



Elli Barbagianni "The Establishment of Utopia"

THE CRITIQUE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ECONOMY

ABSTRACTS

THE CRITIQUE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ECONOMY – A SYMPOSIUM

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This symposium intends to bring scholars of different disciplines and theoretical orientations together in the city of Karl Polanyi to discuss recent developments in the reconstruction of past economies through anthropological, archaeological, historical, sociological, and economic perspectives.

A single and isolated individual driven by his or her economic agency has emerged in modernity in an imaginary free market and accordingly defined archaeological theory and interpretative praxis. Social anthropological research has been showing since the 19th century that such “Robinsonades” lack foundations in well-documented pre-capitalist societies. Instead, they represent projections of contemporary economic role models into the remotest past. Furthermore, certain current perceptions of the singular individual and eternal market forces are more or less unconsciously inspired by the hegemonic neoliberal economic discourse of our time.

We may now acknowledge that any study of past economic systems by means of archaeology requires a revised theoretical approach, which can be conceptualized through the application of anthropological theory in a critical study of historical data and testing of the results in the field. The quality of a model is evaluated against its ability to explain a concrete historical situation, the residue of which is archaeological evidence in context. The evidence, in turn, offers the tools for verifying, rejecting, or adjusting the model.

Archaeological theory in the western world seems to have overwhelmingly favored a neoliberal positivism in the interpretation of past economic relations. In the first half of the 20th century, cultural historical approaches projected modern economic models into the past through a rather formalist perspective; processual archaeology attempted to quantify these relations; finally, post-processual critique emphasized the role of the individual in shaping ancient economic patterns. Archaeological theorizing is contingent on contemporary political and philosophical contexts making, therefore, interpretation of the past vulnerable to manipulation, especially when economic relations are at stake. Economic studies of the past have been defined by several different theoretical approaches not only in accordance with the respective socio-political background, but also depending on the *Zeitgeist*. There are only a few academic fields, where interpretation depends so heavily on the theoretical methods and approaches engaged, as economic studies of the past.

Therefore, in our minds, a current challenge in archaeological interpretation is to become aware of several points of critique and reassert them in analytical praxis. One of these points is the social conditioning of property in past economic relations, which have been historically shaped through continuous transformations. Accordingly, relations among cultural phenomena can reflect, or more often, conceal relations among social groups with distinct interests. Human agency is socio-historically restricted, which means that individuals can become active social performers, yet under the restriction of certain conditions. These conditions may emerge independently of human will, but they are always subject to transformation by means of conscious human (re)action.

One of the main objectives of this symposium is a critical discussion of the dominant economic models that have been applied to the study of the past economic relations during the last two centuries and consideration of alternative theoretical trajectories. These may be conceived against the background of recent developments in the capitalist world system such as the enduring crisis. They may be tested on the grounds of well-documented archaeological and historical contexts. We conceptualize economic behavior as the diachronically changing relations of production, distribution, and consumption and welcome the application of economic theory to archaeological contexts. Our intention is not to test the theoretical models under scrutiny, but rather to present evidence against the rationalization of past economic behavior according to the rules of modern markets.

Randall McGuire

Writing the Deep History of Human Economy

Colleagues frequently ask me why do I as an archaeologist, embrace Marxism which is a theory of Capitalism, to study the deep history of human economy before Capitalism. My simple answer is twofold: (1) if we wish to transform capitalism we must demonstrate that alternatives to Capitalism existed in the past and that we can therefore create alternatives in the future, and (2) Marxism offers archaeologists a way around many of the seemingly irresolvable theoretical oppositions and as such deserves a space in the theoretical and substantive debates of archaeology. Capitalists deny history by claiming that capitalist relations spring from human nature that is universal and given in human history. More recently various New Materialisms have arisen from the ashes of Postmodernism. Some advocates reject the study of inequality and history. Capitalism and theses New Materialists each reject history for different reasons and with different goals but their rejections of history lead to the same results: (1) they maintain the status quo of capitalism; (2) they preclude critiques of capitalism; and (3) they enfeeble our ability to proffer alternatives to Capitalism.

