Introduction: Recuperating economic anthropology

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‘Transforming Economies, Changing States’ were the themes of the annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, held in Canberra at the Australian National University from 30 October to 2 November 2007. We were fortunate that our keynote speaker, Prof. Anna L. Tsing, addressed both conference themes directly in her stimulating address entitled ‘Beyond Economic and Ecological Standardisation’, included in this edition of TAJA and discussed further in the following.

The other papers included here were given in a plenary panel of the conference especially intended to develop the first theme, transforming economies, and entitled ‘The Economic in Contemporary Anthropology’. (Or, rather, 20-minute versions were given of the four papers included here.) The aim of the panel was to examine and assess the value of various concepts of ‘economy’ or ‘the economic’ for the work of anthropology. Panellists were invited to position their own work in relation to these concepts. As one might expect from this, the unfolding academic work and sense of the discipline of each author is visible in what she or he has to say. Two of the authors (Gregory and Austin-Broos) describe, in different terms, what they see as having been a retreat from economy by anthropologists over the last several decades. They suggest ways in which new connections between anthropology and the subject matter of economy may develop in relation to changes in world economic activity (Gregory), or in reconceptualisation (Austin-Broos) of what has often been seen as the relationship of the ‘material’ and the ‘symbolic’. Two more authors (Altman and McKay, as well as the keynote by Tsing) challenge notions of ‘standardisation’ of the economy from differing ethnographic and conceptual standpoints. All the papers are instances of repositioning of economy within anthropology, not so much by resuscitation of a subfield of ‘economic anthropology’, as by new framings of the ‘economic’ deriving, in part, from authors’ convictions that conventional narratives of capitalism do not adequately tell contemporary stories of economic diversity and disjuncture.

In part, the relations of anthropology with ‘economy’, as this is ordinarily understood, have been oppositional and deconstructive. From its inception in the work of Mauss, Firth, Malinowski and others, much of what counts as ‘economic anthropology’ has emphasised that ‘economy’ cannot be seen as a separate sphere,
but must be seen as a dimension of multi-stranded social relations. Illustrative of the thrust is this opening from Robben’s (1989: 2) *Sons of the Sea Goddess*: ‘This book wants to challenge the persistent myth that the economy is a bounded domain of society and culture that therefore can be truthfully represented in models, structures, laws, and principles’. Similar views have emerged again and again from anthropology’s specific mode of inquiry and accompanying style: its grounded fieldwork, participant observation (what Hart (2002: 16) calls the anthropological impulse to ‘join the people where they live’), the feeling for holism, combined with a persisting tendency to value ‘otherness’ and to take relativising perspectives. ¹

Anthropology’s perspectives on economy and economics have not only been informed by its long-term central tendency to ‘study out’ and its encounters with ethnographic otherness that resists organisation into familiar institutional categories. Its perspectives are at least as much informed by tendencies that come from ‘within’ European thought and self-reflection. Classical sociology, grounded in depictions of the institutional break-up of what was typically imagined as a more holistic pre-modern European social order, laid the groundwork for acceptance of ‘economy’ and economic action as recognisable in its own right, partitioned from other dimensions of social action. The works of Marx and Weber testify to the enormous, wrenching forces that have led to this very extraction or extrusion of ‘economy’ as a domain which we recognise as separate, and which has an ostensible realisation in particular forms of property, law, regulation and subjectivity. Both traditions inherited, and were a medium for, debate in terms of a recurrent distinction between meaningful-symbolic versus causal-functional, modes of existence of social relations. Both things—concretisation of ‘economy’, and ‘culture versus practical reason’—can be illustrated by brief reference to the similarities and differences between Marx and Weber.

Parsons (1937: 491–2) observes that Marx took over the main elements of classical economic theory—the conception of a self-regulating competitive system, a ‘great control mechanism, a compulsive system’—but invoked elements not central to classical theory for the dynamic part of his own framework. Marx’s theory of social causation remains utilitarian; preoccupied with the ‘means and conditions’ (Parsons 1937: 493) of action and their adequate historicisation. This is consistent with a view that each distinctive social form has its distinctive mode of economic activity. This makes ‘economy’ a valid category of comparison, allowing Marx to free himself from an acceptance of capitalism as the end product of historical development (but not from the broader teleological mode of thinking which has characterised most economic theory of the development of capitalism).

