Introduction: the porous boundaries of a discipline

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For much of the 20th century, theoretical developments in economic anthropology could be placed within specific debates and related concepts. These theories and the ethnographic studies on which they were based focused, for example, on classic dualities between – on the one hand – 'traditional' economies organized around personal relations and gift exchange, often based on rural agricultural production; and – on the other – urban economies characterized by markets, money and institutions that are generally associated with modernity (states, companies, industry, etc.). Another important distinction that influenced economic anthropology was between 'substantivist' and 'formalist' approaches (Polanyi 1944; see also Tucker, this volume), with contemporary anthropologists generally favoring the substantivist perspective. Also, in the debate about a 'moral' versus 'rational' approach to economics (Thompson 1963, Scott 1976), anthropologists tended to focus more on morality. These debates also scrutinized classical distinctions that divided the economy into spheres of production, exchange and consumption as relatively discrete areas of specialization (Bloch and Parry [1989] made an important step by formulating an alternative approach to spheres of exchange).

Over the past decades, the landscape of economic anthropology has changed to the extent that we need to reconsider what could be the boundaries of the discipline. This is due to new debates that, at least partly, are inspired by crucial societal changes. This led to novel or at least intensified discussions on, for example, circular economies (Isenhour and Reno 2019); financial and digital instruments (Maurer 2015, Neiburg 2010, Ortiz 2021); how to challenge global capitalism as intrinsically undemocratic (Hart 2010); the ethics of investments in fossil fuels (Nikolaeva et. al 2024); financialization and changing household configurations (Zaloom and James 2023); the economics of configurations of citizenship (L'Estoile 2014, Lazar 2017). These are only a few examples of how debates are changing, and in this volume we strive to represent these new orientations.

This *Encyclopedia* is, therefore, in some ways unusual. What one would expect are entries that summarize the state of the art within the established boundaries of a discipline. The ideal entry would summarize key debates, shifts in approaches and applications of a term, and identify major contributions to our understanding of the term. Although we value and respect this approach, works providing these kinds of tools abound. Recent in-depth overviews of economic anthropology already exist: James Carrier's (2021) *Economic Anthropology* proposes a useful 'further reading' section and a six-page index. Deema Kaneff and Kirsten Endres identify key issues and critical reflections (2021), inspired among others by the work of Chris Hahn, while Richard Wilk and Lisa Cliggett's handbook (2007 second edition) remains a valid didactic tool. *Focaal*, among the economic anthropology journals, has consistently provided an avenue for in-depth critique of neoliberalism's value-regime and the financialization frontiers. These strategies and struggles are captured in the award-winning *Insidious Capital* (Kalb 2024). With such institutional contributions and forms of recognition, multiple scholarly networks contribute to delineate and rewrite the contours of the discipline. Among those are, for example, the Society for Economic Anthropology and the Society for the Anthropology of Work (part of the American Anthropological Association), the Anthropology of Economy Network (part of the European Association of Social Anthropologists), as well as networks and working groups across the world concerned with Urban Studies, Development Studies, Political Ecology, Environmental Anthropology, Legal Anthropology and Gender and Queer Studies. Consequently, when Cristina Grasseni extended the invitation of Edward Elgar Publishing to edit an *Encyclopedia of Economic Anthropology*, we asked ourselves what need there would be for one.

We concluded that our aim is to map lines of innovative development in economic anthropology that are open to a new scholarly generation. Without ignoring the history of economic anthropology, we try to shed new light on the development of the discipline by placing emerging themes in economic anthropology at the center of the volume and asking authors to explicitly draw connections between their key topics and the empirical evidence that they have recently collected. Our list of contents is thus not designed around conventional definitions but rather on topics and objects of inquiry that economic anthropologists are investigating in the field today. Ethnographic research is leading in setting the tone, and we use this opportunity to distil the directions in which the discipline's curiosity is moving.

