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# *Oikos* and Surplus: The Search for an Anthropological Economics

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, building on recent contributions from Cesaratto and Di Buccianico, explores the possibilities offered by an ‘anthropological economics’. De L’Estoile has highlighted economic anthropology’s problematic tendency to self-define in opposition to the study of ‘modern’ economy, and the risks of depoliticisation engendered by a reliance on the category of the ‘economic’. As an alternative, he proposes an anthropology of *oikonomia* — the practices and imaginaries through which people ‘govern the house’ (*oikos*), and strive for a ‘good life’. But does grappling with *oikonomia* require moving beyond the ‘economic’ altogether? An ‘anthropological economics’ approach may provide a pathway through these problems. Synthesising elements of substantivism and the classical surplus approach, ‘anthropological economics’ aims to illuminate the ways in which political, social and moral practices and ideas shape distribution. At its heart, then, is an inquiry into the relationship of *oikonomia* and production — of *oikos* and surplus. For illustration, the paper considers applications of an anthropological economics approach to two important topics: capitalist penetration in (post)colonial contexts, and crises of social reproduction in post-industrial societies. It concludes by considering the relevance of anthropological economics to the broader struggle for a ‘human economy’, directed towards human wellbeing rather than merely material abundance.

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## 1. Introduction

How to get beyond *homo economicus*? How to do greater justice to the wide range of meanings and motivations which underpin economic life in different places? These well-worn questions, familiar to many ‘heterodox’ critics of neoclassical economics, have exercised anthropologists since the early 20th century. One result has been the vibrant subfield of economic anthropology. From Malinowski’s (1922) and Mauss’ (1990) analyses of gift exchange, to Polanyi’s theory of ‘embeddedness’ (2001) and Graeber’s accounts of debt (2011) and ‘bullshit jobs’ (2018), economic anthropology

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has provided influential ripostes to marginalist shibboleths around the functioning of markets and ‘utility maximisation’ for over a century. While the impact of these contributions within the economic mainstream may have been limited, they have been widely influential among heterodox thinkers and other social science traditions.

Notwithstanding its undeniable fecundity, however, nor its renewed appeal in the post-2008 world, economic anthropology has recently been the object of an important and far reaching critique. In a thoughtful series of contributions, Benoît de L’Estoile has called attention to a number of persistent analytical problems in the economic anthropology tradition (de L’Estoile 2014, 2024). Notably, he has emphasised the problematic habit of implicit self-definition by opposition to the study of the ‘modern’ (capitalist) economy, and the risk of depoliticisation inherent in conceptually distinguishing the ‘economic’ from social or political institutions. In place of an ‘economic anthropology’ blithely adopting conventional economic categories, de L’Estoile proposes an anthropology of *oikonomia* — the practices and imaginaries through which people ‘govern the house’ (*oikos*), and strive for a ‘good life’.

Close attention to *oikonomia* does indeed seem crucial to achieving a richer understanding of economic life than mainstream economics can afford. But does grappling with *oikonomia* require moving beyond the ‘economic’ altogether? In this paper, building on the thoughtful recent contributions of Cesaratto and Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, I explore the potential pathway through these dilemmas which may be offered by a different approach: namely, an anthropological economics. A dialectical synthesis of substantivist economic anthropology and the surplus approach in political economy (in particular in its Sraffian interpretation), anthropological economics scrutinises the relationship of *oikonomia* to the production process. Building on the core Sraffian insight that the ultimate determinants of distribution are institutional rather than purely ‘economic’, it aims to throw light on the ways in which political, social and moral practices and ideas shape the distribution of the surplus.

I start by offering, in Section Two, an account of de L’Estoile’s important critique of economic anthropology, and his proposed alternative of an anthropology of *oikonomia*. In Section Three, I discuss the anthropological economic approach emerging from the contributions of Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, (as well as precursors including Bharadwaj, Sahlins, Gudeman and Gregory), considering its potential to resolve issues raised by de L’Estoile’s critique. Finally, in Sections Four and Five, I explore the possibilities of anthropological economics ‘in practice’, considering its application to a range of ethnographic cases. Specifically, I consider its analytical possibilities in exploring two contrasting types of setting: on the one hand, colonial and post-colonial contexts of ‘capitalist penetration’, and on the other, post-industrial societies ridden with welfare-state retrenchment and ‘crises’ around social reproduction. In the conclusion, I draw together these threads, and briefly consider the wider implications of an anthropological economics — in particular, its relationship to political aspirations for a ‘human economy’.

## 2. Anthropology Beyond the Economic?

Following a certain decline in the 1990s and 2000s, the last fifteen years have seen a marked revival of interest in economic anthropology. As is best exemplified in the work of David Graeber (2011, 2021), the global financial crisis of 2008 drew renewed

anthropological attention to the inadequacies not only of dominant economic models, but of the mainstream economics which failed to predict it. While stimulating inquiry into topical issues such as austerity and financialisation, however, this debate has also revived fraught theoretical questions about exactly how anthropologists should conceptualise and engage with economics and the economy.

One of the most important and far-reaching responses to this set of questions has been offered by de L'Estoile, who has called for anthropology to emancipate itself from the category of the 'economic' altogether. Economic anthropology, he notes, has 'greatly enlarged our vision', by showing that real world 'economic practices' are underpinned by a set of logics far more pluralistic and complex than neoclassical economists would suggest (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63). However, insofar as these analyses have been pursued under the banner of 'economic anthropology', he argues, they have remained a 'counter discourse', imprisoned in the very paradigm which they ostensibly critique.

De L'Estoile traces the limitations of economic anthropology back to Malinowski's programmatic call for a 'primitive economics' (Malinowski 1921). He notes in particular two problematic tendencies. Firstly, Malinowski accepts that 'economics is the apposite science to analyse (Western) "national economies"', proposing 'primitive economics' merely as its necessary counterpart for the study of 'Tribal Economy' (de L'Estoile 2024, p. 163). Secondly, while Malinowski points to the inadequacy of mainstream economic wisdom with regard to non-western societies, emphasising that that 'primitive economics are not by any means the simple matter we are generally led to suppose' (Malinowski 1921, p. 15), he nonetheless organises his analysis around familiar economic categories such as production, consumption, and exchange.

