws consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice’ (Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 149)

‘Classes’ are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas ‘status groups’ are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special ‘styles of life’ (From Max Weber, 193)

Prestige accumulates in (peasant) society through consumption of wealth (Firth Seminar)

Predatory warfare – the root of modern conspicuous consumption in Veblen’s scheme (*Leisure Class*, 30ff)

Veblen agrees that desire for conspicuous consumption ‘is probably the most effectual of the Malthusian providential checks’ (*Leisure Class*, 87)

### ***Consumption: some general observations***

#### ***Why is it important?***

‘Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production’  
(Smith, *Wealth*, 2, 179)

‘The cultural transformation of modern society is due, singularly to the rise of mass consumption’ (Bell, *Contradictions*, 65)

‘Publicity throws consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice’ (Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 149)

What do we consume?

Hann, p. 101: 'Consumption is not to be confused with consumerism, with distinctively modern attitudes to goods that approximate the economist's assumption of 'unlimited wants'.

'some anthropologists expand the definition of consumption to include the time spent singing and dancing, or praying, or watching television' - so, as wide as culture itself.

Consumption - not limited to objects, but also of people and relationships (Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 81)

p.107: 'if consumption is to be defined in terms of the pleasurable realisation of identity, then in our kind of society we should recognise that work must, for some lucky people, be seen as a consumption good.'

### **Consumption, status and class**

'Classes' are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas 'status groups' are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special 'styles of life' (From Max Weber, 193)

We are moving back from class to status groups?

China as a good example of both egalitarian and hierarchical forms of consumption:

The traditional high consumption of the Court and Mandarins: then the 'cultural revolution' and the radical egalitarianism which was extended to everything, even work (intellectuals in the countryside). 'To enforce equality in consumption, everyone wore the same style of clothes and ate the same food.' (an unmitigated disaster).

hierarchical societies usually attempt to have 'sumptuary laws', you must consume certain things and not others.

Now back to a world of goods.

(Hann, p.104) Douglas, World of Goods,

three 'consumption classes', the lowest spent a high proportion of income on foodstuffs etc. In the middle was 'a consumption class of people for whom status competition through the acquisition of relatively expensive consumer durables was a major preoccupation. The highest...was that comprising people for whom time and information were the most precious commodities. - cf. Bourdieu on *Distinction* (in relation to education)

### **Globalisation and consumption:**

One anthropological contribution: 'how an apparently uniform capitalist mode of production always undergoes local modifications' (e.g. consumption of Coca-Cola)

The globalisation of stimulants - tea, coffee, sugar.

Mintz on sugar: (p.108-9) Mintz showed 'how the demand for sugar in European societies was influenced by the new industrial systems of production in Europe. Meeting the demand had far-reaching consequences for production systems in the Caribbean... and also in Africa, where most of the slave labour for the sugar plantations was recruited.'  
(cf. Jack on Flowers and Cooking as well)

A worked case: we are what we consume: tea and its influence.

## SOME DEFINITIONS AND TECHNICAL TERMS

(Compiled by Alan Macfarlane: for private use of students. If you would like a full version covering all of anthropology, please see [www.alanmacfarlane.com](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com) under 'Lectures'. The full definitions can be printed out. The sources for these definitions in various textbooks is given there.)

**Band:** Basic social unit in many foraging populations. Normally includes one hundred or fewer people, all related by kinship or marriage.

**Barter:** direct exchange of items, without the intervention of money.

**Big Man:** Figure often found among tribal horticulturalists and pastoralists. The big man occupies no office but creates his own reputation through entrepreneurial expertise and generosity to others. Neither his wealth nor his position passes to his heirs.

**Caste:** (1) In Indian subcontinent, an endogamous social group incorporated within the stratified hierarchy of Hindu ideology. Some sociologists would apply more generally to endogamous, ranked social classes. (2) Caste system: a hierarchical system of groups with differential access to prestige and economic resources; in such a system, an individual's position in society is completely determined at birth.

**Corporate Group:** (1) A social group whose members act as a legal individual in terms of collective rights to property, a common group name, collective responsibility, etc. (2) Groups that exist in perpetuity and manage a common estate. Includes some descent groups and modern industrial corporations.

**Cultural ecology:** the study of the way people use their culture to adapt to particular environments, the effects they have on their natural surroundings, and the impact of the environment on the shape of culture.

**Division of labour:** the technical and social manner in which work is organized in a society.

**Domestic Group:** A social group occupying or centred in a dwelling house, living (and usually eating) together, and characteristically exercising corporate control over family property.

**Domestic Mode of Production:** Term used by Sahlins and Meillassoux about economic systems where the bulk of production takes place within the domestic family.

**Domestication:** process by which people control the distribution, abundance, and biological features of certain plants and animals, in order to increase their usefulness to humans.

**Ecology:** the study of plant and animal populations and communities and their relationships with one another and with their environment.

