

# Some notes towards a human economy approach

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*The diverse research activities carried out in the Human Economy Project focus on the economic practices that people on the ground perform in their everyday life, and the interactions between these actions and larger-scale political and economic structures and institutions. This article provides some partial reflections on what we mean by 'human economy'. It will discuss some aspects of this approach that have influenced project members, including an ethnographic orientation, historical analysis and comparison across cases. Human economy research often cuts across geographic and theoretical scales. Many project members aim to move beyond the analytical distinction between local and global, and towards a conceptualisation of the economy as a Maussian 'total social fact'. Finally, the knowledge produced within the project has the potential to help individuals and social groups in building a better world for all who live in it.*

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What do we mean by 'human economy'? This article is an attempt to provide partial answers to this question. This will be done by way of formulating a few provisional reflections on some of the uses of this concept that guides the diverse research activities carried out in the Human Economy Project at the University of Pretoria.

I should make it clear from the start that the 'human economy' is consciously used as a term with multiple meanings, rather than a well specified label for an empirical reality 'out there' to be studied with a priori theoretical tools. We are trying to run counter to the mainstream economists' tendency of imposing their 'universal' tenets over the context-specific livelihoods of the actors that make the economy with their everyday activities. People do not always 'know best' and they do need expert knowledge of the bigger picture and their position in it to understand their struggles and devise effective solutions (Hart 2013). But the starting point for the analysis and the proposed interventions has to be what they do on the ground, not what economics textbooks claim they are supposed to do.

This lack of specificity is not just a temporary feature that will be overcome with time and more research. Members of the group express a plurality of ideas and aspirations that spring from the shared experience of going through a particular historical moment in the world economy – one characterised to a great extent by the implications of the 2008 global financial crisis and its after-effects. They do so armed with specific intellectual tools that come from a variety of disciplinary and philosophical backgrounds and through the lenses of their specific empirical cases. In this way, project members' process of knowledge production resembles the work of a 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2004). As a multitude, we spontaneously coalesce around common themes that emerge from our daily teamwork without having to give up our own specificities and differences. Multitudes privilege spontaneous alliances and flexible and shifting actions, rather than top-down processes or overtly bureaucratic mechanisms of group consensus.

As a heuristic tool, the human economy is a 'concept-

metaphor' (Moore 2004). Its meaning cannot be fully specified in advance and there is a part of it that remains outside or exceeds representation. Much needs to be done to concretise this vision, yet one crucial role of concept-metaphors is 'to act as stimulus for thought [...] and to act as domains within which apparently new facts, connections or relationships can be imagined' (Moore 2004:73).

The following sections highlight some of the uses of this approach. They should not be seen as a 'complete set' that distinguishes all work in our project. For instance, each of the empirical case studies presented in this collection focuses on one or more of these aspects, but not all of them.

## Ethnography

One major aim of many project members is to study people's behaviours and perceptions in everyday life, and how they interact in social and economic relations with micro and macro institutions. Researchers do so through long-term fieldwork in the places and communities they study. Following the tradition of critique characteristic of anthropology, project researchers are usually suspicious of the assumptions about economic behaviour postulated by mainstream economists and technocrats. There is no prejudice against the latter, but a wish to interrogate those assumptions through the in-depth study of social realities from 'within'.

This ethnographic approach is often not confined to one locality or one bounded 'community' – multi-sitedness (Marcus 1995) can be a central component of human economy research. Some of the project researchers privilege the complex interactions between micro and macro and between localities and different social groups and classes, across nations, regions and continents (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This is a strong indication of the need to reorient the study of contemporary economies towards the analysis of the connections and relations that characterise the world system as a whole.

Another distinctive feature of the kind of ethnography that some of us draw upon is reflexivity. Going against the current of positivism ingrained in mainstream economics, the

aim is not to separate researchers from the realities under study. Unlike positivist scientists, members of the project do not try to minimise the bias that their intervention produces. The aspiration is to engage the social field and co-produce knowledge with research participants and collaborators. Researchers are inserted in the multiple fields of connections and relations they aim to grasp and describe (Burawoy 1998:7-9). This movement from within is coupled by a movement towards reflective analysis. Immersion should be complemented by an in-depth consideration of each researcher's own role and interaction in the field (Bourdieu 1977, Burawoy 1998:14).

Through the reflexive study of local realities, ethnography helps unveil the cognitive maps, the local theories, that guide people's attitudes and actions in their everyday social and economic relations (Burawoy 1998:5). The human economy project is more concerned with these concrete local theories that inhabit real people's minds as they go about their everyday lives, than any abstract theoretical assumptions, especially but not only those of mainstream economics.

In our group, not all members are anthropologists or ethnographers. Much of the conceptual work on attempting to understand what might constitute a human economy has been carried out in teams, and the presence of ethnographers and the usefulness of ethnographic knowledge have remained a crucial component of the project members' work. Simultaneously, ethnography complements and is complemented by other qualitative and quantitative approaches.