These tendencies then, de L'Estoile suggests, are present in the DNA of economic anthropology, and have never gone away. Like Malinowski, de L'Estoile argues, Polanyi's substantivism takes as its object modern economy's 'Other' — that is to say, economic practices taking place outside of, or at the margins of, modern market economies (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63). Just as Malinowski offered 'primitive economics' as a necessary alternative to neoclassical economics for the study of non-western societies, Polanyi's substantivist definition of the economy (as an 'instituted' process of human provisioning) is offered as an alternative to the 'formalist' definition (rational decision making under conditions of scarcity). However, de L'Estoile notes, even Polanyi's alternative definition continues to take for granted the existence of 'the economic' as a separate sphere of reality, which, however central 'in our contemporary world', is actually a contingent (and indeed relatively recent) 'ontological tenet' (Mitchell 2002, p. 4; de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63). Even when the economic is conceptualised as 'embedded' in or 'entangled' with the social or political, it is still assumed to be 'logically distinct' from these other 'spheres' (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63). The consequence, he argues, is to 'desocialize and depoliticize' the 'economic', thus narrowing the range of questions we may ask about it (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s71).

To find a way out of these problems, de L'Estoile proposes an alternative to economic anthropology: namely, an anthropology of *oikonomia* (οικονομία). This Aristotelian concept, which provides the etymological root for 'economy', is itself derived from the ancient Greek word *oikos* (οἶκος), meaning house, home, family or estate. While Polanyi glosses *oikonomia* as 'householding' (Polanyi 2001, pp. 55–56), and famously enlists it in his project of a 'substantivist anthropology focused on humans' 'interchange

with [their] natural and social environment' in order to meet their 'material' needs (Polanyi 1957, p. 243), de L'Estoile notes that Aristotle originally coined this term 'to refer to domestic rule of the *oikos* ... by contrast with the *politiké*, civic government' (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63). For de L'Estoile then, the concept of *oikonomia* would be better translated as the 'government of the household', which brings its 'political ... dimension to the fore'. It is through close attention to everyday local practices and ideals of *oikonomia*, de L'Estoile proposes, that anthropology can overcome the limiting frame of the 'economic', with its artificial exclusion of the moral and political.

By way of illustration, de L'Estoile considers a number of episodes drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, among which the most striking relate to his encounters with 'Dona Maria', the beneficiary of a land reform programme in the sugarcane region of Pernambuco. While she inhabits a state-owned settlement, situated on a state-expropriated plantation, Dona Maria's everyday utterances and householding practices constantly emphasise her status as 'master' (*dona*) of her own domain. As she asserts, "the house is mine, I am the one who rules (*manda*) here" (de L'Estoile 2024, p. 168). She underlines the 'temporal autonomy' that she enjoys in the home, repeating that "I do what I want at the time I want" (de L'Estoile 2024, p. 169). De L'Estoile links these assertions with a widespread preoccupation among land-reform recipients with 'autonomy' and the 'freedom' to rule oneself, values which hold particular significance in a region shaped historically by the experiences of slavery and more recently by the exploitative plantation system. Close attention to *oikonomia* thus illuminates a 'political and moral dimension' of the experience of land reform which, de L'Estoile notes, would be obscured by a purely 'economic framing' (de L'Estoile 2024, p. 171).

De L'Estoile's intervention is an important contribution to anthropological engagement with economic life, opening up areas of inquiry well beyond those conventionally associated with 'economic' categories of production, consumption and exchange. It simultaneously raises an important question. The ethnographic study of the *oikos* offers rich insights into the imaginaries and practises through which people seek to realise a 'good life' in conditions of 'structural uncertainty' (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s72). Crucially, though, these imaginaries and practices cannot be understood with reference to the *oikos* alone. As de L'Estoile notes, Dona Maria's ideal of household mastery and autonomy assume particular meanings in the context of a life marked by experiences of domination in plantation work, as well as in the context of a region marked by the violence of slavery (de L'Estoile 2024, p. 169). How then to grasp more systematically the relationship between *oikonomia* and the wider world in which it takes shape?

### 3. Towards a 'Desirable Merge'?

In view of this question, the recent contributions of Cesaratto (2019, 2023a, 2023b), and Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico (2020, 2021a, 2021b) are highly apposite. In a thought-provoking series of papers, building on earlier contributions of anthropologists such as Gudeman (1978a, 1978b) and Gregory (1982), these authors have called attention to the consonances between economic anthropology and what they call the 'surplus approach' in political economy, as well as to the possibilities presented by 'mutual fertilisation' between these traditions (Cesaratto 2023a, p. 2). In doing so, they sketch an

alternative approach, which, I will suggest, offers a pathway through some of the problems raised by de L'Estoile: namely, an anthropological economics.

By the surplus approach, Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico refer broadly to the theories of the classical economists and Marx, as well as to the reconstruction of these theories provided by Piero Sraffa and his followers. These analyses draw a fundamental connection between the *reproduction* of a society and the division of resources between social classes. Building on the pioneering insights of Quesnay's *Tableau Economique*, the classical economists noted that maintaining the 'social product' (a society's total output of commodities) at the same level each year required reinvesting a part of this product into production (Garegnani 1987, p. 2). On the one hand, there were the costs of replacing equipment, raw materials and seed; on the other, there were the subsistence costs of workers themselves. The remaining part of the annual product, after the deduction of these costs, was the 'social surplus'. This is the share of the product that 'goes to classes of society other than labourers', in the form of rents and profits (Garegnani 1987, p. 3). Given knowledge of the total social product, techniques of production, and real wage level, it is possible to subtract the second two from the first to determine the size of the social surplus as a residual.

Wages are thus treated in Classical theories as an *independent* variable, in the sense that their determinants are 'non-economic'. Significantly, these 'non-economic' determinants are not assumed to be 'natural' or based on human physiological requirements, but rather by historical and institutional factors — either relating to historically established ideas around minimum acceptable subsistence levels, or to the unequal bargaining power of different social classes. In their different ways, then, classical theories all recognise the division of the product into wages, profits and rent as an inherently socio-political process, analytically inseparable from social class divisions.