Rosemary A. Joyce

Wealth, Women's Labor, and Forms of Value: Thinking from the Study of Ancestral Central America

As renewed interest in inequality sparks a turn to the archaeologically documented past as a source of data for generalizing models explaining the roots of the contemporary economic reality, it is worth pausing to question how pasts that were shaped under far different social conditions can be treated as equivalent to the contemporary world of nation states and global economies. In this paper, I examine three sources of incommensurability that should be taken into account in any attempt to think from the past of economic relations to the present. The first of these examines how labor is conceived of, counted, and understood in these different situations. As feminist scholars of the contemporary economy have long noted, large areas of economic activity by women are routinely excluded in modern analyses. Such household maintenance work rests on a tacit distinction between household labor (as intimate, domestic, and ruled only by naturalized relations of sex and age) and extra-domestic labor. For the societies of ancient Central America, such a division simply did not exist. Not only did a large part of the organization of agricultural labor build on household relations; women's specialist craft production, in particular, was critical to economic relations. This leads to the second aspect of incommensurability that I consider: the identification and mobilization of standards of value and exchange. In these societies, cloth produced by women working in domestic spaces was one of the enduring standards of value, specifically important in tribute payments that established and perpetuated political hierarchies. Cloth's use in this fashion cannot be disentangled from the social relations in which it was embedded. Nor can the social relations which gave value to other key media used to measure value in economic exchanges be equated, even when the same social agents, women, have key roles in production, for example, in the cultivation of cacao, a second standard of value. By considering these two media, and the way that they relate to women's economic activities extending from domestic space to cosmopolitan marketplaces, I identify a third contradiction to conceptualizing the ancestral Central American economy in terms drawn from the current situation: the importance of ideologies of material animacy and the role of animating spirits in exchanges we might otherwise think of as economic.

Bleda S. Düring

Crafting and Trade in Chalcolithic Cyprus and Anatolia

In the Chalcolithic of Cyprus and Anatolia we can document the emergence of exchange networks that were centred on highly standardized craft products. These exchange systems, organized around figurative items crafted from stone, set the stage for the later development of long distance exchange networks of 'prestige goods' made of metals and gemstones from distant origins. This earliest exchange of figurative stone objects remains poorly investigated and occurred in egalitarian societies. Why were such objects considered desirable in the first place? How can we understand the rise of the shared regimes of value that they objectify? In this presentation I will put forward some first ideas to understand this problem in relation to anthropological studies on value, such as those of Appadurai and Graeber.

Roberto Risch

Affluence or Surplus: The Dilemma of Prehistoric Economies

A common understanding of modern “critical” anthropology, as well as political-ecological thinking in the Western World is that material affluence and freedom is only imaginable in societies with limited material needs, living in harmony with nature, an assumption which has its deepest roots in the Genesis of the Old Testament. As soon as societies managed to increase production through technological improvements, through specialisation or by mobilising more work force, centralization of power and exploitation become inevitable. Consequently, the economic wealth and technological advances achieved under Civilisation is inevitably tied to the state, social inequality and environmental destruction. In this narrative, Western democracy emerges as the only political system capable to reduce social as well as natural exploitation to “acceptable limits”.

However, this view is challenged by archaeology and the identification of an increasing number of prehistoric societies which manifest an exceptional economic force, including a high level of specialisation and coordination, but where no or few signs of political centralisation can be observed. Often, these societies engaged in substantial joint enterprises, extended over large territories, organised large-scale distribution networks, and developed exceptional technical skills. No convincing interpretative framework has yet been reached for these archaeological complexes, which escape the conventional labels of chiefdom, state, social complexity, etc. The different spatial and material expressions used in archaeology to recognise political institutions, centralised power or social hierarchies remain elusive. Although settlement areas can reach considerable extensions, they do not develop into urban centres. The production of substantial gains, rather than surplus is the common feature of these groups. This economic affluence is realised in very different social, ideological or political realms, but does not become private property. Consequently, we can speak here of “true affluent societies”, where substantial material benefits are shared and relished collectively. A new different and economic theory is required in order to understand these societies.