## History

As anthropologists have long acknowledged (i.e. Kalb and Tak 2005), ethnography that is not embedded in history can rarely attempt to provide a satisfactory explanation of the human behaviours, institutional practices and structural forces at play in everyday life. This is true of economic life as well. Some project members look at the real histories of economic behaviour and institutions, unveiling the power dynamics and the structural inequalities that have characterised world history since its beginnings.

In the postcolonial context, this is particularly important in order to avoid a brand of economic evolutionism that replicates colonial hegemonic discourses by positing the 'advanced' economies as the model to which all other economies should aspire, and the 'underdeveloped' economies as trailing behind and lacking the necessary ingredients for 'success', however that is assessed. Historical analysis and contextualisation throws light on important connections across localities and fields that are otherwise obscured. For instance the current austerity programmes being imposed in Europe, one of the centres of the 'developed' world, show striking similarities to the structural adjustment programmes imposed on the postcolonial economies of Africa and Latin America since the 1980s (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

Farré's article in this collection shows that historical analysis is crucial for the understanding of the current plight of people in the small towns and rural areas of Mozambique. It makes the somewhat disquieting point that the past structures of capital, in this case the brutal migrant labour system of the South African regional economy, cannot be easily undone. When these exploitative structures go, as in the case

of Mozambique, they need to be replaced by something just as durable, or else the effects of the demise of exploitative capitalism can be even more devastating than the previous state of affairs. Historical analysis in this case provides a sobering lesson that could be easily missed by a utopian focus on the betterment of people in a visionary ahistorical future. Interventions that disregard the past and the sturdiness of previous economic institutions are not likely to succeed.

The historical orientation of many human economy project members owes much to the long tradition of world system theories (i.e. Wallerstein 1974, Wolf 1982) and to studies at the intersection of anthropology and political economy (i.e. Roseberry 1989, Donham 1990). Some of us are concerned with local histories, especially in so far as they reveal orientations, practices and aspects of social reality that are obscured by Eurocentric narratives. Simultaneously, people grounded in local realities interact with wider structural forces and are inserted in global flows of world history. Ethnography, local histories and world history can complement each other in providing an extensive picture of the interactions between local realities and wider national, regional and global forces. They help us make sense of the structural forces operating in specific contexts.

## Comparison

Comparison might not always be explicit in our members' research, but it is at the heart of the human economy project. This comparative orientation differs from the tenets of positivist science.

In the latter, comparison works through inductive generalisation, that is, comparison between different cases is developed as a linear vertical activity that looks for commonalities across cases and then moves away from the empirical towards middle and high level theories (Burawoy 1998:19). In our case, rather than assuming theory as positioned 'above' the empirical data it aims to explain, theories emerge from dialogue with the field, but also from dialogue across cases.

This kind of comparison is based on transversality, it cuts across dichotomies and conventional notions of verticality and horizontality (van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010:159). There is no established hierarchy between cases, and differences and similarities emerge from grounded fieldwork and theoretical analysis. Cases are not subsumed under an overarching theoretical narrative that synthesises them. Analysis of one aspect of a case can inspire changes in perspectives and the discovery of different – perhaps complementary, but never identical – aspects in another case. These feedback loops can go on ad infinitum and the theories that spring from these dialectical movements do not aim to be linear, complete or monolithic. As Burawoy (1998:7) put it, it is important to acknowledge the fragmentation and incompleteness of our research tools and the world we live in, while never crossing the boundary towards total relativism and a wholesale abandonment of the concept of reality.

## Local/global linkages and total social facts

The question of comparison opens up the much debated issue of the relationship between the global and the local, and its methodological implications. Moore (2004) rightly criticises approaches that see the global and the local as two dis-

tinct dimensions, separated by scale or by different temporal coordinates. The local and the global are empirically entangled and it is impossible to separate them into discrete categories. Analytically they assume multiple forms that can only be determined through historical-ethnographic inquiry. Keith Hart (2007:16) makes a similar point in his work on money, which “[l]ike society itself [...] is always both personal and impersonal”.

Powers’ article in this collection is a clear example of how issues of scale cannot be satisfactorily addressed by a conception of vertical relations between local realities at the ‘bottom’ and global forces on ‘top’. In the struggle for securing effective treatment for HIV/AIDS patients in South Africa, grassroots movements, sections of government and transnational donors all worked together in elaborate negotiations of national institutional arrangements, notably through the activities of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) which brings together state agencies and civil society institutions. These shifting alliances strongly influenced and were influenced by state apparatuses. Powers shows how policy shifts in HIV/AIDS treatment in South Africa need to be understood in the light of these complex interactions. A vertical view of scale, starting from the grassroots micro level, through the middle level of the state, all the way to the transnational level is not an effective framework to capture these processes.