These insights, and the question of the social surplus, as Sraffa famously noted, were 'submerged' in marginalist economics (Sraffa 1960, p. v). In the latter approach, income distribution is explained by the 'marginal productivity' of different factors of production, with wages thus treated as 'dependent' variable, determined by the 'marginal productivity' of labour. They were 'recovered', however, by Sraffa and Garegnani (Cesaratto 2023a, p. 2). Using simultaneous equations expressed as input-output tables (as pioneered in 1940s US wartime planning), Sraffa is able to systematically demonstrate that income distribution is not mechanically determined by the marginal productivity of factors of production, but rather, at least in part, by 'external' institutional factors. In contrast to Smith and Marx, Sraffa suggests that, in a capitalist context, it may be rates of profit (determined by central bank interest rates) rather than wage levels, which constitute the determining 'external' element of the system (Sraffa 1960, p. 33). Recognising that real wages may include, in addition to a 'subsistence' component, a share of the social surplus, Sraffa proposes that this share is determined by the (institutionally determined) rate of profit. However, Sraffa's model is consistent with the classical surplus approach in calling attention to the 'outside causes' of the surplus, lying beyond what he calls the 'economic field' (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2020, p. 16). The determinants of the distribution of wealth are identified in 'historical-institutional circumstances' (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2020, p. 16) which can only be grasped outside of what Garegnani has conceptualised as the analytical 'core' of the surplus theories. While data within the 'core' — dependent distributive variables and commodity prices — are amenable to 'mathematical

treatment', data outside it require 'institutional and historical analysis' (Garegnani 1984, p. 321; Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2020, p. 4).

By implication then, a Sraffian or surplus approach to economic analysis requires close attention to social and historical processes beyond a conventionally defined 'economic field'.

Certain economists working in the Sraffian tradition have, indeed, placed considerable emphasis on this point. Krishna Bharadwaj, for example — on whom Cesaratto explicitly draws — frequently stresses that 'distribution ... is to be analysed in terms of the social relations of production and the state of productive forces' (Bharadwaj 1986, p. 62). Her work accordingly combines nuanced discussions of economic theory with the empirical study of Indian agriculture, paying due attention to the role of factors such as caste and religion (Bharadwaj 1974). Nevertheless, Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico imply that Bharadwaj's contributions have been somewhat exceptional in this regard.<sup>1</sup> In practice, they argue, Sraffian economics has tended to neglect institutional factors despite the crucial causal role they are theoretically assigned (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021a, p. 27). They cite Clark's observation that while 'most Sraffians will mention the importance of historical and institutional factors ... these factors are given no active role' (Clark 1992, p. 458).

How, then, to get beyond this limiting focus on the analytical 'core'? It is here that Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico point to the intellectual resources offered by economic anthropology. In particular, it is the 'substantivist' tradition of economic anthropology associated with Polanyi and his inheritors to which Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico draw attention. Polanyi famously argues that in non-market economies, unlike in market economies, economic life is 'embedded' in institutions. Another notable substantivist, Pearson, develops this line of thinking in his engagement with the concept of the surplus, arguing for the importance of not separating 'technological development from [an] institutional complex of which it is but a part' (Pearson 1957, p. 326; Quoted in Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 207). As he points out, 'there are always and everywhere potential surpluses available ... What counts is the institutional means for bringing them to life' (Pearson 1957, p. 339). For Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, then, the great insight of substantivist economic anthropology is its understanding of the need to bring in institutions 'from the beginning', rather than as an analytical afterthought (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 210). It is precisely this emphasis which they call Sraffians and other inheritors of the surplus approach to adopt.

Conversely, Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico draw attention to certain oversights within substantivist economic anthropology, at least as articulated by Polanyi and his immediate followers, and suggest how they might be addressed by taking on certain insights from the surplus approach. Notable here is Polanyi's assertion that, in market societies, unlike in non-market societies, economic life is truly 'disembedded' from wider human institutions, and entirely governed by self-regulating markets. As a result, marginalist economics, which Polanyi understands (following Robbins) as the study of the relationship between ends and scarce means, is seen as analytically appropriate for market societies. This, Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico argue, represents a

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, there have been other exceptions, notably Antonella Picchio, whose work is discussed in Section Five of this paper.



misunderstanding of the ‘essential meaning of marginalism’, as a theory of distribution based on factor endowments (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 203). A core insight of the surplus approach, as discussed above, is that even in industrialised, capitalist societies, income distribution cannot be explained without reference to ‘external’ institutional factors. In other words, contrary to the pretensions of marginalist economics, the economy ‘is never disembodied from society’ (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 209), even in thoroughly capitalist contexts. Building on Bharadwaj’s reading of Polanyi (Bharadwaj 1986, pp. 83–85), Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico connect this oversight in substantivism to its excessive focus on the sphere of ‘circulation’ (exchange), and a relative inattention to the sphere of production. This leads to an underemphasis on the ‘embeddedness’ of capitalist economies, for example in the ‘institution’ of class relations which shape income distribution. Economic anthropology, they argue, should therefore ‘more resolute[ly] discard... marginalism’ by adopting the surplus approach’s greater attention to the sphere of production (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 210).

For Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, then, the benefits of dialogue between economic anthropology and the surplus approach would be mutual. However, appropriately enough given their critique of Polanyi, they call for more than an interdisciplinary *exchange*. In other words, they advocate for a *new* theoretical approach, constituting a ‘desirable merge’ of these two traditions: namely, an ‘anthropological economics’ (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 187). What would this mean?

Although coined in 1927 by the economic historian Norman Gras (Cook 1974, p. 357), Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico draw the suggestive idea of ‘anthropological economics’ from the work of Marshall Sahlins, in which it takes on different meanings in different places. In its initial appearance in a 1969 article, it serves as a kind of synonym for substantivism, to which, in the context of the formalist-substantivist debate, Sahlins openly declares allegiance (Sahlins 1969). In the seminal *Stone Age Economics* (SEA), while it retains this original meaning at points, the project of ‘anthropological economics’ also comes to refer (at least implicitly) to an attempt to ‘get beyond the sterile formulations of the debate between formalists and substantivism’ (Marchionatti and Cedrini 2016, p. 211), notably by paying greater attention to the sphere of production and adopting certain marxian concepts (Sahlins 1972). By the time of his preface to the 2003 edition of SEA, ‘anthropological economics’ is even more sharply distinguished from (Polanyian) ‘economic anthropology’. He forcefully critiques the ‘aged conceit’ that, in contrast to the ‘economic rationality’ of Western societies, non Western systems are ‘in thrall’ to ‘culture’, and explicitly associates it with ‘economic anthropology’ (Sahlins 2017, p. xxiii). It is on this basis that he ends the preface with a rallying cry to ‘forget economic anthropology’, and instead to advance the project of a ‘truly anthropological economics,’ which understands that in Western and non-western societies alike, material practices are ‘dependent on a vast system of logico-meaningful attributes of things and relationships of people’ (Sahlins 2017, p. xxiv).

For Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, too, anthropological economics represents a move *beyond* substantivism, and towards a theoretical approach capable of analysing both capitalist and non-capitalist arrangements. As a dialectical synthesis of substantivist anthropology and the surplus approach, they envision anthropological economics as a means of simultaneously grasping the socio-cultural and material dimensions of economic life



(Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 210). It is a framework embodying the insight that ‘from the very beginning, the concept of economic surplus should not be considered in a historical or institutional vacuum — and vice versa, of course, institutions should not be examined in an economic vacuum’ (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 211). Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico’s notion of anthropological economics thus shares a great deal with that previously advanced by Gudeman (1978a). Gudeman has argued for an anthropological economics which adopts a Sraffian surplus approach, placing it ‘within a set of historically and culturally determined social relationships’, (Gudeman 1978a, p. 365) and thus offering a ‘total or relational view of distribution’ (Gudeman 1978a, p. 374). For Gudeman, as for Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, anthropological economics holds the promise of understanding ‘distribution as a meaningful system, distribution in light of social forces, and distribution as a structure ... which is forever subject to the vicissitudes of nature and history’ (Gudeman 1978a, p. 374).

Significantly, an anthropological economics might also offer some pathways out of the problems raised by de L’Estoile’s critique of economic anthropology. This suggestion might, at first glance, seem paradoxical. After all, the idea of an ‘anthropological economics’, no less than that of an ‘economic anthropology’, is evidently somewhat implicated in the modern ‘ontological tenet’ of the economy as a distinct sphere of reality.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, it addresses two major issues identified by de L’Estoile.

Firstly, while the anthropological economics approach described above may conceptually distinguish the ‘economic’ from the ‘non-economic’, it decisively avoids its ‘desocialisation’ or ‘depoliticisation’. On the contrary, by scrutinising the valuation of different ‘inputs’ to the production process, it offers a framework for grappling more systematically with the precise ways in which social and political imaginaries and practices shape distribution, without falling into the subjectivism characterising neoclassical theories of value. Building on the observations of John B. Davis (2017), Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico argue that Sraffian theory reconciles the ‘objective determination of prices in the ‘economic field’ ... with the historical-social determination of distribution’ (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021a, p. 41). In its articulation of the objective and subjective, it offers a suggestive path through the thorny social scientific problem of ‘structure versus agency’ (Cesaratto 2023b). In adopting and developing this aspect of Sraffian thought, anthropological economics offers possibilities for more systematically analysing the ways in which humans, to follow Marx’s famous formulation, ‘make their own history, but ... not ... under circumstances chosen by themselves’ (Marx 2008, p. 10). As Andrea Ginzburg observes, a similar set of intuitions is echoed in the writings of Sraffa’s close friend and correspondent Gramsci, in the latter’s vision of a ‘critical’ economics characterised by ‘a continuous mixing of theoretical deduction and historical description, of logical and factual nexuses’ (Ginzburg 2016, p. 180; quoted in Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021a, p. 41).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>A tenet which, by the way, de L’Estoile admits it will be somewhat difficult to entirely overcome: he notes that even an *oikonomia*-centred analytical framework ‘cannot dispel our ontological belief in the reality of “the economy”’ (de L’Estoile 2024, p. 179)

<sup>3</sup>It is worth quoting the full passage that Ginzburg (2016, p. 180) highlights from *The Prison Notebooks*:

We must fix the precise point at which we distinguish between ‘abstraction’ and ‘genericisation’ (‘generalizzazione’) [the latter term was shortly to be replaced with ‘indetermination’] ... The determined market in pure economics is an arbitrary abstraction, of solely conventional value for the purposes of pedantic, scholastic analysis. The determined market for critical economics will, however be the set of concrete, economic activities

Secondly, the anthropological economics approach discussed here unequivocally rejects any self-restriction to the study of non-capitalist or non-market economic practices. Anthropological economics, as noted above, does not presuppose any focus on what de L'Estoile calls modern economy's 'Other' (de L'Estoile 2014, p. s63), but rather recognises the institutional 'embeddedness' of all economic arrangements, including the most unambiguously capitalistic ones. It does not need to concede, either implicitly or explicitly, any authority to neoclassical economics, by treating macro-economic processes as a 'given' to which its ethnographic subjects respond. Rather, it is capable of exploring how people participate in, shape and reproduce these very economic processes.

What, then, would an anthropological economics look like in practice? What kind of analytical fruit could it bear? Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico tend to associate ethnography, like archaeology, with the study of 'pre-capitalist economic formations' (Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico 2021b, p. 200), an expression hinting at a certain evolutionist conception of anthropology, which within the discipline itself has been widely critiqued from the beginning of the 20th century onwards (Kuper 2005; Segal 1999). However, as discussed above, the anthropological economics approach they sketch is not tailored to 'non-capitalist' practices or settings; indeed, the need to transcend this analytical habit is one of its core insights. In the next section, then, I explore anthropological economics 'in practice' by considering two sets of ethnographic cases, depicting two contrasting types of social context — neither being straightforwardly 'non-capitalist'. First, through a discussion of the ethnographic analyses of Stephen Gudeman and Chris Gregory, I consider how anthropological economics approaches can illuminate processes of capitalist penetration, notably in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Secondly, through considering the work of Antonella Picchio (among others), I explore how anthropological economics might contribute to our understanding of contemporary transformations around welfare states and 'crises of care'.

#### 4. Anthropological Economics and (Uneven) Capitalist Penetration

While capitalism is a global force, as Chris Gregory notes, 'the forces of globalism have been very uneven in their effect' (Gregory 2021, p. 15). If classical social theorists tended to envision a fairly unilinear transition towards (capitalist) modernity, social scientists since the middle of the 20th century have brought into focus the uneven and asymmetrical character of capitalist expansion, particularly in colonial and postcolonial settings. Dependency and world systems theorists, for example, have paid attention to processes of capitalist penetration, through which colonised and formerly colonised peoples have been hierarchically and unevenly integrated into the world economy. How might an anthropological economics approach throw light on these processes?