In our presentation, we will delve into the concepts of affluence, wealth and surplus, and present several archaeological case studies from the Near East to the western Mediterranean in order to discuss different forms of social and political organisation.

Harald Meller

Charisma and Norm. On the Constitution of Power and Resource Control in Early Bronze Age Central Germany

The assessment of the economic base of the Únětice Culture is hampered by a comparatively young Early Bronze Age settlement archaeology. However, in scientifically determining the origin of raw materials as well as in analysing the distribution of artefacts, it becomes possible to reconstruct stable long-distance relationships and regional distribution contexts. In addition to this, further research on the Nebra Sky Disc provides new insights into grave and hoard finds as well as into the inclusion of the Únětice Culture into the cultural fabric of Central Europe. At the transition from the 3rd to the 2nd millennium an elite was established in Central Germany, which is characterised by exceptionally rich burials with standardised ruling regalia in burial mounds. This elite was integrated into far-reaching trade and communication networks and was capable of controlling the flow of goods between north and south for several centuries. Signs of inner-social clashes, an increased need for protection, or warlike conflicts are completely missing in this period and proofs of settlement are mostly confined to unfortified farmsteads in settlement clusters along bodies of water. The preservation of this situation until the decline of the system in the late phase of the Únětice Culture was achieved by means of social control mechanisms as well as a strong, caste-like hierarchy. The latter can be tracked on the basis of fixed patterns of equipping burials and hoards and allows making statements on the economic conditions.

Svend Hansen

“The Economy Has No Surplus”: Harry W. Pearson’s Contribution Revisited, 60 Years Later

In the influential volume, *Trade and Market in the Early Empires. Economies in History and Theory* edited by Karl Polanyi, Conrad M. Arensberg und Harry W. Pearson (Chicago 1957) Pearson published his provocative article, “The Economy has No Surplus.” He rejected a mechanistic view of development in which surplus was considered as the precondition of “complex” societies with priests and a ruling class. He stressed the question of the preconditions of the surplus: “There are always and everywhere potential surpluses available. What counts is

the institutional means for bringing them to life.” It provoked a number of statements by Marvin Harris, Ernest Mandel, Maurice Godelier and others, which criticized Pearson’s standpoint and insisted on the “evolutionary” view of surplus. In my contribution, I will sketch this debate and discuss an archaeological example.

Donald W. Jones

The Western String in the Late MBA and LC I–II: Populations and Account Balance

The populations of the islands of the Western String – Thera, Melos, and Kea – were small enough that it is difficult to see how some of their residents could have amassed sufficient wealth from strictly intra-island resources to have supported the affluence reflected in some of their architecture, frescoes, and high-value imports present on the islands. The Western String port-town hypothesis offers an explanation which is formalized in a model of local production, provision of shipping or port services, a trade account, and a capital account. The model predicts that the islands could have earned substantial wealth through the export of these port services to much larger populations on Crete and the Mainland, providing a mechanism for acquiring the observed affluence. As a less observable, corollary prediction, the model shows that the provision of port services would have taken labor from agriculture, requiring agricultural imports, incidentally diversifying the islands’ food supplies. The model’s observable predictions are tested with changes at Ayia Irini and Phylakopi following the Thera volcanic eruption and ensuing disruptions on Crete and are found to be roughly in accord with available evidence.

Reinhard Bernbeck

The Emergence of Abstract Work in 4th Millennium BCE Mesopotamia

The Uruk period in Mesopotamia is well known for two basic developments in human history: this is the time of the first and earliest cities, and at the end of this period, the first writing appears. However, the political economy that underlies these changes remains poorly understood and analyzed. We know of attempts to pay labor by developing ration systems, but the consequences for those who were carrying out this labor are not taken into account. I focus on the difference between objectivist approaches to the analysis of a labor system and those that include subjective viewpoints. I argue that it is necessary to conceive of major work projects not just in terms of work hours or other linear measures, but also in terms of drudgery. I discuss in more detail the discrepancy between these two views of the same phenomenon and political consequences.