There is another sense in which the global cannot be studied and described as separate from its local entanglements. One might think for instance about activist movements fighting the destructive effects of capital and technocracy. They work at the intersection between global and local, capitalising from the experience of other social movements in other localities and localising universal discourses about human rights and social justice. Rakopoulos’ article (in this issue) on economic solidarity movements emerging in the context of the contemporary Greek financial crisis is particularly telling on this point. His analysis is an example of the productively subversive potential of Polanyian counter-movements against the imposition of top-down technocratic (assumed) universals such as ‘debt reduction’, ‘austerity’ and ‘structural reforms’. Starting from the localised crisis of Greece, one can draw empirical and political lessons that can be extended and readapted to other contexts around the world.

Rakopoulos’ account of the activities of an anti-middlemen organisation in Athens can be read as a dialectical movement away from mainstream economics’ totalising abstractions formulated in a social vacuum, and towards a restoration of the whole, starting from the multiple aspects of everyday economic life – ‘making economy on the street’ as one Greek activist puts it. In Maussian terms, Rakopoulos and other members of the human economy project are interested in ‘total social facts’. At the end of his extensive and eclectic treatment of reciprocity and exchange practices in non-Western societies, Mauss concluded his classic essay on *The Gift* with an important methodological statement:

The facts we have studied are all ‘total’ social phenomena. [...] These phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological

and so on. They are legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present, although not perhaps in their modern senses. [...] We are dealing then with something more than a set of themes, [...] more than institutions[,] We are concerned with ‘wholes’, with systems in their entirety. [...] It is only by considering them as wholes that we have been able to see their essence, their operation and their living aspect, and to catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards others. (1969:76-78)

Much of human economy research is inspired by this kind of holism that privileges connections, contiguity, overlaps, encounters and clashes of real actors and institutions in economies that are embedded in social, moral and political relations. This is different from an outdated static and structured holism of the kind rightly criticised by Moore (2004) and Thornton (1988). Some project members aspire to connect different parts of the multiple constellations of overlapping economic systems that intertwine with each other in world history and are connected both by formal markets and by counter-movements working against expansion of these markets. Wholes are never discrete or complete, and attempts at exhaustive explanation of systems are destined to fail, both in principle and in practice.

Mauss’ statement has deeper moral and political implications. If the economy is studied as a total social fact, then the heuristic process of finding out and describing its workings is not separate from the process of exploring possibilities for positive change and the betterment of the human condition. The question of connecting the micro and the macro, the global and the local, is a question about the human struggle for understanding and for being able to influence and shape the world we live in. The technocratic management of the economy has not only had devastating material effects. It has also negatively affected the individual psyche of most people who find themselves disenfranchised and disempowered in the maelstrom of external forces constraining their everyday life.

Working towards restoring the whole is not merely an academic activity. It can be a political process that runs counter to the overspecialisation of the post-Fordist global division of labour. The latter has produced a world where crucial functions of social and economic production and reproduction are delegated to specialised technocratic and capitalist structures, devoid of accountability and removed from the aspirations, struggles and challenges of the lives they manage.

## Towards a science of the possible

We are still right at the start of the process of translating our empirical findings into workable solutions for the people we study with. Some of the empirical cases in this collection provide a glimpse of what this political engagement might be. From Powers (in this issue) we learn the importance of engagement with national and international institutions to produce effective change. Even within the constraints of the current political and economic structures, citizens can bring change. In Rakopoulos' case (in this issue), change is more abrupt, emerges as a radical rupture with the mainstream. The debt crisis brought about by the neoliberal world order represented by the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank (the infamous 'Troika') also brings new opportunities for breaking away from that very order and sowing the seeds of a future economy where markets are retained as vital vessels of economic life and are not synonymous with capitalist exploitation.

What these cases begin to show is that, as researchers explore and navigate the multiple facets of the economy, they do not simply throw light on the patterns of recurrence and stability which make the system what it is now. Human economy research has the potential to unveil a wide range of moral and social behaviours and understandings that could in a not so remote future provoke the unleashing of new energies and new dynamics within society. Social systems are in constant flux. Even when they are in temporary states of apparent equilibrium, the seeds of their future transformations are inscribed in their present entanglements and their histories.

In different ways, all human economy project members are committed to explore possibilities for change. We do not conceive of science as a conservative arm of dominant power concerned only or primarily with producing accurate descriptions for day-to-day management by whatever system of administration is current.

We are convinced that the economy out there is 'human' in a deeper normative sense: in its multiple patterns of continuity and change, it is something that everybody can shape and influence. The institutions that tie people to the current unequal and exploitative world order – money, wage labour, multinational companies, states, international commodity markets, to name a few – are also what have made human actors increasingly interdependent and interconnected with each other. Yet individuals are not just passive receivers. They can help to actively subvert and manipulate their relations with these realities to make incremental changes to their wellbeing and that of others around the world (Hart

2013). Our research, we hope, has the potential to play a significant role in this direction.

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