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Excerpt

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The Materiality of Practice in Ancestral Maya Economies

Economies are strange beasts; in the idiom of *The Market*, they are said to perform, to be bullish or bearlike. Although few living in the twenty-first century conceive of the market in true animistic terms, the power, the prevalence, the fundamentality of market capitalism within our society imbue it with a vitality that is conducive to animistic tropes. Economies are foundational: humans cannot live by bread alone, but, without bread (or tortillas), humans would starve. Economies are about more than the manner by which humans go about feeding, clothing, and housing themselves; economies also are fundamentally social entities; there is nothing “natural” about economic practice (although some rational choice economist might disagree). From a perspective that is so abstract as to be practically meaningless, we can assert that all economies are organized around production, exchange, and consumption, but radical differences become readily apparent as one drills down and begins to examine economic practice on a human scale – the ethos and social relations of production, the means and motivations behind the circulation of goods, and the tempo and logic that undergird the consumption and replacement of goods. When one moves around the space–time continuum beyond market capitalism, as we do in this study, the extent to which sectors of this tripartite scheme differ from capitalism becomes so great as to render them easily misinterpreted (as often has been the case in the Maya region). With such profound variability to embrace, studies of “cultural economies” (Halperin 1994:1) or the

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“social structures of the economy” (Bourdieu 2005) have come into their own and provide us with guideposts as we move into a terrain in which the logic of capitalism may be irrelevant.

Geertz (1973:5) used an arachnid trope for culture, referring to it as a “web of significance,” a totalizing yet permeable membrane that envelopes and is created and modified by individual agents and the societies they constitute. Even though this metaphor provides a vivid, visual image of this pervasive yet elusive thing called culture, here I would like to stress a more abstract quality of culture – its logical properties. By the term “logical properties,” I am not referring solely or even mostly to the rules and norms of culture (although they do exist) but rather to the way in which everyday experience is lived in reference to a socially and culturally constructed realm – a “figured world” to borrow a term from Dorothy Holland and colleagues (1998:52). In no way is cultural logic divorced from daily economic practice; in fact, cultural logic and economic practice are irrevocably married with scant chance of separation (see Fischer 2001). In an astute analysis of postmodernism, Jameson (1991:6) attempts to capture the logic of late capitalism by characterizing it as “a dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm ... the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses ... must make their way.” Whether you prefer to think of culture as a sticky spider web or an inescapable force field, it is clear that cultural modes of reasoning undergird action and cannot be separated from economic practice. Moreover, we can expect that variations in cultural logic within and among societies will produce highly variable economic practices in both a fundamental and a situational sense. I do not want to stress the notion of cultural logic to the point of inviting the specter of an essentialism that is divorced from history and creative action, but it is worth considering the manner in which foundational armatures and economic process entangle and result in distinctive social and ritual practices. The oft-noted “embedded” nature of economies owes much to the cultural logic of daily practice; understanding the fabric of the mesh will do much to improve interpretive narratives.

In the case of postmodernism, Jameson (1991) considers the extent to which late capitalism foregrounds commodification and has absorbed into the economic sector many arenas of material production such as art and architecture that previously had existed in

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a non- or semicommodified state, but are now shrink-wrapped and packaged for convenient sale. In effect, the black hole of capitalism has proven capable of absorbing any element of culture that can be deformed to conform to supply-and-demand market principles – even religion, judging from the economic success of televangelists and the more secular crusade for “creative capitalism” by philanthropist Bill Gates (2008). There is no denying the power (and allure to many living within less growth-oriented economic forms) of the cultural logic of capitalism, especially its ability to deliver goods and a comfortable livelihood to a middle class. Framed in this way, one can see how ridiculous it would be to study twenty-first-century U.S. society without dealing with its dominant form of economic integration. If we carry this point forward (or more accurately backward in time) to the Maya region, then we are somewhat perplexed by the absence of a consideration of economic practice in studies of politics and cosmology. But this analogy lacks elasticity. The vortex and hegemonic quality of twenty-first-century market capitalism must be considered a unique and recent phenomenon that likely would astound even Adam Smith. In archaeological terms, the many-headed hydra of late capitalism that dominates all other sectors of society has scarcely reached puberty.

In noncapitalist societies, on the other hand, economic practice tends not to rule the day but to be entangled with political, social, and cosmological frames – a point to which I return throughout this book. The cultural logic entailed in this entanglement (the term is used here in a way that varies a bit from Thomas 1991, 1996) is more complex and generally not reducible to the forces of supply and demand. Halperin (1994:165) describes a pertinent example from rural Kentucky where householders, with only one foot in the capitalist world, engage in a self-referential, diversified economic practice called the Kentucky Way: “there is a wisdom here, a rationality that has a logic of its own, a steadfastness and a doggedness that has tremendous resiliency precisely because it is multifaceted and flexible.”