In countering this position, Weber does not deny the significance of material conditions, but only what he regards as exaggerated claims of their sole adequacy in explanation of economic practice. As important additional factors, Weber investigates attitudes which people bring to economic activities, famously finding an affinity between the ‘spirit’ of capitalism and the ethics of ascetic Protestantism, and later, developing a wide-ranging series of studies (of China, India and Judaea) that
tend to locate main differentiating features in capitalistic-bureaucratic development on the plane of values rather than material conditions. Weber compares systems in terms of the extent to which they do, or do not, conform to a capitalist mode of activity, which he sees as potentially present everywhere.

Perhaps the examples given may stand for the most disparate traditions anthropology is heir to: an understanding of ‘economy’ as an aspect of broader forms of social action (a position perhaps visible in its purest form in the work of Polanyi); and another, mainly emergent from western analyses of capitalism, of economy as an hypostatised domain. In anthropology and allied social sciences we find analysts taking different positions along a spectrum related to this distinction. Bourdieu (1977: 178) accepted and elaborated a neoclassical economic understanding of human activity as fundamentally competitively strategising in every sphere of endeavour, and used economistic language as an overarching form of theoretical discourse. He extended the notion of ‘capital’ to all human goods, and that of ‘economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation’ (Bourdieu 1977: 29). This view has, perhaps, been most appreciatively taken up in some applied (policy-oriented and development) anthropology, for example, in the form of notions of ‘social’ and other forms of capital as resources that people should be able to mobilise in their efforts to change (see Fine 1999). Such assumptions have also been comprehensively critiqued from within development-related anthropology by ethnographers who have observed the interaction of established systems of socio-economic practice with introduced ‘capital-centric’ changes (e.g. Elchayar 2005).

In Sahlins (1976), we see someone who has tended to move in an opposing direction from the neoclassical economic one. Having considered the long-standing and, he would say, false dichotomisation of ‘culture and practical reason’, he seeks to refuse and defuse it by invoking values as mediating between them: ‘Any cultural ordering produced by the material forces presupposes a cultural ordering of those forces’ (1976: 39). Although ‘economics’ is the dominant form of ‘cultural ordering’ and self-understanding produced by the material forces of bourgeois society, these forms of value and meaning can and must be understood as fundamentally ‘cultural’, aspects of a specific symbolic structure. Principles of cultural ordering are everywhere fundamental to differing ‘cosmologies of capitalism’. Sahlins’ chief move beyond American cultural theorising, however, has been to argue for a historical dimension within anthropology, rather than to extend ethnographically based synchronic analysis of cultural economics.

In the following set of papers the authors attempt in different ways to deal with the problematic relation of anthropology, its disciplinary practices and tendencies, with notions of economy in their own work. I will briefly address them here in the order in which they appear in this volume.

As I have observed, Gregory and Austin-Broos trace different histories of anthropologists moving away from economy and each suggests different repositionings of
economy in the discipline. In relation to changes in the wider world, Gregory also offers some predictive suggestions about new directions that anthropological thinking about economy may take. The next two papers (Altman and McKay) begin from a rather different starting point: recognition of the power and effects of representation of dominant economic practices upon the people they work with. In their papers, they argue for alternative forms of economic conceptualisation and action.

Chris Gregory is an economic anthropologist who has done field research in Papua New Guinea and India. His first degree was in economics, and he lectured in Economics at the University of Papua New Guinea, 1973–75. His widely cited book Gifts and Commodities (1982) was inspired by a combination of his field research in Papua New Guinea, and his rethinking of the large volume of writings on the gift-commodity distinction.

In that work, and in his second book Savage Money (1997), Gregory has attempted to illuminate the co-existence of differing, sometimes rival, systems of value within social systems. He starts from a couple of basic convictions. One is that most forms of disciplinary economics lack convincing social grounding; another, that anthropology’s close participant ethnographic methods, as well as its ethnographic tradition and theorists, have had much more to offer an understanding of economic action that breaks with reductive binary oppositions than have neoclassical economic, and neomarxist forms of economistic thought.

In his paper, he divides the relations between anthropology and economy into three phases: before, during and after the 1970s. He suggests these periods correspond roughly with three large theoretical rubrics: reciprocity, articulation and agency. He sees changes in emphasis in economic anthropology not as having ‘dropped from the sky’, but related to changes in the wider world. He describes himself as coming of age in anthropology in the 1980s with respect to a paradigm ‘that was already on the way out’, the progressive disorganisation and accompanying ‘savagery’ of global capital, bench-marked by Nixon’s abandonment of the gold standard in 1971.

