The Anthropology of the Economy: Community, Market, Culture. (Book Reviews)

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Main content

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In the 1960s the young Gudeman, armed with the latest neo-classical economic theories in decision theory and game theory and some anthropology, set off to study a small village in rural Panama. His first encounter with a farmer who grew rice and maize for household consumption presented him with a dilemma: how could his activity of burning the earth and planting seed with a stick be illuminated by a super-abstract game theoretic approach? Something had to give. Gudeman, to his credit, abandoned the theory and began a long quest to reconceptualise the economy in an anthropologically informed way. This book is the product of that long march, one that has passed many significant milestones.

His first milestone was to find a theoretical framework to make sense of his fieldwork. He found this in the Latin American dependency theory which he modified in the light of his reading of the Marxian and neo-Ricardian economic literature. After the publication of his first book, The Demise of a Rural Economy (1978), he posed himself the question: What is cultural economics? This led him to the library where he worked his way through the classics in the history of economic thought. The third milestone was passed when he returned to the field, this time in Columbia, with a colleague, Alberto Rivera, and published Conversations in Columbia (1990), a study of local language and practices. The final milestone is the book under review, a synthesis of almost forty years of research, teaching and thinking about the concept of the economy as it manifests itself in today's globalised world.

While the book obviously reflects his experiences of working in Latin America, the aim is to construct an historically and anthropologically informed conception of the economy. His does this by literally sketching a model and illustrating...

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