An insightful example is offered in Gudeman's ethnographic study of the transition from 'subsistence farming to cash cropping' in the 1960s Panamanian village of 'Los Boquerones' (Gudeman 1978b). At the heart of Gudeman's analysis of the transforming village economy is the Sraffian insight that 'the division between subsistence and surplus

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characterising a determined social form, taken with their laws of uniformity — i.e., 'abstract laws' — but without the abstraction ceasing to be historically determined.

is essentially a social and not an economic fact' (Gudeman 1978b, p. 15). The 'subsistence economy' which predominates in Los Boquerones at the beginning of Gudeman's account is interpreted as a system which had emerged *on the margins* of colonial Panama's wider capitalist and proto-capitalist economy. Spanish attempts to exploit or invest in the rural interior, starting in the early 1500s, came to an end by the mid-1600s, and the economy that thus developed was one of production (chiefly of rice and maize) for use — that is to say, one of 'subsistence'. However, Gudeman emphasises, the orientation of this system towards production for use does not mean an absence of surplus production. Rather, a surplus is produced, but used in a distinctive way. Unlike in a capitalist system, where the surplus is held by corporate shareholders, in Los Boquerones it is held by the *campesinos* themselves. The rate of surplus (and thus the level of subsistence) can be understood, he suggests, 'within the overall patterning of the socio-cultural fabric and institutions of production' (Gudeman 1978b, p. 65).

*Campesinos* neither accumulate the surplus, nor reinvest it to transform the system. Rather, the bulk of it is effectively converted into time, and consumed in the form of days not devoted to agricultural labour. In addition to Sundays, between fifteen and thirty-five days are devoted to *fiestas* celebrating the saints, to whom alone the *campesinos* can appeal for assistance on earth (for example in case of illness or crop plague) (Gudeman 1978b, p. 51). The largest block of non-work time, around 50–100 days, are 'true leisure' days, and are either spent at home, visiting neighbours, or absorbed through working more slowly or finishing work in the early afternoon (Gudeman 1978b, p. 63). While subsistence levels in Los Boquerones may thus appear to the outsider as a kind of 'absolute economic standard' — an impression reinforced by the fact that the village's agricultural productivity levels have traditionally changed little — Gudeman is able to show that they are rather defined by 'social conditions and expectations' (Gudeman 1978b, p. 15). Specifically, the division of time between work in the fields (supported by subsistence) and various forms of leisure (supported by the surplus) is 'not dictated by economic facts alone', but is rather 'part of the cultural fabric of society', tied up with form of collective religious practice and ideals of autonomous, self-directed work (Gudeman 1978b, p. 15).

Questions of production and distribution remain central in Gudeman's analysis of the transition to cash cropping which is underway in Los Boquerones by the 1960s. The completion of a concrete highway has brought Los Boquerones within the orbit of two privately owned sugar mills, which produce partially refined brown sugar, primarily for export to the USA. A growing proportion of labour in the village is devoted to the cultivation of sugar cane to supply these mills, which themselves provide the *campesinos* with fertiliser, weed-killer and seed on (interest-free) credit (Gudeman 1978b, p. 139). Without purchasing any land. The mills are thus able to gradually to gain control over production in the village through their 'command of finance' (Robinson and Eatwell 1974, p. 30; quoted in Gudeman 1978b, p. 139), and receive the major part of the new surplus being created. While *campesinos* continue to rely on the same tools — machete and digging stick — and while the appearance of being an independent farmer is maintained (at least initially), they are effectively being transformed into wage labourers.

Whilst this 'integration' into the national economy enables the consumption of goods hitherto associated with the rich and powerful — radios, shop-bought clothes — it also

carries major costs. Firstly, the cultivation of sugar cane accelerates soil degradation, making the cultivation of rice and maize increasingly difficult; the transition to cash-cropping is thus ‘not only irreversible but cumulative’ (Gudeman 1978b, p. 132). Secondly, because *campesinos* are obliged to purchase more of their goods they need, their standard of living, previously defined ‘in relation to others in the countryside and controlled by the individual labourer’ is now defined ‘in relation to other strata in Panamanian society and controlled by market prices’ in relation to wages (Gudeman 1978b, p. 141). Thirdly, the shift to wage labour is experienced as a loss of *autonomy*; as Gudeman notes, ‘when drawing a contrast between the traditional mode of production and a salary system the men often point out that they prefer the former, since it allows them to work on their own and not under the orders of someone else’ (Gudeman 1978b, p. 63).

Significantly, then Gudeman’s anthropological economics approach enables him to locate the source of these changes in the transformations of the sphere of production. What might have appeared in a classically Polanyian account as a ‘disembedding’ of economic relations, or as an expansion of market forces, is here clearly exposed as rooted in ‘the mills’ enlarged control over local production through their command of a financial fund’ (Gudeman 1978b, p. 20). It also enables him to illuminate the complex ways in which *campesino* notions of a good life relate to the production process, and cannot be fully understood apart from it. Like de L’Estoile, Gudeman brings into focus the *campesinos*’ moral emphasis on the value of autonomy and self-directed work, and the particular importance of *temporality* in their experience of autonomy.<sup>4</sup> He is able to take an additional analytical step, however, by revealing the inextricable connection between temporal autonomy and a particular pattern of surplus distribution, itself tied up with a particular (use-oriented) mode of production. Autonomy, as experienced by the *campesinos*, is thus not only a question of *who* directs work, but *how* it is carried out — and thus is fundamentally undermined by wage labour. Transformations in productive arrangements thus emerge as crucial for fully understanding *campesino* imaginaries around *oikonomia*.

Another insightful example of an anthropological economics approach applied to the analysis of capitalist penetration is Chris Gregory’s 1982 *Gifts and Commodities*. This work offers an account of economic transformation in colonial and post-colonial Papua New Guinea (PNG). Like Gudeman, Gregory grapples with this situation of penetration by distinguishing for the purposes of analysis two economic ‘systems’ at play, and deploying a Sraffa-informed surplus-centred approach to analyse them both. However, whilst Gudeman mainly explores this process in terms of a gradual transition from one to another, Gregory considers the *interaction* between two systems over time.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘paradox’ with which Gregory begins is that, contrary to the ‘descriptive and pre-scriptive propositions of neoclassical development theory’, the arrival and growth of mining and plantation capitalism in PNG does not seem to have had the effect of

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<sup>4</sup>On this point, see also: (Thompson 1967).