In his 1982 book Gregory defended the utility of the ideal-typic gift-commodity distinction of the economic anthropological classics: in ‘gift’ exchange, emphasis is on the social relationship between giver and receiver, whereas in ‘commodity’ exchange the social relationship is minimal and emphasis is on the object content of the transaction. Appadurai and Parry criticised the ‘Gifts and Commodities’ distinction as overdrawn. Like them, Gregory accepts that particular objects can pass between social contexts of gift and commodity exchange. But he took exception to what he calls their versions of ‘continuum theory’ that threaten to deprive us of a clear vision of differences in regimes of value.

‘My problem in Gifts and Commodities’, he writes, ‘was to explain the paradox, brought about by colonisation, of the efflorescence of gift exchange in a world dominated by commodity production and exchange’ (1997: 47–8).

Following this lead, Gregory argues in his later book Savage Money (1997), with ethnographic material largely drawn from his Indian research, that one needs a view of differing conceptions of value as co-existent, and often in tension, the basis of
commonplace contradictions. ‘People create multiple value systems for themselves and are constantly switching between them according to the dictates of the moment’ (1997: 8). Gregory argues against analyses that have implied the mutual exclusivity of types (such as gift and commodity) and value regimes, and sees them as associated with different social orders: ‘we’ are to commodities as ‘they’ are to gifts. Gregory objects to Appadurai’s (1986: 18) description of the kula ring as a ‘pre-industrial, nonmonetised exchange system’ as a classic case of ‘denial of coevality’.

As Gregory was exploring the co-existence of value regimes, there was a turn in the 1970s and 1980s to a formulation of issues in terms of ‘articulation’: explicit efforts to relate the theorisation of capitalism to pre-capitalist or other forms of social order. He describes himself as having contributed to a paradigm—reciprocity—that was over before it began. Articulationism was strongly embedded in versions of Marxist theory and in a critical, often moralising, stance toward less developed, or disadvantaged countries.

Gregory’s third phase is characterised by the emergence of ‘agency’ as a theoretical rubric. He colourfully describes part of what is involved as the recasting of the ‘victims’ of worldwide development as people with capacity to act. This comes together with ideas of rational and aggressive individualistic actors that fit well with a neoliberal world order—perhaps characters like the Jamaican ‘ghetto feminists’ that Diane Austin-Broos, next, describes as having emerged in the dancehall milieu of Jamaica’s post-structural adjustment period.

The next phase, he argues, may focus on ‘distribution’—as the cancelling of the gold standard effected the most massive redistribution of wealth that we have seen. He implies that there are numerous sub-issues that may be organised under this rubric, such as the role of transnational families as both recipients and agents of distributions of wealth earned, invested, consumed, in different parts of the world; and that we will have to rethink some of our assumptions, such as an opposition between ‘kinship’ and money-based transaction.

Diane Austin-Broos first did research in Jamaica in 1971. In Central Australia in 1989, her choice of field sites related to her particular concern with forms of analysis applicable to places and people ‘marginalised’ from the perspective of respectively relevant, dominant nation-states. While she and Gregory both foreground questions of the evanescence of economy within anthropology, Austin-Broos traces a ‘disappearing’, in the transitive sense we have learned from the South American ‘disappeared’—a set of theoretical preferences by which anthropologists actually cause economy to drop out of their agendas. Also, while she and Gregory share a concern with conflicting regimes of value, the influences that Austin-Broos cites are somewhat different to Gregory’s. She is more directly concerned with how we might deal descriptively and theoretically with these conflicts as ‘within’—within individuals as constituted subjects, and within what is, for them, a meaningful local social order—rather than as mainly distributed over parts of a differentiated social order. Austin-Broos contends that we modern subjects—Jamaicans, Central Australians and the rest of us—are changeful, and an economic dimension is an integral aspect.
of that changefulness. Without an adequate conceptual and analytic framework to elucidate how, as Williams (1977: 110) put it, the economic ‘saturates’ our process of living, our anthropology will remain locked in the symbolic/meaningful versus causal/functional dichotomies that have tended to limit our conceptualisation of the economic dimension in social life.

Austin-Broos begins her account before the ‘disappearing’ with some of the same ancestors as does Gregory. Mauss, Firth and Malinowski presented us with understandings of economy as embedded and intertwined with other aspects of social relations; Polanyi (1944) gave us a way of seeing the ‘disembedding’ of economy and the rise of an allegedly ‘self-regulating’ market. The imaginative stimulus of Polanyi’s ‘great transformation’ lost verve and clarity as it was taken over by the ultimately unproductive formalist/substantivist debate.