Juan Carlos Moreno-García

Property, Markets and Commons in Pharaonic Egypt: Beyond Redistributive and Neoliberal Approaches

Ancient Egypt has been traditionally characterized as the quintessential example of a redistributive and heavily centralized economy. However, a recent trend intends to analyze it under the perspective of neo-institutionalism, in which markets, law and institutions progressively reduced transaction costs, promoted economic rationalism and paved the path to economic specialization in a context of progressive integration in international exchange networks. While the pertinence of neo-institutional models for antiquity is increasingly questioned, I shall focus my research on some examples of economic behavior in which production for markets, a business-oriented mentality and economic “rationality” operated in a social and economic environment rational but alien to modern capitalist values. There the community (family, fellow citizens, patronage networks) and customary norms marked the limits of acceptable behavior, with their emphasis put on the reproduction of social groups and getting durable sources of income, not on the development of individualist interest and entrepreneurial strategies of accumulation and investment that could put in danger the continuity of family and community links.

Reinhard Jung

Uneven and Combined: Products Exchange in the Mediterranean (3rd–2nd Millennium BCE)

When investigating value systems, social anthropologists analyze fundamental social norms and processes shaping value and its reification inside a living society. Reconstructing complex belief and behavior systems is of course

one of the most difficult tasks for archaeologists, who are dealing with past societies. Obviously, this is due to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record – even leaving aside the aggravating absence of written sources in the case of prehistoric societies. Consequently, it is often impossible to define or even describe by purely archaeological means any socially and ideologically determined use values.

In his monograph ‘Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value’ David Graeber has suggested that the terms use value and exchange value “should best be used to describe the inner workings of a capitalist system, and not outside it (Graeber 2001).”

Indeed, average production time is the measure for the exchange value of a product in a commodity producing society, in which all products have assumed commodity character. However, in several past societies characterized by early modes of production, average production time played an important role for controlling and regulating economic processes – including exchange relationships. Moreover, the exchange value of a product as defined by its “socially necessary labor time” (or “abstract labor”) offers a measure of value that is independent from specific use values, which are not commensurable between different societies with diverging value systems. According to Marx, the more regular an exchange relationship becomes, the more products tend to be produced for exchange. Consequently, a separation starts to occur between the utility of the product for consumption and its utility for exchange purposes – i. e. its use value becomes distinguished from its exchange value. Furthermore, the quantitative proportions, in which commodities are exchanged against each other, becomes directly dependent on their production. “Custom stamps them as values with definite magnitudes (Marx, The Capital vol. I [1867]).”

This paper explores the archaeological correlates that one may detect for determining the extent to which certain products gradually assumed commodity character due to the role they played in recurrent exchange processes evolving between different societies. The exchange relationships of the societies around the Mediterranean coasts in the Bronze Age offer a promising field for such an endeavor, as those societies were based on very different economic systems ranging from the Asiatic Mode of Production in the east and south to small-scale domestic modes of production in the north and west.

Stefanos Gimatzidis

Value and Social Transformation in the Iron Age and Archaic Mediterranean

Anthropological and especially economic studies often treat value as a quantifiable notion and attempt its rationalization by attributing to it several different meanings. Value, whether physical-economic or symbolic, social or cultural is the same driving force in social change. In this paper I argue that neither labor is the only source of value nor fungibility and exchange mechanisms are the only factors that define it; value is indeed constructed by its cultural context but in certain premodern societies it was also manipulated to forge new social and political relations. On the one hand commodities’ value is defined by social norms that regulate production and exchange; on the other hand value may be irrationally structured not as part of a strategy within already operating sociopolitical systems but as a response to them. The definition of value may thus become a matter of choice that can have major implications in sociopolitical transformations.