When economic practice occupies a nuanced position within society, fleshing out the daily workings of economic processes can be very challenging for archaeologists, particularly in the absence of relevant documentary materials. But even when present, documentary materials tend to provide evidence of the dominant cultural

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logic or hegemonic norm, and problems of sampling bias can lead archaeologists to misread the evidence. Recall how our understanding of land transactions in Sumerian society was skewed toward hegemonic temple-state control by an overreliance on cuneiform tablets relating to temple transactions (for review of this issue, see Foster 1981 and Yoffee 1995). Most scholars of Mesopotamia now embrace a more heterarchical notion of economic power and land rights, particularly for the Old Babylonian period for which there is considerable detail on economic action at the family level from sites such as Nippur (Stone 1987:127). A comparable source of economic data to lead (or mislead) archaeologists working in the Maya lowlands has not been found, and this fact leads us to “go to ground” and synthesize multiple threads of information to arrive at a comparable level of interpretation. In this regard, assertions of elite hegemony over economic spheres tend to say more about the perspective (or cultural logic) of an archaeologist than about the sufficiency of archaeological data. Due to the highly visible archaeological remains referable to Classic Maya royalty – monumental architecture, hieroglyphic texts, portraiture, and beautifully crafted items of personal adornment – there is a tendency to focus on the “lives of the rich and famous” and to impute more hegemonic control to their agency than actually may have existed. In this work, I strive for a balanced perspective and attempt to tease out of the array of available sources some semblance of understanding of the agency of commoners as well as those who were markedly dominant or, as aptly expressed in a Tzotzil Maya “true, ancient narrative,” those who were fortunate enough to have been born accompanied by a powerful jaguar coessence (Gossen 1993:428–429).

PRACTICE-BASED APPROACH TO ECONOMIES

The action-oriented nature of economic process suggests that a practice perspective (Bourdieu 2005:213) may serve us well in a study of the social actions that produced and reproduced the material basis of ancestral Maya society. With classic inscrutability, Bourdieu (2005:13) states that “the true object of a real economics of practices is nothing other, in the last analysis, than the economy of the conditions of production and reproduction of the agents and institutions of economic,

cultural, and social production and reproduction.” The role of agents vis à vis institutions and the bidirectionality of forces of both change and stability have been at the fulcrum of social theories espoused not only by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) but also by Giddens (1979, 1981) and others. Theorists have called for a more profound grounding of social theory in human action and daily practice – the *habitus* or “generative principle of regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu 1977:78) without ignoring the fact that there are larger structures of society that both constrain and enable (Giddens 1979:69). These larger structures – so conspicuous in ancient Maya society – traditionally have received the lion’s share of attention and causal reference. Giddens (1979:53, 66), in particular, has taken great pains to emphasize that “the notions of action and structure *presuppose one another* [emphasis in original]” and to define structure as the “rules and resources, organized as properties of social systems.” Unlike synchronic theories of earlier structural-functionalists, however, Giddens (1979:66, 69) is actively concerned with the conditions under which society is reproduced (either as continuity or transformation) – a thing that he terms “structuration” – and claims that it proceeds via the “mutual dependence” of agency and structure (duality of structure), which acts as both the “medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems.” This interest in long-term change and stability among practice theorists carries resonance for archaeologists as does the priority accorded to the “fundamentally recursive character of social life” (Giddens 1979:69), a notion that harkens back to a goal of 1960s archaeology: to re-create past lifeways. But practice theory represents a sea-change shift in analytical focus with more emphasis placed on what and how and less on why (see Pauketat 2001:76). This shift in research priorities has filtered into archaeology via a critique of master (explanatory) narratives by several groups: postprocessualists who lament the exclusion of ritual action, feminists who decry the exclusion of females, and indigenous people who tend to be less concerned with why their ancestors switched to food production and more concerned with how archaeological information can be used to bolster claims of long-term sovereignty over land.