‘Development’ studies and wider post-war institutional growth of social science was stimulated and justified in the context of the emergence of ‘new nations’ and Third Worldism, bringing new forms of thinking about global interconnections from structural Marxist and articulationist, to underdevelopment and dependency theories (see Geertz 2002). But, as Austin-Broos remarks, in counter-reaction there also opened up a radical material/cognitive divide. The preparedness to accept radical cognitivism was shown by Lévi-Straussian structuralism’s having rapidly became anthropologically ‘mainstream’ (e.g. in the United States context, where it displaced some of those with social democratic philosophical persuasions and research agendas to a kind of ‘leftie’, émigré and, significantly, East Coast intellectual sub-class).

Austin-Broos sees as important the way in which Geertz came into this context and selectively drew on, and adapted, Weberian emphases. Dichotomisation of questions of value and material conditions as meaningful versus causal, elaborated by Weber in his reaction to Marxist historical materialism, was adapted in Geertz’s formulation of a particularising, cultural symbolic anthropology which heavily emphasised the meaningful and ideational. Geertz (2002: 10) characterised his style of ‘interpretive anthropology’ as concerned with ‘beliefs, values, world views, forms of feeling, styles of thought’. Then came Sahlins who, having examined the meaning-material impasse, tried to mediate it by ‘culturalising’ capitalism as historically constituted meaning, rendering ‘economy’ as bourgeois cosmology. And then Foucault, under whose influence anthropologists were drawn more to the study of the state, forms of governmentality and to ‘renovations of the self’, than to economy.

Austin-Broos sees a need for other starting points adequate to bringing economy back in, and explores, in her two ‘marginalised’ contexts, ways in which people are now faced with tensions that had their sources in different, definite modes of life. How do these co-exist in them and in their lives? Central Australian Aborigines are faced with questions of prioritisation of attachment to place over the mobile valuables of a cash economy, and a tension between relationship to persons as kin and as persons with more generic and transferable capacities. Jamaicans have lived through a period of structural adjustment, which has seen weakening of state
supports, emigration of many of the better-off and lighter-skinned, the strengthening of black nationalist policy in government and greater emphasis upon individualistic, aggressive personal styles as exemplified by the rise of dancehall culture—a ‘cutting loose’ which repudiates standards of respectability that had been so strongly linked to differentiations of gender, race and social status. (Gregory might call dancehall the rise of a new kind of ‘agency’ among the victims of global change.) Austin-Broos illustrates her point of departure in a phenomenology of the subject that draws upon Heidegger, Appadurai and Marx, and also calls for empirical adequacy when addressing the kinds of subjects and social scenes ethnographers now face. This perspective involves the notion of an economic dimension as an integral aspect of what is experienced in local conditions and formative of types of subject, in which materiality and meaning infuse each other. Austin-Broos refers to the very real possibility that conflicting values cannot be adequately bridged in lived experience, but that their coming together may yield various kinds of violent residues. Austin-Broos’ approach may be contrasted with the performative approach taken by McKay (later in this issue) in that the latter emphasises representations of economy as salient and as a significant aspect of people’s actual economic situation, whereas the former does not presuppose subjects’ necessarily having any explicit ‘representation’ of economy as such.

Some of Austin-Broos’ comments link to the next paper by Jon Altman, and a proposal concerning Aboriginal livelihood he has called the ‘hybrid economy’. Altman has been Director of an applied and policy-oriented unit called the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University since 1990. The idea of the ‘hybrid economy’ goes back to his original doctoral research of 1979–1980 on an outstation in Arnhem Land. Following an initial period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which Aborigines were sedentised and concentrated in remote settlements, the 1970s saw the growth of government support for the possibility of their return, seasonally or longer-term, to dispersed ‘outstations’. These communities could be established and occupied by small groups in keeping with conventional forms of territorial and social attachment.

At Momega outstation, approximately 60 km from the coastal settlement of Maningrida, Altman (1987) found that Aborigines were supplying a considerable part of their daily food requirements from hunting, fishing and foraging; and furthermore, that they experienced these activities as satisfying. According to his ‘imputed valuation’ methods, the ‘customary sector’, including hunting, fishing and gathering, accounted for 64 per cent of the local economic product, welfare 26 per cent and art marketing 10 per cent. This positive accounting, Altman has argued, must have a role in countering real situations, and common reports, of Aboriginal communities as lacking viable livelihood activities and forms of economy, and as overly dependent on government transfer monies. He also sets his views against recent and growing calls for Aborigines to engage with what some observers, analysts and activists have called the ‘real’ economy (Pearson 2000), rather than a damaging, bogus hand-out economy. Indigenous economic policy is currently debated...
in a context of concern that, while the land rights and native title agenda of recent decades has produced some significant change in formal Aboriginal land ownership, this has not translated into improvement of living conditions in Aboriginal communities, which are notoriously poor in many respects.