**Fallow:** The period or process whereby the fertility of soil is regenerated after a crop has been harvested.

**Forces of Production:** The technology and physical resources used in production (viewed, in Marxist theory, as comprising, along with *social relations of production* (q.v.), the economic base of a society.)

**Generalized reciprocity:** (1) gift giving without any immediate return or conscious thought of return. (2) Principle that characterizes exchanges between closely related individuals; as social distance increases reciprocity becomes *balanced* and, finally, *negative*.

**Globalization:** tendency towards homogeneity and uniformity across the world (e.g. McDonald's, Coke etc.)

**Horticulture:** Cultivation of crops using hand tools (e.g., digging stick or hoe).

**Hunter-Gatherers:** Human populations that rely in subsistence exclusively (or almost exclusively) on wild foods, hunted and collected. Some modern hunter-gatherers receive subsistence food from governments or missions or do minimal cultivating.

**Kula ring:** a ceremonial exchange of valued shell ornaments in the Trobriand Islands, in which white shell armbands are traded around the islands in a counter clockwise direction and red shell necklaces are traded in a clockwise direction.

**Lineage:** descent group based on demonstrated descent.

**Market:** The abstract relationship of supply and demand in the buying and selling processes of a money economy.

**Marketplace:** A physical setting within which buying and selling (and barter) take place.

**Maximization:** A theoretical assumption that individuals (or groups or firms) will make decisions rationally in such a way as to achieve maximum reward (whether in money, power, etc.); an

assumption underlying classical and neoclassical economics and formalist economic anthropology.

**Means of Production:** In Marxist analysis, the resources used in the process of production (tools, land, technological knowledge, rare material, etc.); *Social Classes* are defined with reference to their differential relationship to the means of production (e.g. owners vs. wage labourers).

**Mode of Production:** In Marxist theory, a complex of productive relationships: e.g., *capitalist*, entailing relationships between wage labours and employers; or *feudal*, entailing relationships between serf and lords, etc. two or more modes of production may coexist within the same society (in Marxist theory, a *social formation*).

**Money** (general purpose): Currency that functions as a means of exchange, a standard of value, and a means of payment; opposed to special-purpose money (e.g. tea or cowrie shells)

**Neolithic:** “New Stone Age”: the level of technology, marked by food producing and the use of ground and polished stone tools, characteristic of much of the “tribal” world before the advent of colonialism.

**Nomadism:** A mode of life based on the shifting of population to move with livestock (in accordance with needs for pasturage).

**Palaeolithic:** “Old Stone Age”: the vast period marked by chipped and flaked stone tool industries.

**Pastoralism:** A mode of life where herding (of cattle, sheep, camels, goats, horses, etc.) provides the major subsistence.

**Peasant:** A member of an agrarian social class or estate whose productive labour supports an elite (characteristically urban) as well as providing for subsistence.

**Potlatch:** A feast marked by distribution and destruction of valuables, as a demonstration of wealth and status, characteristic of the Kwakiutl and some other Northwest Coast Indians.

**Rank society:** a society having no socially structured unequal access to economic resources, but having socially structured unequal access to status positions and prestige.

**Rationality:** (1) the tendency to justify or explain actions by emphasizing their efficient contribution to ends. (2) Max Weber classified social action as (a) instrumentally rational, where object and persons are used as relatively efficient instruments or means for attaining one’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends; (b)

value-rational, where an end is pursued for its own sake, regardless of its prospect of success (c) affectual, determined by emotion, (d) traditional, determined by ingrained habit.

**Reciprocity:** A mode of exchange marked by continuing obligation to reciprocate particularly in kind: governs exchange among equals.

**Redistribution:** Major exchange mode of chiefdoms, many archaic states, and states with managed economies.

**Relations of Production:** In Marxist theory, the social relationships through which production (and distribution and consumption) are organized in a society (relations of production and *forces of production*. q.v. together define a *mode of production*, q.v.)

**Slash and burn:** Form of extensive horticulture in which the forest cover of a plot is cut down and burned before planting to allow the ashes to fertilize the soil.

**Social Class:** A division of society, defined in terms of its relationship to the means of production, within a system of such classes, hierarchically ordered, and marked by a consciousness of their collective identity and interests.

**Social mobility:** the process of changing status in a system of stratification

**Social Stratification:** Division of society in terms of inequality; differential ranking or status of social groups, classes, or categories.

**Swidden:** See “Slash-and-burn”.

**Technology:** (1) ‘traditional effective action’ (Mauss). (2) the skills and knowledge by which people make things

**Transhumance:** Seasonal movement of nomadic peoples according to the availability of pasturage.

**Tribe:** (1) Form of socio-political organization generally based on horticulture or pastoralism, more rarely on foraging or agriculture. Socio-economic stratification and centralized rule are absent in tribes, and there is no means of enforcing political decisions. (2) A small-scale society characterized by a distinctive language and culture with a political identity but not central, hierarchical institutions.

**Urbanization:** The movement of rural or small-town populations into cities, the growth of cities.

**Wealth:** objects or resources that are useful or that have exchange value.




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