Practice theory has become so prevalent that, as Kelly and Kaplan (1990:141) note, “practice” has usurped “structure” as the reigning image of the real in anthropology. Theories of social practice

and agency, however, are not unproblematic. In the final analysis, one must deal with the basis of motivation and nature of intentionality that sparks agents to effect social practice. Ortner (1994:395, 2006:143), Gero (2000), and others have critiqued the emphasis on aggressive, competitive action – based on the theory of self-interest – that pervades studies of agency. We return shortly to theories of self-interest and methodological individualism, but here it is pertinent to mention the vintage invocation of strain theory by Geertz (1973) as an alternative means of “priming the pump” of agentive action. For Geertz (1973:201), self-interest and strain theories are two primary approaches to the study of the motivational factors that underlie agency (and ideology): “In the one, men pursue power; in the other, they flee anxiety.” Although the realm of intentionality is beyond the scope of this essentially archaeological study, it is apparent that practice theory cannot be taken at face value because modeling the how and what of intentionality can be based upon dramatically different theories of human motivation. Reynolds and Tanner (1995), for example, apply strain theory to the social ecology of religion and propose (following Ortner 1994:395) that actors experience the complexity of their situations and attempt to solve problems posed by those situations via religious practice that ironically both creates and alleviates the binds and burdens placed on actors.

The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977:78) provides a less muscular (some would say overly reflexive) concept for thinking about action that is habitual and deeply seated within cultural DNA – such as the notion of *costumbre* in traditional Maya societies (see Chapter 7). In an effort to link *habitus* to intermediate-scale societal forces, Bourdieu (2005:196–199) – in a manner that is evocative of Goffman’s frame analysis (1974; see also Branaman 1997:lxxiv–lxxx) – applied the concept of “field,” particularly in his analysis of the Parisian real estate market (see Bourdieu 1993:162–163 for seminal discussion). The field plays a powerful role in determining the “conditions in which agents come to decide (or negotiate) purchase prices ... and selling prices.” More in line with strain theory than self-interest theory, Bourdieu (2005:199) describes the field of forces as a field of struggles. For Bourdieu (2005:193), understanding *habitus*, field, and structure constitute the true goal of economic anthropology: “we must ... attempt to construct a realist definition of economic reason

as an encounter between dispositions which are socially constituted (in relation to a field) and the structures, themselves socially constituted, of that field.” As Holland et al. (1998:58–59) note, field is a kind of “structure-in-practice” and holds two advantages: (1) composed of interacting persons, field does not stand apart from persons in the way that structure – due to its abstractedness – can; and (2) dynamic relations of power and privilege – problematic within agency theory – can be traced somewhat more realistically through a field of interacting persons. In summary, Bourdieu’s definition of economic reason as an encounter between dispositions and structures – mediated by fields of interaction – highlights the entangled skeins that must be unraveled in order to understand economic practice.

How would an economy of practice take shape within archaeology? Within Mississippian archaeology, Pauketat (2001:87) urges a consideration of “the historical processes of *how* cultural orthodoxies [or logics] were created and resisted, or how a communal ethos or a corporate organization was co-opted or perpetuated through transformations of identity and scales of negotiation [emphasis in original].” This emphasis on power and its potential defeaters is a strong characteristic of practice studies, which Ortner (1994:390) maintains exhibit a “palpable Marxist influence,” a point to which I return shortly. Additional archaeological studies that explicitly employ a practice or agency approach – with varying degrees of success – are increasingly in evidence, beginning with Dobres and Robb (2000). Dobres (2000) singly has attempted to recast the archaeological study of technology in terms of agency theory, while Robb (1999:33) asserts that agency can provide the “theoretical linkage between cultural ideas and economic behavior.”

Throughout archaeology, there is renewed attention to putting a human face on narratives of the past. In Maya archaeology, our understanding of the agency of certain actors within Classic society has grown with the decipherment of hieroglyphic texts and the ability to put a name to the face of royalty. Decidedly more historical than the Maya archaeology of old, practitioners are still struggling to register the well-documented ritual practices and martial activities of the über-elites with the dimly focused activities of the very large remaining sector of ancestral Maya society. Was this latter sector coopted, composed of well-informed collaborators, or both? To what extent can

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knowledge of the royal segment be used to interpret archaeological materials from nonroyal contexts in a kind of intradisciplinary cross-fertilization or were the royals living a world apart, playing by completely different rules? As with much of practice theory, in posing specific questions about what and how, we often surrender the ability to answer these questions in an unambiguous fashion. The cultural logic of authority in ancestral Maya society (explored extensively in Chapter 6) suggests that even though royal power was imputed to have been absolute, it was neither uncontested nor totally foreign. This circumspect approach to the power of “natural lords” carried into the Colonial period when Spaniards quickly learned that many Yucatec Maya people intended to take full advantage of the Spanish judicial system to press their land claims and redress grievances against abusive Colonial practices (see Roys 1939; Restall 1997).