With our approach – and thanks to all the authors' contributions – we would like to achieve something different than outlining – or even suggesting – a theoretical convergence and clearly defined boundaries to economic anthropology. Boundaries are, in fact, determined by our intellectual history, and we find that in our research trajectories, the boundaries of what economic anthropology is or should be about have not been clear-cut, as they overlap onto ethnographies of work, food, identity and subjectivities. In fact, the discipline itself is no longer defined by comfortable canons and debates. Several contemporary anthropological studies relate to the economy as a practice and lived experience, as livelihood and care, as infrastructuration, etc., but they would not be considered as studies in 'economic anthropology' within a narrow, classical definition. We are thinking, for example, of research on the energy industry and climate change nexus (Boyer 2024, Howe 2019; see also Howe, this volume). Similarly, economic imaginaries and practices of care (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), sustainability (Shivant 2024), precarity (Bäumer Escobar 2021) and self-exploitation (Guthman 2014) intersect with those of alternative economic practice, for example in the case of alternative food networks (Grasseni 2013).

There is also a growing awareness of how theoretical approaches and methodologies differ in regional research traditions, and thus reflect institutional and national histories, each with their own power dynamics. We need to work towards a more divergent and subversive map of the field, capturing the many directions that research in economic anthropology is taking us, without neglecting its heritage. Economic anthropology has and continues to offer critical contributions to how societies have changed in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways.

A second reason for our somewhat unusual approach is that (economic) anthropology relates theoretical approaches to empirical research, including everyday practices and historical and socio-political contingencies. Instead, an encyclopedia is usually premised on the expectation that the intellectual history of a field is first and foremost defined by theoretical progress as separate from its empirical foundations. This creates a duality that anthropologists often reveal as being the outcome of power dynamics. This *Encyclopedia* aims to make this relationship between rich, detailed, and contextualized empirical research and theory explicit, highlighting how theory is contingent knowledge. Theory is *contextual*, and relates to the study of specific phenomena and events as well as to research practices and methods. We would like this volume to offer insights into the contingency of the concepts that inform our understanding of the economy as a lived reality and, at the same time, challenge the universal claims of theoretical approaches.

For such an approach, summarizing 'the state of the art' is not the most important criteria. This single-volume *Encyclopedia* instead reflects different and contingent 'state of the arts', suggesting a (not linear) epistemology whereby we move forward by solving old problems and identifying new ones, making intellectual and empirical space for the contingency of knowledge production in economic anthropology. It is for this reason that we invited authors to a) propose an entry that they find important, even when that is not yet reflected in a classic canon of economic anthropology; b) provide a brief positioning of the entry in relation to how they and others have approached 'their' topic; and c) include an ethnographic or otherwise empirical context underlining the specificity of their research. We also encouraged authors to include at least a paragraph on their methods. In sum, the entries and subjects we profile are unusual because the authors have been encouraged to speak with an authorial rather than compilatory voice, using a bottom-up ethnographic approach grounded in personally conducted fieldwork. This approach does not aim at being exhaustive but rather at opening up diverse approaches through contextualization.

This, in turn, helps redefine what economic anthropology can be about, mapping lines of innovative development. We emphasized ethnographic examples, exploring the most up-to-date, interdisciplinary and frontier works in economic anthropology. This meant inviting a diverse range of scholars, from junior to senior, and as much as possible seeking to highlight geographically diverse focusses of investigation, from different regional traditions. The aim is to capture how new curiosities in economic anthropology are emerging, and how these curiosities underwrite a new way of thinking about the economy while sustaining interdisciplinary conversations. We approached authors who are pushing the bounds of what constitutes anthropological engagements with the economy, with regard to economic analysis, economic institutions and economic knowledge. We envisaged this as a dialogic process with our invited authors; we were in correspondence with a little fewer than one hundred of them – eventually delivering the fifty-seven entries we present here. The organization we proposed, by clustering them in eight sections, each with an editor's introduction, should be seen as a snapshot of our dynamic work of categorization.

Among our ambitions was to reveal and highlight how specific regional/topical entries could situate themselves in relation to the broader economic anthropological debates. Therefore, each entry builds on ethnographic fieldwork on a specific geographic area and topic expertise, explaining how its regional and historical contexts affects and defines its economic-anthropological theme – for example, contemporary car insurance legislation in Italy (Moretti), the solidarity economy movement in Massachusetts (Shear), or the 'affective labor of Polish and Mongolian kin and work-brigades networks' (Rakowski). We asked the entry authors to not shy away from ethnographic anecdotes about the idiosyncratic professions of their field actors – central bankers, corporation lawyers, crop insurers, digital currency designers, fiscal policy-makers, climate-funds managers, but also urban gangs' youth, activists, and 'battling' poets artistically engaged in and against their precarious factory jobs (see the relevant entries by Holmes, Westbrook, van de Meerendonk, Kanters, Smith, Makovicky, Tripathy, and van Crevel in this volume).