<sup>5</sup>This difference in approach, though partially a result of analytical choices, can also partially be linked to the different modalities of capitalist penetration being studied in the two cases. Unlike the inhabitants of Los Boquerones, men in PNG overwhelmingly enter the capitalist economy as *migrant workers*. As Gudeman himself notes, migrant labour systems in ‘in which the outside system is not even spatially juxtaposed to the existing economy’ imply a different kind of transformation from that described in his own ethnography (Gudeman 1978b, p. 146).

diminishing the ostentatious gift-giving practices characteristic of the ‘traditional economy’ (Gregory 1982, p. 4). Rather, ethnographic evidence suggests a certain ‘efflorescence’ of these practices in the colonial and post-colonial periods. How to understand this paradox?

Gregory’s answer starts with an attempt to get to the heart of the differences between PNG’s plantation capitalist capitalism and its ‘traditional’ economy. While Gudeman, as noted above, highlights that an orientation towards ‘production for use’ does not imply the absence of a surplus, Gregory goes further by rejecting the concept of ‘subsistence economy’ altogether. PNG’s ‘traditional’ economy is rather characterised as ‘gift economy’ in which a large part of the surplus is devoted to gift exchange. Melanesian gift exchange has long been a *locus classicus* for anthropological theorising, starting with Malinowski’s famous account of the *Kula* ring (1922), revisited by both Mauss (1990) and Levi-Strauss (1971). As Mauss has famously observed, while commodity exchange establishes a ‘relationship between the objects exchanged’ — that is to say, it forms a price — gift-giving establishes a (debt) relationship between the giver and the receiver (Gregory 1982, p. 14). Rather than to maximise profit, transactors in gift economies aim to ‘acquire as many gift-debtors as [they] possibly can’ (Gregory 1982, p. 19). While classic anthropological gift theories had ostensibly focused on the gift as a mode of exchange, Gregory reinterprets them as speaking to the question of reproduction. Just as the ‘correct’ prices in Sraffa’s reproduction scheme are those that ensure material self-replacement, he observes, kinship terms in classificatory kinship systems analogously regulate the exchange of women, in such a way as to ensure the reproduction of the clan. Like Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, then, he draws a fundamental connection between the concerns of anthropology and classical political economy, characterising the gift theories as ‘a logical extension of the method of political economy to the analysis of anthropological data’ (Gregory 1982, p. 15).

Starting from this isomorphic similarity, Gregory elaborates a systematic theory of gift economies and their differences from commodity economies. In the class-based capitalist societies described by Marx and Sraffa, the predominant processes are production and ‘productive consumption’; these involve ‘objectification’, in which labour time is transformed into things, and both ‘things and people assume the social form of objects’ (Gregory 1982, p. 41). In clan-based societies, by contrast, the predominant processes are consumption and ‘consumptive production’; these involve ‘personification’, whereby things come to ‘assume the social form of persons’ (Gregory 1982, p. 35). Consumption includes both the consumption of food, and sexual relations, these activities being closely symbolically linked in clan-societies (Gregory 1982, p. 78). The exchange of women as ‘gifts’ (brides) between clans, regulated by kinship classification systems, is thus crucial for clan reproduction. However, the exchange of ‘thing-gifts’ is also crucial in creating and sustaining social relationships, and these objects are often symbolically conceived of as persons, with a soul and a gender classification (Gregory 1982, p. 93). If commodity economies, then, are understood following Sraffa as oriented towards ‘the production of commodities by means of commodities’, Gregory argues that gift economies are oriented towards the ‘consumption of gifts by means of gifts’ (Gregory 1982, p. p. 77).

On the basis of this theoretical account, Gregory is able to provide an incisive analysis of the relationship of gift and commodity systems in the context of colonial and postcolonial PNG.

This is not a straightforward process of replacement of one system by another, but rather a complex interaction resulting in an ‘ambiguous’ economy where things are now gifts, now commodities, depending on the social context’ (Gregory 1982, p. 117, see also 2015, p. xii). On the one hand, he describes how, as in other colonial settings — and indeed, as will be discussed in Section Five below, as in 19th century England — participation in the labour market in colonial PNG had to be coerced. Those living within the gift economy had no need to supply their labour power as a commodity, so this need was created through repressive indentured (essentially forced) labour systems. Likewise, state-imposed taxes created a need for money, which encouraged the growth of small-holder cash-crop production. It was only through these measures that labour power and agricultural produce, which both had previously taken the form of gifts, could take the form of commodities.

However, this process is not unilinear, and Gregory shows that the opposite tendency — ‘the transformation of commodities into gifts’ — has also been widespread, manifesting in the ‘efflorescence’ of the gift economy (Gregory 1982, p. 117). The ‘material basis’ of this efflorescence, Gregory argues, is the overwhelming persistence of clan ownership of land, with only a tiny proportion having been appropriated by the state, plantations or other private owners. As a result of this persisting clan control over land, relationships within and between clans continue to be organised through gift exchange, and social status comes to depend on the conversion of commodities into gifts. For example, in one case Gregory analyses, migration for plantation labour has become a kind of rite of passage for young men in the village. In the process, their labour is transformed from ‘gift-form to commodity-form’. However, on their return to the village, the commodities that they have accumulated as wage labourers are ‘transformed back into gift-form’ with the help of specially-devised rituals, and lavishly distributed to lineage headmen and other notables (Gregory 1982, p. 185).

Like Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, then, Gregory goes beyond a ‘simple welding together of different theories’, rather aiming for a new ‘synthesis of the ideas of political economists with anthropologists’ (Gregory 1982, p. x). His ‘modified political economy approach’ (Gregory 1982, p. 211) offers a striking demonstration of the analytical potential of an anthropological economics. It enables an analysis which exposes precisely and insightfully the working of colonial and neocolonial extraction, without neglecting the non-capitalist practices that may survive and even flourish in its midst. As Marilyn Strathern has noted, by bringing the colonial plantation economy and the clan gift economy into the same analytical frame, Gregory is able to analyse the ‘interaction between sets of relations as they impinge upon one another’ (Strathern 2015, p. xii). Anthropological economics, then, here offers the way out of a conceptual impasse, in which contexts of social transformation are interpreted through binaries such as ‘tradition and modernity’ (Strathern 2015, p. xii), rather considering the dynamic and unpredictable ways in which systems interact in contexts of capitalist penetration.



