

# ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY





NEW

SZÉCHENYI PLAN

# ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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## Week 5

Material culture, system of alienable  
and inalienable goods

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# The social life of things

- Appadurai (1986)
- Meanings of objects are assigned by people
- “Methodological commodity fetishism”:
  - “biography of commodities”: through that one can investigate social relations
- $\approx$  analysis of commodity chains
  - geography, economics
  - added value  $\Leftrightarrow$  movements across the regimes of value
- Barter  $\Leftrightarrow$  commodity; commodity  $\Leftrightarrow$  gift emphasised too much
- Key is the exchange: makes commodities circulate

# Circulation of commodities

- Commodity  $\Leftrightarrow$  commodity situation
  - it is not the property of object but generated by the social environment that surrounds it
  - commodity situation: its capability of being exchanged is social relevant
  - it is dynamic: objects move in and out of commodity situation
- Commodity phase
  - the chapter in the biography of the object in which it is a commodity (e.g. wedding ring in the jewellery shop which steps out of its commodity phase when given out)
- Commodity candidacy
  - rules of symbolic categorization that assign value to objects (e.g. Sahlins)
- Commodity context
  - social locations that facilitate the turn of objects to commodities (e.g. bazaar, heritage)

# Regimes of values

- The movement of commodities between different cultural contexts
  - varying cultures
  - varying social groups
- Participants of exchange do not value the objects in the same way
  - overlapping values are rare: tensions
- Regimes of values
  - overlapping visions of values and circulations
  - exchange: parties belong to different regimes of values
  - corresponds to different degrees of regulations in gift exchanges



# Oriental rugs

- Spooner (1986)
- Incessant Western demand for oriental rugs since the 19th century
- Luxury  $\Rightarrow$  mass goods:
  - exclusivity  $\Rightarrow$  authenticity
- What is the source of authenticity?
  - objective properties cannot explain it
  - subjective experience: the more distant, the better
  - distance: lack of information  $\Rightarrow$  the role of mediators



# Value generated by irregularities

- Esperanza (2008)
- Market of ethnic art
- Value – knowledge: mediators' role is crucial
- Bali woodcraft artists contracted to make Christmas tree decorations designed by American wholesaler
- Several hundreds of copies of irregularities: uneven dye
  - ink stains believed to be part of the proper design
- Consumers highly appreciated the outcome:
  - American retail trader: the stains have symbolic meanings (referring to gods Ram, Vishnu, Shiva), in the spirit of Hindi-Christian dialogue



# The politics of value

- Value: not only meanings but power relations across groups
- Socially determined paths:
  - who can trade, with what and with whom?
  - “commodity enclaves”: e.g. royal monopoly
- ⇔ innovative diversions motivated by competition
  - mobility of goods (flow between regimes of values)
    - ⇒ social mobility
- Tournaments of value:
  - status fight among those who are incumbent (e.g. *kula*, stock exchange)
- Goods and knowledge:
  - power based on limiting knowledge on commodities
  - knowledge on production
  - knowledge on proper consumption

# Commodification

- To what extent is it pertinent to society that:
  - objects are in commodity phase?
  - fulfil requirements of commodity candidacy?
  - they appear in commodity contexts?
- commodification is most advanced in capitalism but all societies embrace a certain amount of commodification
- withdrawal from commodity phase (decommodification) : maintaining social prestige (e.g. regulated paths)
- Koptyoff (1986):
  - economy: commodification ↔ culture: decommodification

# Property

- Network of social relations governing conduct of people with respect to use and disposition of things (Hoebel 1966)
- Social and cultural plurality:
  - exclusive private property is only one type of ownership, which is not the general model of property
  - in most societies some form of private property exist (including the most egalitarian ones – Woodburn 1982)
- Examining property on two levels:
  - micro: building identity through possessing objects
  - macro: control over the distribution of material goods

# The complex nature of property

- Bundle of rights (Maine 1861):
  - the entitlement to use, lease, sell, etc.
- Estates of administration (Gluckman 1965):
  - system of transferring bundle of rights in a particular political hierarchy
  - dynamic approach
- Layers (F & B Benda-Beckmann 1999):
  - cultural-ideological
  - legal-institutional
  - social
  - practice

# Property in socialist system

- Cultural-ideological
  - Marxist critique of the concept of private property: the primacy of state ownership
- Legal-institutional
  - Civil Codes: collective (social), private, and personal property
- Social relations
  - women in the countryside (industrialised agriculture)
- Practice
  - second economy, household farms, small collective entrepreneurship within the socialist industrial firms
- Estates of administration:
  - collectivization: inalienable collective property but with shares/dividends for the members
  - significance of social networks

# Property in postsocialism

- Transition: economy based on state property  $\Rightarrow$  private property
- “fuzzy property” (Verdery 1999)
  - privatisation is not a one-directional path
  - overlapping rights, obligations, claims
  - lack of unambiguous rules, practices
  - Romanian village in the middle of the 1990s
    - transformation of collectives to ‘associations’
    - restitution: owners cannot and do not want to cultivate the land
    - lease of land: to the association; former property rights by limited control (e.g. say in what to cultivate but not in quantity of production)
  - economic uncertainties: obligations and claims



# Private and collective property

- Critique of the concept of the prime efficiency of private property in all circumstances
- Tragedy of the commons:
  - for the individual, it is rational to overuse the common, yet everybody loses in the collective (game theory: prisoner's dilemma)
  - solution: private property
- Practice of efficient and sustainable collective properties:
  - collective property  $\neq$  open access
  - local collective control, selective transfer of information