Altman proposes a model of Aboriginal local economies as tri-sectoral, or ‘hybrid’, comprised of free market, state (including government transfer payment) and ‘customary’ components. Distance from cities and centres, combined with distinctive forms of social action and relationships among Aborigines, makes integration into the ‘mainstream’ economy unrealistic and undesirable policy. In his paper, he details the main forms of activity which might be (principally) associated with these sectors, and which are, or could be, viable in remote communities. These include hunting and other wild life harvesting, the provision of environmental services and the production of art, as well as receipt of government monies. Altman recognises that the ‘sectors’ he identifies are not distinct but overlap. Arguably, however, even stronger forms of easily calculable interdependency among them might lead one to question their separateness as ‘sectors’: for instance, ‘customary’ hunting is now typically practiced in a way that is highly underwritten by capital expenditure (vehicles, rifles, boats), making it dependent on state outlay. Altman also recognises, indeed considers it fundamental to the situation he is attempting to take into account, that people engage in a variety of livelihood activities, moving from hunting to art production to receiving transfer monies on the same day.

Austin-Broos takes up the point of complicated interdependency, but wants to bring this question onto her turf and interrogate the implications of interdependencies for persons and social fields. This would involve recognising that all contemporary forms of activity in remote communities involve chains of connection beyond the local (and local-global dependencies are, in fact, a theme of all the papers in this volume). Just as hunting kangaroo may involve purchasing bullets and guns, so too does working in the council office, or on country as an environmental ranger, involve connections to organisations, people and forms of understanding and value that go beyond anything which is strictly ‘local’. Aboriginal people are subject to particularly intense forms of value conflict in social relations, and Austin-Broos’ paper links this with experiences of pressures, tensions, suffering and more directly interpersonal forms of struggle and violence. Looked at in this light, inevitable and ordinary-seeming local-global disparities and interdependencies are associated with forms of disordering of social relations (and are comparable in general terms with similar phenomena in Jamaica). The ‘hybrid’ model, she suggests, does not adequately recognise these social implications.

The production of art, to further exemplify the way in which interdependencies demand to be dynamically understood, is often, and perhaps aptly, seen as best supported in an outstation context; it seems to thrive when artists can live on country. Yet ‘modern’ remoteness requires negotiation and sometimes struggle to achieve, and modelling of indigenous socio-economy needs to recognise this. Although it is
grounded in these aspects of customary association, art production yields cash returns, and this is the basis on which Altman counts it as market income.

To my mind, to deal with some of the intersections that the hybrid ‘model’ brings to our attention, it may be useful conceptually to take a leaf from the work on gifts and commodities. That literature sensitised us to ask what dimensions of ‘gift’ as ideal type and what dimensions of ‘commodity’ may be involved in any given exchange, especially where indigenous economies come into relationship with money-based practices, and kinds of values and valuables from both become part of an expanded repertoire. (Comparative ethnography has heightened our understanding of this contrast but we may, of course, also look at mundane transactions at home with these questions in mind.) Mauss and others have taught us that the difference between ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ exchange cannot be simply read off from things themselves. Money may be a gift, and sweet potato a commodity, or a purchased book ordered as a commodity in a transaction between the buyer and Amazon.com may become a gift in a transaction between giver and receiver. Thus, the distinction has to do with relations of actors to each other and to what is given, and with the values in terms of which those relations are understood and enacted.

We have had to pay attention to forms of value, understood as the ways in which actions ‘become meaningful to the actors by being placed in some larger social whole, real or imagined’ (Graeber 2001: 254). Forms of action need to be understood as underpinned by a possible variety of values and motivations, as well as resourced in complex ways, and as having diverse social implications.

It could be useful to reimagine the tri-sectoral model in terms of differing frameworks of value. Certain kinds of activities—say, hunting—have been and still are associated with enabling the production of particular forms of meaningfulness which, I think, are very evident to Aboriginal people themselves. They include being able to provide for others, a strong measure of gender identification, demonstration of one’s knowledge of country and hunting skills and so on. It is likewise with the ‘state’ sector. Receiving government child support is associated with recognition for ‘looking after’ others; having ready money is also undoubtedly associated with achieving a modicum of autonomy and recognition, and a range of other values. Holding down a recognised community position is also a thing of importance.

Value-producing activities like these are not resourced from single, neatly divisible material stores. But attempts to act in ways productive of values which Aboriginal people regard as important cannot be divorced from questions of how the resources for activity become available.

