



Anthropology, Sustainability and Inequality

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Introduction

Anthropology has since its foundation in the 19th century, been concerned with the sustainability of human societies and the effects of human ecology on the natural distribution of plants and animals. Alfred C. Haddon, originally trained as a biologist, organized the Torres Strait Expedition (1898) after realizing that the exploitation of the world's natural resources by human complex societies (after the discovery of domestication and sedentary lifestyles). These societies, he believed were having a catastrophic affect on wild life. His purpose was to investigate the effect of this selective pressure of complex human societies on the diversity of human cultures and languages. As he recognized that agriculture was reducing the diversity of plants and animals and their distribution over the globe, he wondered if this complexity was made possible at the expense of human diversity as well. In other words, it seemed to him that complex societies arose by the creation of uniformity in human culture and that a reduction of diversity in species, that is species extinction, was a direct or indirect product.

This certainly seems obvious today as globalism as economic pressure and technology in the form of cultural change overwhelm local traditions creating a form of culture many have termed "globalism." Mass behavior is changing in uniform patterns from the use of smart phones, computers of all kinds to the recording of images and their effect on individual behavior as models. Whereas in the past there could be local effects in individual behavior in song and dance, ideology and technology, today local behavior is swamped by global exposure, and this ethnocide seems to wipe out not only cultural traditions, but also languages at an even faster pace than in Haddon's day.

Inequality and Standards of Living

The trade off that is often given for the benefits of globalism is usually defined as an increase in local standards of living. John Gapper's article in the Financial Times recently, (December 25th, 2013, "Capitalism in Search of Balance") takes on the Pope's message criticizing capitalism over rising inequality. Gapper depreciates the Pope's argument by reference to Antony Atkinson's research (see his recent Arrow Lecture at Stanford for details, it is on You Tube). Prof. Atkinson, however, does not dispute the data on rising inequality, rather he suggests that global inequality is decreasing as people in developed countries see their wages stagnate and their buying power and savings collapse, because at the same time he argues that this drop is compensated for by rising wages and income in developing countries. This is a false conclusion from the raw economic data and obfuscates the fact that in almost every economy that can be cited, China, Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, there has been a loss of institutions that support the health and welfare of the mass of the people (in Russia and China a loss of health care and pensions, for example, due to the end of the Soviet regime, and in Indonesia and Brazil a loss of community shared resources supported by barter now lost by cash economies brought in by global investment in land and resources). Global figures, as those provided by the IMF or Bank of International Settlements, ignore the fact that in locations where people produced most if not all of their needs or exchanged surpluses, they had incomes but they were not cash

incomes. Therefore, they were categorized as in poverty. When they are forced by changes in land use policies driven by global investment to work to earn money to survive they are now categorized as "middle class," in a most absurd corruption of reality. In most cases they are driven off the land and into the cities to become the under employed yet their return now provides less buying power than before under barter and self-sufficient conditions. I document this situation in my new book, *The Anthropology of Complex Societies: Inequality, Stability and Cycles of Crisis*, Lexington Books, 2013. Prof Atkinson, on the other hand, simply argues that growth will even things out, but in my study I find inequality is growing world wide, and especially in the countries where he sees growth for millions. It is rather an illusion.

Concepts in Development

Seeing the world differently, not through computer models or concepts of monetary incomes is necessary to understand the tremendous change that is taking place. This is the subject of a new book by Ben Ramalingam (*Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, Oxford University Press, 2014). Ramalingam points out the problems associated with making policy based on limited economic models. Of course, economic models failed to predict the credit crisis of 2008. Perhaps human behavior is too unpredictable for any human designed computer modeling.

Still such modeling is being applied across the globe and has significant consequences in the lives of millions of people. Samuel Brittan cites the work of S. Anagol, A. Etang and D.D. Karlan (*Financial Times* 12/27/13 "Cattle look good on gift cards, but look like poor investments") on the continued use of cows in India as an example of irrational behavior in capitalist settlements. While I have provided a number of examples of this from Western settings (2009, 2012, 2013), this example fails to meet the requirements. The authors examine the various benefits and negative outcomes of maintaining a cow in rural India and come to the conclusion that it represents a religious example of failure to maximize economic opportunities. India has the largest cattle and buffalo population in the world. In the post WWII period it was argued that India had as many of 80 million "excess" cattle. Confusion reigned in the 1960s and 1970s as to what "excess" meant and lacking a comprehensive analysis of the role of cattle in the lives of Indian farmers and villagers no conclusion could be reached. Many of those who argued the cattle were unproductive failed to understand how they were used, most did not realize that the cattle produced milk, that in some states they were slaughtered for meat and their hides, etc, used for economic purposes under various conditions. The Hindu

