

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological

Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS
ON TRIAL

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

By the same author from Cambridge University Press:

Migrant Cocoa-Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism

Population, Prosperity and Poverty: Rural Kano 1900 and 1970

Dry Grain Farming Families: Hausaland (Nigeria) and Karnataka
(India) Compared

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS ON TRIAL



*THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CASE FOR
A PROSECUTION*



POLLY HILL

FELLOW OF CLARE HALL, CAMBRIDGE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

Cambridge University Press 1986

First published 1986

Reprinted 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1995

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Hill, Polly

Development economics on trial:
the anthropological case for
a prosecution

1. Rural development -
Developing countries

I. Title

330.91724 HC59.7

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Hill, Polly

Development economics on trial.
Bibliography.

Includes index.

1. Rural development - Africa, West.

2. Rural development - India, South.

3. Economic anthropology - Africa, West.

4. Economic anthropology - India, South.

5. Technical assistance - Africa, West - Anthropological aspects.

6. Technical assistance - India, South -

Anthropological aspects. I. Title

HN820.Z9C64 1986 307.1'4'0966 86-2613

ISBN 0 521 32104 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 31096 2 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*This book is dedicated to the memory of
my two great teachers in the two disciplines:
MEYER FORTES and JOAN ROBINSON*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological

Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

‘To the extent that economics is a source of
legitimacy for government actions, the modern
discipline constitutes in itself a major obstacle to
development in backward regions.’

J.K. Hart

*The Political Economy of
West African Agriculture*

CONTENTS



	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page	<i>ix</i>
	<i>Preface</i>		<i>xi</i>
	<i>Preamble</i> How the Farmers Outwitted the Bureaucrats: A True Tale		1
	<i>Appendix: The Creditors Come Too</i>		5
1	Why Country People are not Peasants		8
	The conventional use of the indefinable word <i>peasant</i> enhances the compulsion to generalize about the motivations of all the farmers in particular villages or even regions; leads to the neglect of farm-labouring (is the <i>landless</i> labourer a peasant?); and takes no account of the usual lack of craft and trade specialists.		
2	The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations: 1. The Relevance of Economic Inequality		16
	Village economic inequality is not regarded as innate, hence the fear that economic development will upset some aboriginal equilibrium; hence, also, the vain search for universal generalizations regarding farmers' motivations, etc.		
3	The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations: 2. The Poor Quality of Official Statistics		30
	Official statistics relating to the rural tropical world, especially in West Africa, are commonly so poor that they cannot be relied on to indicate the right trends and orders of magnitude.		
	<i>Appendix: The Berg Report</i>		49
4	The Vain Search for Universal Generalizations: 3. Historicist Fallacies		51
	Using a popular textbook, orthodox views of stages of development are shown to have no historical content in most regions. Market places are essentially a rural phenomenon, in many regions much older than economists believe. The concept of population explosion is called in question.		
5	Pause: How can the Impasse be Resolved?		66
	The dangers of 'contemporary prevailing orthodoxy' relating to all agrarian systems are very briefly examined.		

<i>viii</i>	<i>Contents</i>	
6	The Logical Necessity for Economic Inequality within Rural Communities	70
	The <i>a priori</i> evidence for inherent rural inequality is examined.	
7	The Farming Household: its Defects as a Statistical Unit	78
	Statistics relating to farming households lack all analytical precision unless different types of household are distinguished.	
8	The Need to be Indebted	83
	Numerous forms of village-generated credit are examined in relation to persistent moralizing about indebtedness. Village credit-granting should be regarded as a sign of a lively economy.	
9	The Flexibility of Inheritance Systems	95
	Sub-division of farm-plots is distinguished from fragmentation. It is concluded that inheritance systems reflect socio-economic realities, not <i>vice versa</i> .	
	<i>Appendix: Farm-Plots and Inheritance</i>	103
10	The Neglect of Farm-Labouring Systems	106
	European economists have traditionally ignored the significance of farm-labouring in their own societies, hence their neglect of this important matter in the third world.	
11	Misconceptions about Migration	122
	Various 'migration stereotypes' have overwhelmed commonsense; the incidence of urbanization is apt to be much exaggerated, and the great significance of intra-rural migration is not appreciated.	
	<i>Appendix A: The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana</i>	134
	<i>Appendix B: The Occupations of Migrants in Ghana</i>	138
12	The Neglect of Women	140
	Despite the growing impact of the feminist movement on third world research the economic contribution of rural women to general welfare is usually grossly underestimated.	
13	The Sale of Farmland	146
	Economists have usually failed to appreciate the significance of land-selling (where it occurred).	
14	Rural Class Stratification?	155
	This is a difficult concept; but it is wrong-headed to regard it as either new-fangled or introduced from the outside world.	
	<i>Appendix: Indian Share-Cropping</i>	167
	<i>Postscript Doomsday Economics</i>	171
	<i>Glossary and Place Names</i>	175
	<i>References</i>	182
	<i>Index</i>	192

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I received much support in writing this book from those who kindly agreed to criticize one or other of my numerous drafts, making many constructive suggestions; in this connection I particularly need to thank Drs Keith Hart, Peter Loizos and Piers Vitebsky, Mr David Williams (great scholar and journalist of West Africa), and my editor at the Cambridge University Press, Dr Peter Richards. I am also grateful to Drs Christopher Bayly, Patrick Chabal, Carol MacCormack, Peter Skalnik and Teresa Spens; and I am especially appreciative of the encouragement I have received over the years from Professor Michael Lipton who, like some of the other economists at the official Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, is well aware of the relevance of economic anthropology. The usual disclaimer that none of these people is responsible for anything that I have written is insufficient: it is rather that I am aware that some of them disagree with various aspects of my approach or presentation. Indeed, my most severe critic is myself, for contrary to appearances I am a reluctant polemicist who has been loath to embark on the vigorous assault I believe the subject demands.