Hunting, for example, may today be a vehicle for the expression of a range of customary values; but it is at least partly underwritten by material resources—money, bullets, vehicles—which in many remote communities come from state and, probably to a lesser extent, free market sources. Art production may, in part, be a vehicle of expression of customary knowledge and values, such as being able to contribute to one’s kin, or to the purchase of vehicles for a local community, a prestigious realisation of traditional associations to country and kin group and so on. Its
conditions of possibility depend to varying degrees on external material and human resources, as well as internal ones. Art production is undoubtedly also a vehicle for the expression of a number of what we might call ‘non-customary’ values, or values that take Aboriginal people, and some of those customary associations, beyond the sphere of local social recognition and into the wider art world, metropolitan Australia. And that this happens also undoubtedly contributes to the reshaping of values that Aboriginal people recognise, and entertain for themselves and others, both within the local domain and beyond it. These changing ways in which actions become meaningful, and the kinds of social contexts actors can envision and relate to, need to be recognised as forms of diversification of values.

Thus, one might reframe the three sectors of the hybrid model not as domains but as constellations of activity types (like hunting) and kinds of value which have typically been vested in or associated with them; as subject to shifts or variability in the ways they are resourced (hunting funded by cash received from transfer monies) and enacted in on-going social relations. Such shifts (dependence of hunting on cash incomes, as well as on access to place) were once more fully understood and organised in customary terms. But now, especially with greater mobility, relations to place are also dynamised in new ways. Values are susceptible to reinterpretation according to the way in which they are resourced, and according to the ways in which goods produced from the activities involved (such as meat) are directed to establishing new kinds of relationships, as well as to reinforcing existing ones (such as understood links of persons to particular areas of the country). To take another example: although art production is strongly grounded in customary knowledge and values, if it is resourced, funded, paid for or otherwise appreciated by museums or art galleries, artists come to be associated with persons beyond the local scene, and thus become involved in relationships which have new social elements and values.

Looked at in this way, particular activity types cannot be uniquely characterised as ‘traditional’, ‘customary’, ‘modern’ and the like; nor can they be seen solely within a single domain of ‘market’, ‘state’ or ‘custom’. For instance, hunting acknowledged to be dependent on or linked with cash incomes must be recognised as complex in its potential social implications. It can no longer be seen simply as a ‘traditional subsistence practice’ insofar as such a label resists critical examination of contemporary intersecting values and resource streams. Likewise, the use of money has diverse social implications (as has long been recognised in a considerable anthropological literature) and may underwrite activities partly or largely grounded in customary values.

To follow out empirically and critically the relations of activities, value elements and resourcing would make for a dynamic modelling of the ways in which certain values and activities are reproduced and changed in present circumstances.

The question of what is a ‘real’ economy, or the roles this kind of representation of economy plays, is one link of Altman’s paper to Deirdre McKay’s, this concern partly reflecting the subordinate societal position of the subjects about whom each author writes. In this project, McKay has collaborated with her (former) colleague Katherine Gibson-Graham (an author of The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It):
A Feminist Critique of Political Economy, 1996), and Amanda Cahill. McKay describes a situation in which the Filipinos with whom she and her collaborators work in the Visayan archipelago have, as she depicts it, been hegemonised by a normative idea of the ‘Filipinos real economy’ as involving large-scale enterprise, wage labour and forms of transaction based on individuated kinds of relationships different from those of their everyday local economy and ‘relational’ economic personhood. McKay argues that the hegemonic notion of the ‘real economy’ limits people’s ability to perceive locally available opportunities.

McKay and her collaborators approached the situation as action anthropologists, seeking to shape with locals an understanding and practice of economy that would permit them to act in terms of existing local relationships, not as ‘individuated’ economic persons. A small group of coconut farmers began producing and marketing nata, a coconut snack product that had normally been mainly consumed in festival periods. They drew on a diversity of relationships by asking for donations of coconuts, arranging for purchase of the product by local stores and getting help in production of nata from family, neighbours and others in ways that allowed them to also keep up their subsistence farming and other entrepreneurial activity.

McKay recognises that production of this kind and scale is only a part of a spectrum of activities in which people in this locale engage. Beyond the question of the extent of the contribution of the project’s activity to farmers’ livelihoods, to my mind this paper raises several other important issues.

