6.S: CONCLUSION and Exercises

Anthropologists have identified forms of structural inequality in countless places around the world. As we will learn in the Public Anthropology chapter, anthropology can be a powerful tool for addressing the pressing social issues of our times. When anthropological research is presented in an accessible and easily understood form, it can effectively encourage meaningful public conversations about questions such as how to best disperse relief aid after natural disasters.

One of economic anthropology’s most important lessons is that multiple forms of economic production and exchange structure our daily lives and social relationships. As we have seen throughout this chapter, people simultaneously participate in both market and reciprocal exchanges on a regular basis. For example, I may buy lunch for a friend today with the idea that she will return the favor next week when she cooks me supper. Building on this anthropological idea of economic diversity, some scholars argue that in order to address the economic inequalities surrounding us we should collectively work to construct a community economy, or a space for economic decision-making that recognizes and negotiates our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment. J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy argue that in the process of recognizing and negotiating this interdependence, we become a community.

At the heart of the community economies framework is an understanding of economic diversity that parallels anthropological perspectives. The economic iceberg is a visual that nicely illustrates this diversity. Above the waterline are economic activities that are visible in mainstream economic accounts, things like formal wage labor and shopping for groceries in a supermarket. Below the waterline we find the wide range of people, places, and activities that contribute to our well-being. This conceptual tool helps us to explore interrelationships that cannot be captured through mechanical market feedback loops.

The most prevalent form of labor around the world is the unpaid work that is conducted within the household, the family, and the neighborhood or wider community. When we include these activities in our understanding of the diverse
economy, we also reposition many people who may see themselves (or are labeled by others) as unemployed or economically inactive subjects.80 When we highlight these different kinds of labor and forms of compensation we expand the scope of economic identities that fall outside the narrow range valued by market production and exchange (employer, employee, or entrepreneur).81 Recognizing our mutual connections and the surplus possibilities in our own community is an important first step toward building an alternative economy, one that privileges community spheres rather than market spheres and supports equality over inequality. This also resonates with one of economic anthropology’s central goals: searching for alternatives to the exploitative capitalist relations that structure the daily lives of so many people around the world today. 82

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Why are the economic activities of people like the fair trade coffee farmers described in this chapter challenging to characterize? What benefits do the coffee farmers hope to achieve by participating in a fair trade cooperative? Why would participating in the global economy actually make these farming families more independent?

This chapter includes several examples of the ways in which economic production, consumption, and exchange link our lives to those of people in other parts of the world. Thinking about your own daily economic activities, how is your lifestyle dependent on people in other places? In what ways might your consumption choices be connected to global economic inequality?

General purpose money is used for most transactions in our society. How is the act of purchasing an object with money different from trading or gift-giving in terms of the social and personal connections involved? Would an alternative like the Ithaca HOURS system be beneficial to your community?

The Barbie doll is a product that represents rigid cultural ideas about race, but Elizabeth Chin discovered in her research that girls who play with these dolls transform the dolls’ appearance and racial identity. What are some other examples of products that people purchase and modify as a form of personal expression or social commentary?

**GLOSSARY**

Balanced reciprocity: the exchange of something with the expectation that something of equal value will be returned within a specific time period.

Consumption: the process of buying, eating, or using a resource, food, commodity, or service.

Generalized reciprocity: giving without expecting a specific thing in return.

General purpose money: a medium of exchange that can be used in all economic transactions.

Homo economicus: a term used to describe a person who would make rational decisions in ways predicted by economic theories.

Means of production: the resources used to produce goods in a society such as land for farming or factories.
Mode of production: the social relations through which human labor is used to transform energy from nature using tools, skills, organization, and knowledge.

Negative reciprocity: an attempt to get something for nothing; exchange in which both parties try to take advantage of the other.

Political economy: an approach in anthropology that investigates the historical evolution of economic relationships as well as the contemporary political processes and social structures that contribute to differences in income and wealth.

Redistribution: the accumulation of goods or labor by a particular person or institution for the purpose of dispersal at a later date.

Structural violence: a form of violence in which a social structure or institution harms people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

Subsistence farmers: people who raise plants and animals for their own consumption, but not for sale to others.

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