For Bourdieu, the economies of practice cannot be separated from cultural production and reproduction. In this regard, Maya societies of Colonial and more contemporary times are remarkable for their resiliency and ability to reproduce culturally (and biologically) in the face of a harsh Colonial regime and, during more recent times, through tragic epochs of genocide. What is the stuff of culture that results in this suprahuman feat of survival? Economies of practice have played a large role in the Colonial and Postcolonial survival of Maya people: the crafting of a culture that came to be seen as distinctive in dress, cuisine, religious practices, farming, and living in general. This distinctiveness marked Maya people as different and therefore vulnerable, but it also provided a way of being – a socially constituted economy of practice – that promoted intragroup solidarity and cultural survival. It is this characteristic of structure – both enabling and constraining as per Giddens (1984:169–179) – that occupies our thoughts through a good portion of this book.

GHOSTS OF PAST ECONOMIC ANALYSES

Economic anthropology has more than its share of skeletons in the closet. With a contentious past, economic anthropologists have long been divided over what constitutes an anthropologically grounded economic analysis (see Isaac 2005:20; , also Ensminger 2002). Central to this issue has been the question as to whether or not it is a good

thing to huddle with economists who produce elegant models of economic “behavior” based on simplistic and unrealistic assumptions. Much abused for their assumption of methodological individualism (otherwise known as *Homo oeconomicus* or rational choice theory), economists have been treated roughly by social theorists as the following quotes indicate. Bourdieu (2005:209) weighs in with the thought that “*homo oeconomicus*, as conceived (tacitly or explicitly) by economic orthodoxy, is a kind of anthropological monster: this theoretically minded man of practice is the most extreme personification of the scholastic fallacy.” Not one to hold back, Bourdieu (2005:221) delights in citing a quote from the venerable economist Thorstein Veblen who describes *Homo oeconomicus* as construed by classical economists “as a self-contained globule of desire.” Elsewhere, Bourdieu (2005:10) indicts economists in general as being guilty of seeing like a state and colluding with state-sponsored policy makers.

Sahlins (1994:440) is more circumspect in his critique of the central tenets of capitalism and attempts to place rational choice theory within an historical perspective: “by the time of Adam Smith, every person’s permanent misery – that is, scarcity and need – had become the premise of economic wisdom and the source of national welfare. The social and moral sublimation of temporal desires had indeed been dissolved by an ongoing capitalism.” This, he calls a new rationality, and, indeed, much of the early modern Colonial epoch can be explained by reference to the collision between the cultural logic of early mercantile capitalism and that of kin and tributary modes of production as examined by Wolf (1982).

Halperin (1994:1, 14) bestows upon methodological individualism the mantle of ethnocentrism “especially when it has imposed a utilitarian, ‘choice-making’ under conditions of scarcity form of rationality upon actors.” That economists are culturally tone deaf may come as no surprise to many anthropologists, but there is still much to be reckoned with as archaeologists – embodied with the logic of Late Capitalism – attempt to write narratives of the past that fill in the dots between material remains and social practice.

Decrying the units of analysis and the theory of motivation by means of self-interest, Geertz (1973:202) suggests that

the main defects of the interest theory are that its psychology is too anemic and its sociology too muscular. Lacking a developed analysis of motivation,

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it [interest theory] has been constantly forced to oscillate between a narrow and superficial utilitarianism that sees men as impelled by rational calculation of their consciously recognized personal advantage and a broader, but no less superficial, historicism.

To be fair, many schools of economic studies – such as New Institutional Economics – have moved away from methodological individualism and self-interest theory to focus on societal institutions and organizational arrangements (see Menard and Shirley 2005:1–18). Still, one has only to glance at the popular 2005 book *Freakonomics* written by University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner to grasp the fact that methodological individualism remains a touchstone – to some a truism – that explains the economics of practice within capitalism. The dust jacket reads, to wit: “economics is, at root, the study of incentives – how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same thing.” Described as a “rogue” approach to economics, in fact, the study reiterates the basic tents of classic economic theory: self-interest as the underlying motivation with scarcity as an external driving force.

Setting aside the colorful indictments handed down by anthropological theorists cited earlier, a rapprochement between anthropology and economics is complicated by the embrace of diverse forms of cultural economies by the former and a deafness to cultural diversity by the latter fanned by the flames of rational choice theory, which likely is a model that is too simplistic even for explaining economies of practice within full-blown capitalism. Within anthropology, the plot thickened after 1950 when economic anthropologists brought out of the closet the social thinker whose influential ideas about economies and their transformations have reverberated through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Karl Marx. With him came several others – including Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and A. V. Chayanov. Examining the impact of these thinkers would require a volume in and of itself – and many already have been written – so I focus here on how practice and agency theorists have deployed the ideas of seminal Marxist thinkers. Sherry Ortner (1994:391) expressed the influence of these first materialists best:

As Weber put the actor at the center of his model, so these writers [agency and practice theorists] emphasize issues of human praxis in Marx. As Weber