The first has to do with the paper’s central notion of ‘performing’ economy differently, which McKay masterfully introduces. She quotes Tim Mitchell, by saying that there is no way to identify an ‘economy’ independent of people’s forms of representation of it. The project attempted to get people to represent, to ‘perform’, economy differently to themselves and others and to diversify the kinds of relationships they drew upon in organising the project’s activities. To this degree, some economic activity is thereby made different, or differentiated in its significances. Recognition that representations of what is going on are important is not, however, the same as saying that ‘performing’ economy in this way reshapes economic action in its entirety (as McKay recognises); material constraints still make themselves felt that cannot be resolved by drawing upon kin, family and local community in the same way. As Austin-Broos points out, workings of economic relationships at broader levels interact with and shape the forms of people’s experience. Their sensitisation to hegemonic notions of economy had made Visayans think they should be wage workers producing for a global market. The project, in contrast, supported forms of activity on more familiar local bases, and coconut farmers appreciated ways in which they were able to make the project work. But this did not completely restructure their situation, or their apprehension of it. Limitations upon the possible scope and social effects of performance are important.

There is also an issue of the relation between people’s understanding of their situation, and other analytic vantage points upon it. Must people imagine themselves to be hegemonised or subordinated to global markets in order to be so? Sometimes
people who are producing for a global market do not think of themselves in just that way. Aihwa Ong (1987), for example, described the colonial peasanthisation of Malaysians as having been affected in ways that meant that peasant rubber-tappers did not have to think of themselves first and foremost as tied to global markets. British colonial policy, in fact, succeeded in masking the involvement of local people in a global dynamic. The British reserved lands for people deemed ‘immigrant Malays’, encouraged subsistence farming and thus helped establish conditions for labour elasticity in peasant households—so that, Ong reports, they were in a position to be regarded by the British administrators as ‘indolent’ but, at the same time, grudgingly recognised as thinking of themselves as ‘nature’s gentlemen’ (Ong 1987: 22). And yet these ‘yeomen’ were peasants, exposed and tied to global markets but, unlike the Visayans, not imagining themselves in aspiring relation to them. We in the developed First World are all, to a recognisable extent, subordinated to the world market economy, yet this is arguably reflected quite variously in our self-understandings.

The Malaysian comparison brings up another point. Workers on the project placed a high value on existing local relations, which seemed to allow ‘relational’ rather than individuated personhood. But traditional-seeming local relationships are sometimes themselves the product of change, and may incorporate elements of hierarchy, inequality or dimensions of power that contrast with, or are not adequately covered by, the notion of relational economic personhood. If this is so, the question of whether new activity rests easily on existing socio-economic relations at least requires critical consideration. In Aboriginal Australia, as we have seen, this question is contested among policy-makers; and in a quite different way, among Aboriginal people themselves.

This intriguing paper, in exploring the sense of limitation experienced by the Visayans, shows how their global vision is a source of feelings of deprivation and a dimension of their (economic) situation. This raises questions about the orientations of these Visayan people to further forms of global involvement and wider relationships that we know to be significant (e.g. migration experiences and remittances, aspirations for education, occupational change or stability, mobility and/or permanence in place). How do they imagine they can achieve their aspirations, and how do they actually attempt to do so? Not all these questions are broached here, of course, but the paper effectively illustrates a particular kind of analysis of the Visayans’ situation, and a particular form of engaged response that calls upon them to revalue aspects of it.

Finally, Tsing’s conference keynote paper shows us how new forms of economic activity emerge in relation to the conditions of globalisation which involve the movement of people, differentiation of national populations, redistribution of forms of skills and socio-cultural preferences and human-induced environmental change. This paper describes how émigrés and war refugees from parts of southeast Asia now living in the Pacific North-West of the United States make use of their abilities to harvest matsutake, an aromatic wild mushroom especially prized in Japan.
Red pine forests in Japan, which were the mushroom’s habitat, have been threatened by infestation and crowded out by broadleaf trees, while the mushrooms are to be found in open access US National Forest land near some of the cities where southeast Asian immigrants now live. They operate as the first stage in supply chains that stretch across the world. Tsing relates ‘supply-chain capitalism’ to the conference themes of transforming economies and changing states by asserting that most theorists of capitalism focus on global standardisation, bureaucratisation and, more recently, neoliberal self-governance and accompanying entrepreneurialism. This form of mushroom picking has arisen from an ‘entrepreneurship of the poor’, and is based on cultural and ecological diversity. In the spirit of Bruno Latour (2005) and Alfred Gell (1998) she identifies the mushroom as an active player, an agent if we will, in shaping the landscape—an emphasis that reminds us of Gregory’s charting of the emergence and extension of agency as an anthropological theme. There are questions here about different meanings of ‘agent’, and whether all of us would regard the mushroom as such. But beyond that, it is clear that Tsing is doing here what Kopytoff (1988) recommended in relation to Appadurai’s (1986) discussion of the material life of things: examining how the matsutake mushroom moves through different conditions of commoditisation, through encounters with state and regulations and the varying structures of institutions and markets. The matsutake business, Tsing argues, urges us to do two things: to imagine a world ‘beyond economic and ecological standardisation’; and, as anthropologists, to fall back in love with detailed ethnography, the only way to explore the non-standard. (While Tsing particularly recommends that ethnography be engaged on the side of plurality, heterogeneity and the non-standard, there are many presumed ‘standard’ settings, such as corporations, which have—rather surprisingly—rarely been the subject of recent ethnography.)

