



Making a Living

Chapter Outline

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Key Points

1. Our cultures suggest a range of options for making a living as well as furnishing the tools to pursue those options. Human beings have devised a variety of **subsistence strategies** to satisfy their material survival needs.
2. Human economic activity is divided into three phases: **production, distribution, and consumption**. Some anthropologists argue that storage practices affect these phases. In capitalist societies, **market exchange** is the dominant mode of distribution, yet many non-Western societies have traditionally carried out distribution without money or markets.
3. Formal **neoclassical economic theory** developed in an attempt to explain how capitalism works. Building on the emphasis that this theory gives to market exchange, economic anthropologists showed that non-capitalist societies regularly relied on non-market **modes of exchange**, such as **reciprocity** and **redistribution**, which still play restricted roles in societies dominated by the capitalist market.
4. Marxian economic anthropologists view **production** as more important than exchange in determining the patterns of economic life in a society. They argue that societies can be classified in terms of their **modes of production**. Each mode of production contains within it the potential for conflict between classes of people who receive differential benefits and losses from the productive process.
5. The internal explanation for consumption patterns argues that people produce material goods to satisfy basic human needs. The external explanation argues that consumption patterns depend on the particular external resources available within the **ecozone** to which a particular society must adapt. Ethnographic evidence demonstrates that both internal and external explanations for consumption patterns are inadequate because they ignore how culture defines our needs and provides for their satisfaction according to its own logic—a logic that is irreducible to biology, psychology, or ecological pressure.
6. Particular **consumption** preferences that may seem irrational make sense when considered in the context of other consumption preferences and prohibitions in the same culture. Examples include Jewish dietary prohibitions, the role of banana leaves in the Trobriand Islands, and institutionalized sharing of consumption goods among the Plains Cree.
7. In our era of **globalization**, the consumption of Western market commodities is often embraced by those whom we might have expected to reject them. Moreover, this embrace frequently involves making use of market commodities for local purposes to defend or enrich local culture rather than to replace it. In a global world in which everyone everywhere increasingly relies on commodities provided by a capitalist market, we need to pay critical attention to inequalities of access and the negative impact of contemporary economic institutions on most of the world's population.
8. Developments in the analysis of socio-ecological data has given us powerful tools to develop more precise data sets. **Geographical Information Systems (GIS)** are software-based applications that allow for the collection, organization, downloading and retrieval of files that display

spatial/digital geographical data for analysis. Also, **human ecology mapping (HEM)** records land tenure and resource use as well as local ecological knowledge and sense of place. Both of these allow for enhanced insider and observer perspectives on the relationship between humans and the ecosystem.

9. The **anthropology of food and nutrition** has traditionally dealt with these topics in non-Western societies. More recent developments in anthropology have turned the focus toward global capitalist food markets examining questions of food security, culture and consumption. A focus on the constellation of food production, preparation and consumption in geographically defined areas like Tuscany provide us with interesting examples to consider.
10. The study of **consumption** in anthropology includes the examination of the acceptance or rejection of Western market commodities by **Indigenous peoples**. The choices people make regarding local or imported goods reveal interesting aspects of cross-cultural interaction.

Key Terms

Affluence The condition of having more than enough of whatever is required to satisfy consumption needs.

Consumption Using up material goods necessary for human survival.

Cultural ecology The study of the ways in which human beings relate to one another and to their natural environment

Distribution The allocation of goods and services.

Ecology The study of the ways in which living species relate to one another and to their natural environment.

Econiche The plants and animals in an ecozone on which a species relies for survival; essentially a place in the natural world where a species is “at home.”

Economic anthropology The part of anthropology that debates issues of human nature that relate directly to the decisions of daily life and making a living.

Economy From an institutional perspective, the material-means provisioning process in a cultural system.

Ecotone A transition area between two different ecozones that displays characteristics of both ecozones.

Ecozone The particular mixture of plant and animal species occupying any particular region of the earth.

Extensive agriculture A form of cultivation that depends on slash-and-burn techniques, rainwater, human muscle power, and a few simple tools such as digging sticks, hoes, and/or machetes; it exhausts the land, requiring farmers to move plots every few years.