In this sense manifestation of wealth in the mortuary ritual reflects often a manipulation of the notion of value rather than its explicit documentation. This may partly explain the conspicuous variability in the conceptualization of value among different mortuary landscapes from Phoenicia through the Aegean to Etruria and Iberia. Other examples of manipulation of value present the exchange mechanisms among loosely organized and particularly disparate states that developed irrationally and were subject to continuous changes merging trade with piracy and exchange for profit with exchange of gifts and looting. Key in the objectification of value was the perception of surplus production as part of a new value system that required a political centralization and was also a means to achieve it.

Jan Paul Crielaard

Happily Connected? The Interconnectivity Paradigm and the Debate About the Ancient Economy

Over the last decades, Mediterranean archaeologists and historians have shifted from models emphasizing small, static units and rigid structures towards a new paradigm emphasizing connectedness and the fluidity of the movement of people, goods and ideas, both in a geographical and social sense. Horden and Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea*

(2000) has been a landmark in this development; other sources of inspiration for the interconnectivity paradigm are today's network society, the current internet culture and information economy, and such related phenomena as globalization and increased economic interdependence. Some modern scholars have come to see mobility as part of the human condition, while others present increasing globalization as the master narrative of homo sapiens over the last 60.000 years.

The interconnectivity paradigm has led to all kinds of sweeping statements about mobility, ever-expanding networks, small worlds, mutability, cultural homogenization, loss of sense of place, breakdown of spatially bounded cultures etc. – almost to the point that interconnectivity is taken as gospel truth and is becoming a new ideology. In my contribution I aim to discuss some of the basic tenets of the interconnectivity model. My position is that the model needs a firmer empirical basis as well as critical reflection. I will return to the traditional primitivists vs modernists debate to see how the model relates to this debate and what we may learn from it to identify some of the interconnectivity paradigm's underlying, modernist notions and related ideas about individual economic agency and social mobility.

Mark Lawall

Aegean Transport Amphoras (6th to 1st c. BC), the Social Economy, and Path Dependence

Studies of Aegean transport amphoras of the late Archaic through Hellenistic periods rarely admit to a particular theoretical stance. Implicit assumptions of rational action underpin much of the scholarship: stamps certified capacity since no one would have trusted such otherwise handmade, clay vessels for commerce; shapes must have served to advertise the product of each unique polis as merchants vied for consumers; such branded jars helped to market the well-known wine or oil of the given city. Once the Greek world was securely populated with 'professional merchants' and a widespread use of coinage, the social context of trade fades from discussion. The evidence should speak for itself in a familiar language of economic rationality.

This is not to deny that there has been some debate over interpretive models. When numbers of imported amphoras are too small, some scholars argue against a 'trade' or 'market' linking exporter and importer. Explicit reference to modern economic or sociological models of organizations, innovation or imitation, may be dismissed as 'modernist'. While many such attempts to move beyond basic documentation admittedly suffer from their fragmented approach, addressing only specific elements of the vast field of behavior encompassed by ancient transport amphoras, there have not been sustained attempts to work within a consistent alternative model. Efforts to draw New Institutional Economics (NIE) into the world of ancient economies, while promising and constructive in many respects, have largely left amphoras to their traditional role of carriers of goods and brand advertising.

While an extreme view of deliberate, universal and consistent efforts to reduce transaction costs is not defensible, NIE's attention to transaction costs does draw attention to archaeologically accessible variables such as marking practices, standardization, choices of shape, and so on. Equally important, and often ignored, is Douglass North's emphasis on path dependence in the study of economic development. Existing social, political and economic conditions can either prevent or accelerate changes in economic systems. More attention to the social conditions of amphora use in the late Archaic through Hellenistic periods can challenge the static view of production centers, distribution patterns, and dates as simply speaking for themselves.

Robin Osborne

Modelling Trade in Athenian Pottery in the Archaic and Classical Period

No model for the economy of the archaic and classical Greek world can ignore Athenian pottery. However cheap we think even the most elaborately painted pottery was, the sheer quantity of Athenian pottery exported, and the ubiquity of the markets for pottery demand to be fitted into our models of trade. This paper outlines what we know of the pottery market and the way in which that market changed over time, and considers the factors responsible for the changes and the implications for our views about how trade in the archaic and classical world was organised and how both the quantity and the nature of trade changed over time.