One may take issue, I think, with Tsing’s claim of an exclusive focus in the social sciences on global economic ‘standardisation’; there is much work in anthropology, sociology, geography and economic history that does not just focus on the standard. Further, there is a considerable amount of work on specific kinds of supply and transaction chains (e.g. sugar, coffee, rice, hardwoods and fruits), a kind of genre on which Tsing’s paper builds. I would suggest that the growing range of such work, and the sketching of different settings and connections, makes clear that both so-called standard and non-standard practices contribute to the structuring of supply chains, and that there are great interdependencies of supply chains with state, private and corporate forms of organisation.

Alongside Tsing’s call to ethnographic courage and renewed activity, the new forms of collaborative research that ethnographers like her are developing in investigating economic practice today, as exemplified also by McKay’s research team, are also of importance. Tsing’s paper follows the first anthropological legacy described before of refusing to reify ‘economy’ as a brute fact or distinct domain; and also the second, that of recognising the enormous and pervasive effects of economic activity upon our lives. She provides a positive example of the kinds of research through which economic anthropology is being renewed. Let us consider, finally,
how her argument that ‘standard’ economic activity is not the only vision of economy we require carries forward her previous work, and also has commonalities with perspectives of the other contributors to this volume.

Anna Tsing is well known for her first book, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, subtitled *Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (1993); and for her second book, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005). We see notions of marginality and non-standardisation alongside global interconnection as continuing foci of her ethnographic and theoretical interest. The matsutake mushroom continues these emphases as the subject and centrepiece of the present story of non-standard economic activity.

Each of the papers in this collection, however, appears to be grappling in its own way with the extent to which an opposition of this sort—between ‘standard’ economy and other alternative perspectives—is warranted. They also raise the question of the extent to which revisions of the very notion of ‘standard’ economy are necessary to efforts to think about the ‘economic’ in contemporary ethnographic and theoretical terms. Gregory recounts that one of his chief concerns in reconsideration of ‘gift and commodity’ was (as I described before) the problem of ‘co-existence of value schemes’ and the paradox of the efflorescence of gift exchange in a world newly and increasingly dominated by commodity values. Austin-Broos seeks to understand economy as refractions through a phenomenology of the subject rather than through notions of instituted economic system. Altman suggests a notion of ‘hybridity’ in relation to remote-area economies that have long foiled attempts at standardisation of people and economic practices. McKay explores and advocates the notion of ‘diverse economies’. All these anthropologists are relativising ideas of standard economic practice to omnipresent other ones and, at the same time, more or less explicitly problematising the ‘standard’ as an issue for analysis.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks are due to several anonymous reviewers for their useful comments, which the author has made use of in revisions; Alan Rumsey for the editorial gimlet eye; and TAJA editors Rose Lilley and Martha Macintyre for their help in bringing this project to print.

**NOTES**

1 Understandings of economy as ‘embedded’ have also appeared in sociology, for example, Granovetter (1985), Swedberg and Granovetter (1992). However, a great deal of the sociological tradition of economy departs from, or takes as given, some notion of separateness of institutional domains. Moreover, a great deal of the sociological literature takes a more economistic view of what economy may mean, for example, ‘a type of behavior that has to do with choosing among scarce means that have alternative uses’ (Swedberg and Granovetter 1992: 6).
He expresses a debt to Ranajit Guha and subaltern studies for this orientation.
This reduction is not a feature of Mauss’ own discussion of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ forms.
He views these as ideal types, and co-present, for example, in his own society.
In his 1997 book, Gregory writes of the ‘co-evality’ of rival value systems, picking up on
Johannes Fabian’s (1983) critique of anthropology as given to allochrony, the assignment
of its subjects to a different time.
Ortner (2006) gives a general discussion of precursors to recent theorisations of ‘practice’
and ‘agency’.

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