Food collectors Those who gather, fish, or hunt for food.

Food producers Those who depend on domesticated plants and/or animals for food.

Ideology According to Marx, those products of consciousness—such as morality, religion, and metaphysics—that purport to explain to people who they are and to justify the kinds of lives they lead.

Institutions Stable and enduring cultural practices that organize social life.

Intensive agriculture A form of cultivation that employs plows, draft animals, irrigation, fertilizer, and such, to bring much more land under cultivation at one time.

Labour The activity linking human social groups to the material world around them; human labour is therefore always social labour.

Market exchange A mode of exchange in which the exchange of goods (trade) is calculated in terms of a multi-purpose medium of exchange and standard of value (money) and carried on by means of a supply–demand–price mechanism (the market).

Means of production The tools, skills, organization, and knowledge used to extract energy from nature.

Mechanized industrial agriculture Large-scale farming, often found in conjunction with factory farming of animals, that is highly dependent on industrial methods of technology and production.

Mode of production “A specific, historically occurring set of social relations through which labour is deployed to wrest energy from nature by means of tools, skills, organization, and knowledge.”

Modes of exchange Patterns according to which distribution takes place: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange.

Neoclassical economic theory A formal attempt to explain the workings of capitalist enterprise, with particular attention to distribution.

Production The transformation of nature’s raw materials into a form suitable for human use.

Reciprocity A mode of exchange in which individuals exchange goods and/or services (1) under the assumption that the exchanges will eventually balance out, (2) with the expectation of immediate balance, or (3) in the hope that at least one party will get something for nothing.

Redistribution A mode of exchange in which a centralized social organization receives contributions from all members of the group and redistributes them in a way that provides for every member.

Relations of production The social relations linking the people who use a given means of production within a particular mode of production.

Scarcity The assumption that resources (e.g., money) will never be plentiful enough for people to obtain all the goods or services they desire.

Subsistence strategies The patterns of production, distribution, and consumption that members of a society employ to ensure the satisfaction of their basic material survival needs.

Unfree labour The formalized coercion of men, women, and children to provide their labour.

Review Questions

1. What are the links between subsistence strategy and culture?
2. What are the goals of economic anthropology? Do economic anthropologists inadvertently reproduce the typologies of earlier anthropologists?
3. How is desire for commodities created in capitalist societies?
4. What problems arise when we apply neoclassical economic theory to other societies?
5. What is the difference between wants and needs? Are needs always material?
6. What are some subsistence strategies used by Canadians today?
7. Not all economies are based on money. What other sorts of things do people base economic transactions on?
8. What sorts of complex social developments come along with the invention of agriculture and food production?
9. Can you think of two examples of each? Generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity and negative reciprocity.
10. Can you think of any examples of affluence in Canadian society that is not based on money?
11. Is Marx's economic theory irrelevant today or can you think of situations where his analysis still may be useful?
12. Do you think geographical circumstances determine how people may subsist?

Additional Resources

Films

- *The Meat Fight*. Directed by John Marshall. Documentary Educational Resources. 1974.

This film shows an argument between two Ju/'hoansi bands over a slain antelope.

<http://www.der.org/films/meat-fight.html>

- *A Kalahari Family*. Directed by John Marshall. Kalfam Productions. 2009.

This five-part documentary looks at the lives of the Ju/'hoansi and the cultural, economic, and political changes they have experienced over the past 50 years.

A trailer for this film is available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VqhQPearE&feature=youtu.be>

Transcripts for all five films are available here: <http://www.der.org/kalfam/film-transcripts.html>

Annotated Video Links

- Modes of Subsistence

This animated yet excellent quality short reviews the four basic ways that people obtain food.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lir80I94S6s>

- Subsistence Strategies

A short video that discusses and provides interesting contemporary examples from both traditional and modern society.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtxXrG_LfPQ

- Economic Systems

An excellent review of the basic concepts of economic anthropology complete with some ethnographic examples.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmxpcXMgghw>

Websites

- The Potlatch Collection History, U'mista Cultural Society

Information on the potlatch in Kwakwaka'wakw culture and a gallery of masks and other objects used for potlatch ceremonies.