The terrain of this current scholarly engagement covers both established topics of economic anthropology, such as value (see Filippucci, Nascimento, Spierenburg in this volume) and areas that do not often fall under the heading of economic anthropology (such as hope, exhaustion and violence; see Miyazaki, De Musso, Robben in this volume), both expanding and subverting the current classification. What do we gain when we push these boundaries? Using storying, narrative and ethnographic cameos to explore theory with an anecdotal method (Holmes and Marcus 2007), this approach affords insights into concrete contexts while revealing the situatedness of concepts such as dignity, loss, and crisis, for example, from an insurer's viewpoint (Bähre 2023; see also Pignolo, Moretti, van de Meerendonk in this volume). Concrete anecdotal knowledge is what central bankers need and ask for – from branch directors, parish church pantries, entrepreneurial associations – to tap into the societal mood and divine the 'economic trends' they themselves bring about (Holmes 2014) through the use of institutional and 'futuring' language (see Holmes, Kanters, Beuving in this volume). We make this epistemological-ethnographic nexus visible.

This is not just an empirical contribution – mapping diversity on the ground – but an intellectual one: capturing the critical insights and practical solutions our field interlocutors dealt with, the specific challenges posed by their positioning in the 'field force' of defiant poetry and subterfuge in crashing manufacturing jobs (see van Crevel, Prentice in this volume); of labor in infrastructural hubs for global logistics (see Bäumer Escobar, Høyer Leivestad in this volume); of the pervasiveness of financial services and markets vis-à-vis kin, self-help and religious networks (see Kauppinen, Rodima-Taylor, Mikuš in this volume); or on new configurations of gender in global capitalism (see Kusimba, Green, Kiereri). Thus, experiments in localism and globalism, resistance and hope, futuring and heritage are articulated through visions and functions of the economy – sometimes with contradictory results (Grasseni 2017, 2023). So, for example, worker-owned cooperatives feature in solidarity economy as tools to re-engineer subjectivities and economic relations for people and planet rather than profit, while the cooperative model is also appropriated in scaled-up corporate business and neoliberal governance (see Shear, Mahmud, Plenders in this volume). Likewise, the entries dealing with fin-tech and digital currencies illustrate the porous boundaries and the ambivalent coexistence of the ambitions to re-engineer the economy with moral and political sensibilities, but also the continuing engagement and dependence on institutions and corporations (Kanters 2023; see also Westbrook, Peebles in this volume).

While concise, the entries have not been restricted to providing summaries of canonized knowledge but rather open up horizons of frontier research. Consequently we do not organize the entries alphabetically but rather cluster them thematically and have allowed slightly longer titles. The section introductions provide a summary of the entries while clustering them by thematic sections, pointing out what the entries have in common, especially in relation to the section themes. These overviews provide the reader with clear guidance on how to navigate the volume. The eight sections are interconnected, as most entries could fall into two or more. Yet by focusing on 'natural resources', 'corporations and emerging markets', 'economies of care', 'scale and global circulations', 'economies of statecraft', 'gendered economic relations', 'infrastructure, technology and digitalization', and 'skill, labor, and precarity', we suggest key directions in the development of this field. The section introductions also highlight the key theoretical or empirical directions contextualizing the entries, respecting the diversity of their approaches and the particularities of fieldwork influencing their questions. With this ethnographic purview, some entries challenge what we take to be 'economic' aspects of human affairs and the human condition.

In sum, this volume seeks to capture prospectively what is defining an affirmative economic anthropology that is in-the-making, dealing with the emerging problems and predicaments of our era and opening new fields of curiosity and inquiry. Each entry represents a micro-insurgency aimed at provoking and unsettling the reader into an expansive engagement with conventional and unconventional topics about the economic life unfolding around us – an economy which we, all of us, inhabit as both participants and observers.

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