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doctrine of ahimsa (not killing animals) was investigated by Marvin Harris in the 1960s and 1970s (Harris, 1974, 1978), where he wanted to find if the worship of zebu cattle really represented an irrational block to economic benefit. Western development agricultural experts had long tried to change India farmers' choice of the zebu to more productive strains.

Harris found that the zebu fit the particular ecological setting in rural India better than the alternatives. His work was supported by more comprehensive studies by Odend'hal in a country wide reevaluation found that less than 2% of cattle (including buffalo) could be considered surplus and these were mainly in the central agricultural plains. Mechanical transport is inefficient even now after 40 years of development, so is the lack of infrastructure for maintenance of mechanical farm equipment in most venues making the cattle valuable for a number of activities. The daily caloric requirements of the cattle make them more efficient than vehicles or other strains of cattle that are more expensive to maintain. The manure the animals produce is valuable for fertilizer and fuel (zebu manure Harris found burned slowly and evenly producing a more efficient fire source than other available fuels), something the authors downplayed in addition to the fact that manure the animals deposit in the hillsides and fields acts directly as fertilizer and reduces the cost of human fertilizing labor. Also recent studies have found that many cattle are being defined as buffalo for purposes of avoiding the laws prohibiting exporting cattle for meat. The zebu are a source of energy that reproduces itself and its cost hardly varies when compared to the alternatives. So in this case at least, I have to disagree with Anagol, et al. and argue that the zebu is a rational use.

Models, Resilience and Ethics

Resilience is an aspect of sustainability. Japan is a good example of more than 600 years of population adaptations to stress. But response to stress has to be embodied in an ethical structure for social capital to be sufficient to carry out resilient adaptations. The economies with some degree of ethical policy are some of the Nordic states with a Democratic Socialist heritage but may derive mainly from their culture history. Japan also has a tradition of environmental ethics that is the residue of its ancient Shinto past. The general protectionism is a

part of this, as is the development strategy of coastal density. But its population drop is also tied to this past as I documented in my 2003 article, "The Concept of the Sustainable Economy and the Promise of Japan's Transformation," *Anthropological Quarterly*, v. 76, n. 3. Such a population drop has happened before as Japan went through different crises. If Japan can maintain this slope of population reduction by 2040 then it can reach a sustainable economic adaptation, with a population density comparable to that at the turn of the century. The combination of lower population demands on resources, especially energy, and increasing application of efficiencies and methods of harnessing the benefits of low impact resource use and reuse, can achieve what Herman Daly (*Beyond Growth*, Beacon Press, 1996) and Kenneth Boulding (*Evolutionary Economics*, Sage Publications, 1981) considered to be a means of humanity reaching a steady state economic adaptation.

Today the Pope rightly criticizes the pursuit of profits without regard for consequences. The massive profits of financial institutions including hedge funds seem to have destabilized the economies of a number of nations. The problem with ethics, and I discuss this topic in my new book, is that condition of 20th century ideologies of capitalism and communism, where there are no actionable ethics. Morality, as Amitai Etzioni argues, is not a consideration of modern economics, nor was it of capitalism's 19th century twin communism. We find in pre-Christian social systems with indigenous ethical systems, the integration of morality in economic decision making. This has been considered to be unmodern, or pre-modern thinking. Many people leave certain areas unexploited for religious or ethical reasons, in Darfur Fredric Barth (1967) found that transactions often left small amounts unaccounted for and these "margins" could be utilized for common needs allocated by traditional means. Such "margins" today are stripped out of modern economies by hedge funds, etc. Many such examples can be found in Herskovits' 1952 classic in economic anthropology.

Anthropology has much to say regarding today's problems, the difficulty is in being heard and by an audience that can utilize the information in a world of so much information that everything is submerged in a noise of the hive. Hopefully the contributions to this issue will contribute to a constructive dialogue.