<http://www.umista.ca/exhibits/index.php>

- Innu, Survival International

Information and news on the political and economic situation of the Innu of northern Canada. Survival International is a not-for-profit organization working for tribal peoples' rights worldwide.

<http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/innu>

- Bushmen, Survival International

Information and news on the political and economic situation of the Bushmen of Botswana (The Ju/'hoansi belong to this group). Survival International is a not-for-profit organization working for tribal peoples' rights worldwide.

<http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/bushmen>

- News from Canada, Survival International

News regarding the rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/countries?%5Bcountry_id%5D=18

A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

Gendered Work

Humans have the ability to shape-shift their worlds—both cultural and natural. We could even go so far as to state that the concept of a natural world, as it is applied to the economic habitat of humans, is fully a cultural construct. As such, it has a definition that is in each case culturally specific. This is the reason the landscapes and built environments of any given culture are so different from those of other cultures. These differences are not fully founded in the actual environment or in particulars such as the geology or hydrology, the latitude or altitude, or even the biotic communities that are specific to a certain tract of land, but in how these parameters of what we call the “natural world” are turned to the marking and making of human space. In other words, land becomes landscape and is symbolic and metaphorical for a culture. Our worlds come to reflect our visions of self and culture, and as such they reflect our economic decisions—how we make a living. This living is seen in our relationships to work and in how we assign that work on the basis of gender, age, and class—how we create a division of labour.

The *shape-shifting* in the economically globalized world is not only changing “natural” landscapes but also the cultural constructs that inform how we observe and comment on the economics of life in this world. Significant here is a consideration of the place of women in the market of today. From a historical perspective, much of women’s work has been “background” work done in the private sphere, while men have done the “real work” in the foreground of the

public sphere. For example, women have been gatherers, not hunters; homemakers, not warriors. Furthermore, in the historical view of the colonialist—which we can access through the varied, not infrequently biased records of colonial encounters—women are almost completely absent, or by inference poignantly present as shadow people. The shadow woman is often presented as the sexualized fantasy of the colonizer, a fact that remains quite overt today in the varied pornography, sex trade, and sex tourism economies that are increasingly part of a globalized industry.

We navigate among various and conflicting subject-positions, each offering a limited perspective on the nature of women's lives in any contact zone (see Gerson 1997: 5). This is seen in the analysis of women's work today as we in North America, the relatively privileged, struggle with what Canadian literary scholar Carole Gerson characterizes as "irreducible alterity." We come to recognize that men of other cultures also are seen in a paradigm of otherness, but women of these cultures fare even worse, for they are encumbered not only by the ethnocentric views generally applied to their societies but also by the misogynist aspects of the Western and local world views. Women become the "other" of the "other" in this instance, twice removed from consideration. Indeed, in many cultures, women's interactions in the public sphere are contrasted to and defined by androcentric concepts of provisioning, production, trade, commerce, and government. Under this view, the completeness of women's roles within their societies—roles that sustained life—went unseen.

American anthropologist and gender-studies scholar Carla Freeman attempts to move us toward an understanding of women in the working world of today. She notes that we need to see the contrast as well as the linkages of "global/local; masculine/feminine; production/consumption; and formal/informal sectors of the economy" (2001: 1009). She challenges us to achieve a sense of balanced reciprocity in the world of making a living. It is through her analysis of female informatics workers in the Caribbean that she cautions us to consider that the interactions between the global forces and the necessities of local life are nuanced such that we can neither consider "the local as contained within, and thus defined fundamentally by, the global" (1012) nor the local "as a space in which the heavy hand of the global makes its marks" (1031). Reality is simply too complex. As such, we cannot just "globalize" women, creating another trope for the disappeared gendered "other." Rather, our analysis needs to take in the global forces and how they affect women in the local settings in which women do the work they need to do—making a living for themselves and their

families within and without the home. We need to see women as actors in their/our own modernity.