Finally, I want to thank members of Clare Hall, Cambridge, for the congenial academic environment they have continued to provide; and to say that all my published work within the past twenty-five years has depended on living within a reasonable distance of the great Cambridge University Library, which is enlightened enough still to permit the borrowing of books.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE



For many years I have been waiting in vain for someone else to write this book. While it is common knowledge that so many of the assumptions on which rural development economists base their work are thoroughly unrealistic, owing to their general lack of experience of the tropical world, no one seems to be prepared to assume the role of outside professional critic. Given the failure to appreciate the significance of professional division of labour, it is generally believed that there is no role for a mediator who seeks merely to build bridges between economic anthropology and development economics. But just as an art critic seldom gives artists practical advice on how to improve their work, so it would seem the height of arrogance for an anthropologist like myself to make practical suggestions on working methods or subject matter to economists. Nothing like that is to be found here.

My approach is at once polemical and constructive: my polemical purpose is to expose what I see as the old-fashioned, stereotyped, Western-biased, over-generalized crudity and conceptual falsity of so many conventional economic premises, as well as economists' complacent attitude to bad official statistics; my constructive purpose, which takes up much more space, is a practical demonstration that many of the findings of the less esoteric branches of economic anthropology ought to be regarded as highly relevant to development economics although, as any glance at economists' bibliographies shows, they are habitually ignored. The fact that anthropologists usually pursue their work by means of detailed enquiries in the field has led to a refusal on the part of economists to believe that such detail is not usually an end in itself but rather the empirical basis for generalization.

I am well aware that many complex issues have been discussed in very simple terms (or neglected altogether) in this book, which I have sought to keep brief in order to appeal to as wide a public as possible.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*xii**Preface*

As I thought it would be confusing if I drew my anthropological findings from many different regions of the rural tropical world, I have chosen to concentrate mainly on Anglophone West Africa (all of which lies south of the relatively sparsely populated Sahel) and on south India, the two regions in which I have undertaken prolonged fieldwork myself – place names are listed in the Glossary. This is not to say that the themes and arguments that are presented here could not have been equally well developed using information from other parts of the world, or that I was obliged to make so much reference to my own publications. But like every other author I find it advantageous to work with the material I know best. I am concerned with arable farming so that pastoral societies fall outside my scope. Some four-fifths of the entire population of south India and possibly also of West Africa (for which the figure is not known at all precisely) consists of rural dwellers, who live either dispersedly on their farmland or in settlements with populations of under some 5,000, where the very great majority of households are dependent on farming or farm-labouring for their livelihood. Accordingly, it is certainly the countryside, not the towns and cities, which should be regarded as providing the definitive ways of life in those regions. Nor has the definition of *rural* presented any difficulty for, except in the immediate vicinity of very large cities, which are surprisingly rare in both regions, there is no urban-rural continuum, which takes such subtle and complex forms in some other world regions, notably China.

The justification for examining a few elementary textbooks on economic development in my polemical chapters is that they reflect ‘prevailing orthodoxy’, such as is adhered to by many economists, often unwittingly; given the enormous influence of these texts on the minds of students, in particular, it is unfortunate that they seldom receive the reviews they deserve.

Owing to their acceptance of bad official statistics, relating particularly to the value of crop production over wide areas, development economists must be regarded as mainly responsible for the contemporary mood of demoralization over third-world prospects, which has overwhelmed the public in the Western world – a public which so often feels that ‘it is too late for anything

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-31096-3 - Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological
Case for a Prosecution

Polly Hill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface**xiii*

to be done'. Since the famines in Ethiopia and Sudan became public knowledge, *Africa* has become a doom-laden word. Two of my main polemical purposes are to argue that much third-world 'doom-mongering' has no sound intellectual basis and to affirm the viability of tropical economies. The situation is not helped by the widespread use in India of such jargon as *semi-arid tropics* (a synonym for non-irrigated, rain-fed farming regions); or by shifting the boundary of the West African Sahel (properly the zone where pastoralism, not arable farming, has long defined the mode of existence) some 400 miles south into the heart of Nigeria.

Since my purpose is not didactic, my constructive (non-polemical) chapters 6 to 14 are not intended to form a linked, coherent whole; they are rather a set of essays on particular practical subjects, such as rural credit-granting, inheritance systems and farm-labouring, on which it would seem that economic anthropologists have much of interest to say to development economists. This would not be so were anthropologists devoid of a concern for economic development. Many of us (and I speak emphatically for myself) have long had the presumed needs of development economists in mind when conducting our work. Yet the number of economic anthropologists (as distinct from urban sociologists) concerned with the third world is now so tiny relative to the colossal number of development economists that it would seem that we ought to continue to concentrate on our fundamental research in the field, where most matters are unexplored, rather than converting ourselves into 'development anthropologists'. But such a conclusion is perhaps conditional on our persuading the economists to start reading our books. Will the university students, whom I have had particularly in mind when writing this book, please use their influence to help?