## 5. Anthropological Economics, Welfare States, and Crises of Care

It would be quite misleading, however, to limit our attention here to contexts of ‘uneven’ capitalist penetration. An important premise of an anthropological economics approach is a recognition of the institutionally embedded character of distribution, even in the most unambiguously capitalist contexts. What light might anthropological economics throw on issues such as welfare-state retrenchment or ‘crises’ around elder-care (Federici 2020; Fraser 2016); prevalent in post-industrial societies, but relatively invisible in mainstream economic analysis? While various anthropologists have offered accounts exemplifying different aspects of such an approach (see brief discussion below), here I take as a starting point the work of the feminist economist and historian of economic thought Antonella Picchio (1992, 2011, 2015). Picchio’s analyses have the advantage of drawing explicitly on Sraffa, rendering particularly clear their consonance with the anthropological economics approach discussed above.

For Picchio, explaining the reproduction of labour requires an understanding of political economy as ‘inherently social and political’, and an analysis that is ‘materialistic’ without being ‘economistic’ (Picchio 1992, p. 15). Indeed, she notes, a surplus approach implies a recognition of the ‘anchoring’ of subsistence (and thus wages) in ‘a complex historical and anthropological process’ (Picchio 2011, p. 399) and, like Casaratto and Di Bucchianico, she draws attention to the anthropological references in Sraffa’s writings (Picchio 2011, p. 403).

Starting from the Sraffian insight into the institutionally determined character of income distribution, Picchio offers an approach to political economy which fully incorporates the process of social reproduction. When wages are understood to be fundamentally determined not by the market exchange of ‘scarce quantities’, but rather by the institutionally-defined costs of subsistence, or in other words ‘the historical process of social reproduction’, it becomes possible to examine the inherent contradictions in the relationship between production and reproduction in capitalist societies (Picchio 1992, p. 5).

On the one hand, Picchio considers the ways that these contradictions manifest in the changing ideas and institutions addressing poverty. The English ‘New Poor Law’ of 1834, for example, drastically reduced previous forms of assistance to the poor, whose poverty was assumed to be caused by moral weakness, and imposed repressive measures on ‘able-bodied males’ in the attempt to force them into wage labour or emigration. It thus acted to impose dependence on the labour market, facilitating accumulation, whilst disavowing state responsibility for the costs of social reproduction. By contrast, the famous ‘Minority Report’ of 1909, one of two commissioned by Parliament to explore options for reform, contained a recognition of ‘collective and state responsibility’ for preventing destitution, with the state imagined as the fundamental ‘adjustment mechanism for mediating between the process of production and that of reproduction’ (Picchio 1992, p. 69).

On the other hand, Picchio explores the contradictions between production and reproduction that emerge in the context of gendered care work. The invisibility of (overwhelmingly female) houseworkers in marginalist economics — despite their constituting a large part of the labouring population — is a function, she notes, of the obfuscation of the relationship between production and consumption. From a surplus approach



perspective, unpaid housework substantially subsidises the costs of social reproduction (Picchio 1992, p. 97). But, beyond the daily physical nurturing of workers, Picchio observes, houseworkers in capitalist societies are responsible for ‘restor[ing] a relation between production and reproduction that makes sense from the point of view of the people involved’ (Picchio 1992, p. 98). In other words, if accumulation processes in the outside world require people to be used as commodities, the houseworker is tasked with creating at least the impression of a ‘more human process’ oriented towards the reproduction of persons (Picchio 1992, p. 98).

This responsibility places an immense strain on women, who must ‘compensate for inadequate public services and for the destructive effects of the labour market’ (Picchio 1992, p. 98). While women increasingly enter the labour market, which offers a means to escape forms of dependence ‘inherent in patriarchal relationships’, this implies in effect a ‘double workload’, and great difficulty in escaping the ‘trap of low pay and poverty’ (Picchio 1992, p. 111). Picchio also observes that state attempts to take on some responsibility for social reproduction, for example in the form of childcare, never aim to entirely replace housework, ‘but only to supplement it ... women’s domestic obligations are always tacitly taken for granted’. It is a deeply embedded *institutional arrangement*, then, which ultimately determines the gendered distribution of income, both at household and wider-society level. Since unpaid houseworkers are by definition unable to bargain in a labour market, Picchio observes, it is only mobilisation and political pressure for state provision that can challenge the current subordination of social production to production.

Picchio’s contribution hints at several analytical possibilities offered by an anthropological economics approach. Firstly, returning to the issues raised in de l’Estoile’s account of *oikonomia* in Brazil, Picchio provides a framework for contextualising the ethnographic study of practices and conceptions of household management in a broader context: that of the relationship between production and social reproduction. As she notes, her perspective, ‘remove[s] the veil that keeps the *oikos* separate and hidden from the productive and public realm ... once the veil has been lifted, appearing out of the shadow is an enormous amount of unpaid domestic and care work’ (Picchio 2015, p. 252).

Secondly; an anthropological economics approach offers a powerful lens for analysing the place of non-commodified exchanges and relationships more broadly in contemporary capitalist societies, including those exchanges and relationships often labelled as ‘care’. This is a longstanding area of preoccupation for anthropologists. Mauss (1990) famously noted the ‘survival’ of gift economy practices in the midst of widespread commoditisation, a theme later revisited by Graeber (2011) and Hart (2014) among others. In Picchio’s account, thoroughly industrialised capitalist societies, just as much as ‘unevenly incorporated’ settings like Gregory’s PNG, emerge as places where people confront and move between different orders of value. The home, for Picchio, is where (usually female) houseworkers are charged with the responsibility of sustaining a micro-economy which, in contrast to the outside world, prioritises the nurturing of persons. *Oikonomia* is thus not extinguished by the endless expansion and mutation of capitalism; rather, the struggle for social reproduction; including through sometimes unexpected methods, becomes in some ways ever more important.

Suggestive examples of this kind of analysis have been provided by a range of contemporary anthropologists. Mollona, for example, in his ethnography of labour in an ex-industrial district of Sheffield (2005), shows how deindustrialisation and deregulation have led to new forms of extended family arrangement and networks of ‘relatedness’ (Carsten 2000), whilst also generating conflicts between women, children and male elders. More recently; in a wide-ranging discussion of financialisation and the household, Zaloom and James have shown how householders, rather than being passively subjectivated or atomised by finance, engage with it strategically ‘to produce relationships and aspirations that bind their lives together and to rework existing expectations’ (Zaloom and James 2023, p. 400). Ethnographic analyses of family firms, offered by Hann (2023) and Köllner (2023) among others, provide further examples of the failure of marketisation to dissolve the household; here, likewise, entrepreneurship can represent a strategy through which householders can fulfill obligations towards kin as well as transform them. Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako (2015), meanwhile, have drawn attention to the centrality of kinship in capital accumulation processes more generally, building on Piketty’s influential argument about the significance of inherited wealth in exacerbating inequalities (Piketty 2014).

An anthropological economics approach offers particular insight into contemporary struggles around welfare states, austerity and care. Recent years have seen a flurry of rich ethnographic accounts exploring lived experiences of and moral contestation around welfare services and care work, particularly in post-2008 Europe (McKearney and Amrith 2021; Tošić and Streinzer 2022; Weiss 2021). Narotzky and Pusceddu, for example, have shown how austerity in Spain and Italy have transformed patterns of familial moral obligation, with older retired parents and grandparents increasingly responsible for providing shelter, food, money and childcare for their children, who once expected to achieve autonomy (Narotzky and Pusceddu 2020). Simultaneously, the older generation has become the target of widespread political and media accusations of ‘privilege’ or ‘selfishness’; their pensions framed as ‘unsustainable’ or as manifestations of ‘intergenerational inequity’. Household-level attempts to sustain social reproduction thus persist in tension with a kind of breakdown of social reproduction at the level of the national community. Narotzky has also drawn attention to the ways in which protests against austerity in this period have often taken the form of demands for ‘dignity’ and respect of ‘worth’ in the face of a system which appears to render many worthless, bringing ‘valuation struggles’ to the fore (Narotzky 2022, p. 31). Such analyses show how an anthropological economics approach can contextualise discourses and imaginaries of ‘deservingness’ or ‘sacrificial’ care within the broader conflict between production and social reproduction, considering the role of ethnographically observed practices and ideals in shaping, reproducing or even contesting wider distributional dynamics.

## **6. Conclusions: Anthropological Economics and the Struggle for a Human Economy**

This paper has explored the potential of what has been called, following Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico, an anthropological economics. Anthropological economics pays close attention to *oikonomia*: the meaningful practices and imaginaries through which people ‘govern the house’ and reach towards a ‘good life’. Crucially, however, it also scrutinises the interactions between *oikonomia* and the production process. Building on

Sraffian insights, it thus seeks to illuminate the ways in which political, social and moral arrangements and imaginaries shape the distribution of wealth. At the heart of anthropological economics, in other words, is an inquiry into the relationship of the *oikos* and the surplus.

The ethnographic cases discussed have hinted at the expansive analytical possibilities offered by such an approach. On the one hand, they have highlighted its relevance for grappling with capitalist penetration in colonial and post-colonial contexts; a key area of concern in contemporary debates around the ‘decolonisation of economics’ (Antunes de Oliveira and Kvangraven 2023). In Gudeman’s account of Los Boquerones, attention to the uses of the surplus in traditional ‘subsistence’ agriculture enables a contextualisation of the *campesino* value and experience of autonomy in the production process. This contextualisation is revealing, as it suggests that ‘autonomy’ for the *campesinos* is as much a matter of the temporalities of work and *how* work is carried out as of who directs it. In Gregory’s account of colonial and post-colonial PNG, it is attention to the *interaction* between the gift economies of the villages and the commodity economy of the plantations that is able to explain the ostensibly paradoxical flourishing of ‘traditional’ largesse in context of capitalist penetration. On the other hand, the cases discussed indicated the relevance of an anthropological economics approach for the study of social reproduction. In Picchio’s analysis of gendered care work, only by situating housework within the wider relationship between production and social reproduction — that is to say, ‘remov[ing] the veil that keeps the *oikos* separate and hidden from the productive and public realm’ — that the economic deprivations and emotional burdens facing (largely female) houseworkers can be fully understood. In all of the cases discussed, insight is afforded by an analytical approach which pays equal attention to the *oikos* and to the surplus.

However, the promise of anthropological economics is not merely analytical. Behind many an argument for an alternative economics lies a call, more or less explicit, for an alternative *economy*. Likewise, it is difficult to fully separate the idea of an anthropological economics from visions of a ‘human economy’; *humanus*, after all, being the latin near-synonym of the greek *anthropos* (ἄνθρωπος). In post-2008 anthropology, the ‘human economy’ has sometimes appeared as a descriptive category, referring, like Gregory’s ‘gift economy’, to systems oriented towards ‘the creation and fashioning of human beings’ rather than the accumulation of wealth (Graeber 2012, p. 412).<sup>6</sup> More often, though, it has taken on a *prescriptive* quality, referring to a struggle to ‘make an economy more human’ (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010, p. 6), to a movement reconciling ‘small-scale humanism and large-scale impersonal institutions’ (Hart 2013, p. 5) or to a world reimagined around mutuality and care (Graeber 2021). Reflecting on the type of economic thinking that would be necessary to move towards such a future, David Graeber (2017) gives a sense of the scale of the intellectual task ahead:

To a large degree, mainstream economics is still trying to solve nineteenth century problems: how to increase overall productivity and assure an efficient distribution of necessities

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<sup>6</sup>Others have put this idea slightly differently, contrasting narrower conceptions of wealth focused on material abundance with more expansive ones which also encompass ‘human wellbeing’ in the form of parents and children (Gregory 2018, see also Rakopoulos and Rio 2018).

under conditions of overall scarcity. It's clear that, if our species is to survive, we're going to have to come up with a new economic discipline which starts from very different questions (for instance, how to assure access to the means of life under conditions of rapidly growing productivity and decreasing demand for labor, without also destroying Earth). Everything must be re-imagined. (Graeber 2017, p. xviii)

Further elaboration of the vast project would certainly be the work of many hands, and lies well beyond the scope of this paper. However, the anthropological economics approach explored here, paying equal attention to *oikos* and surplus, would be no bad place to start.

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