

# Anthropology Book Forum

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## Challenging the Idea of Abundance

MONICA L. SMITH, 2017, *Abundance: The Archaeology of Plentitude*, Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 261 pp., ISBN: 978-1-60732-593-2

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Concepts of large-scale consumption and complex trade routes are not new entries into how anthropologists and economic historians view pre-colonial societies. However, the realm of ‘abundance’ and ‘mass consumption’ is often mistakenly viewed as a result of post-industrial societies. Monica Smith, editor of *Abundance*, intended the volume to be a dialogue about the concept of abundance - what it is, and what it isn’t. Smith has previously approached the idea of abundance in her works on consumption and urban environments (2014; 2007). This edited volume is a natural extension of her work on pre-colonial societies and their urban structures and societies. In her introduction Smith makes a compelling point, that pre-colonial societies are frequently viewed as ‘poor’ and constantly operating on a notion of scarcity. This view ignores the premise that artifacts and objects have been a mechanism for cognition and linguistic advancement, material things that are central to human social life in various ways. Smith seeks to use the volume to “address the distinct effects of object plentitude as seen in the archaeological record of both natural objects and deliberately created artifacts” (p. 4).

The term ‘abundance’ is carefully considered throughout the book. In comparison to the more ideologically heavy connotations of ‘surplus’ and ‘excess,’ ‘abundance’ seems to indicate a more “value-neutral term that describes accumulations that are quantitatively large and/or diverse in

their composition” (p. 11). In order to properly situate the definition of abundance, Smith also defines the key terms of scarcity and sufficiency. The text notes that either supply or demand can cause something to be scarce and the threshold of sufficiency is more than a number; it is shaped by social parameters since what is sufficient for a couple is not enough for a household of five. Smith is meticulous in her efforts to set the stage for the chapter authors to interrogate the western-capitalist notion of abundance, fostering discussion such as Moore and Schmidt’s discussion of hunter-gatherer perspectives on nature in Chapter 3. The authors note that many hunter-gatherer groups have viewed the earth as “giving parent,” which demands that “neoclassical models based on the notion that humans have unlimited wants cannot be uncritically applied to the past” (p. 48). Throughout the volume the authors are mindful to position their interpretations of past societies within a context that respects notion of abundance from each culture individually.

Notable investigations of preconceived notions about past societies are included in chapters 4, 8, and 11. Varien et al., consider abundance in the American Southwest, utilizing a critical lens of the Pueblo world view to further breakdown the ideas of scarcity and abundance. They note that while modern peoples rely heavily on the influence of economic thinking to define abundance, the concept can be viewed cross-culturally to challenge the inherent value of these terms and bring a more nuanced understanding to what it means to have ‘enough’ in a location that stretches agricultural capacity. On the flip side, Twiss and Boggard use Chapter 8 to discuss challenges (both past and present) to having an abundance. Having more food than necessary is near-universally considered a good thing, however the logistics of storing the food and keeping it edible for long periods of time is a huge issue to contend with- especially if you are attempting to conceal your excess or ensure equal distribution and access. Either of these approaches would have been socially complicated, adding another dimension to early agricultural societies as they navigated creating a social environment built around an agricultural system. Chapter 11 serves as a notable departure from previous discussions on Chinese porcelain production, using archaeology to drive home a salient point about how value changes the perception of worth. Pierson highlights the reality that while porcelain ceramics may have been hand painted art objects of a great perceived value in Western Europe, they were still mass produced at their place of origin. Hand painted porcelain vases signaled power because of the expensive blue pigments

used to paint them, but archaeological investigations at production sites indicate middens with hundreds of these ceramics rather than a studio where each vase was produced individually.

Other chapters of the book cover symbolic abundance, social status, and the way abundance impacts a society's ability to expand or become more complex. Rather than focusing on just food or nutritional abundance, the volume also considers the abundance of spiritual goods, and trade items as things that can exist in abundance. The case studies are detailed and well thought out and would serve as a comprehensive look at economic archaeology in pre-colonial societies for an upper level undergraduate or graduate level seminar. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a genuine excess of food or prestige goods is a post-colonial phenomenon due to advances in technology and this volume stands as a counterpoint to that notion. Existing dialogue surrounding the economic and social intricacy of pre-colonial societies is greatly improved and bolstered by the authors' contributions.

Overall, the book serves as an interesting exploration of what 'abundance' might look like in non-western capitalist systems. As Varien et al note in Chapter 4, economics is the most frequently referenced social science when it comes to major policy decisions. Archaeologists are uniquely positioned to comment on the social impacts of differing economic systems and this volume highlights all the ways in which material abundance of any type can be a benefit, and occasionally a hindrance. The chapter distribution includes three chapters on North America, two entries each for the Maya and Europe, a single representation for Asia, Africa, and South America. The volume might have benefited from a more diverse group of locations, but Smith does an admirable job of covering a massive breadth of human history geographically and temporally in a single volume of case studies. Human history encompasses a stunning array of values perspectives, and *Abundance* works to highlight some of these differences in an attempt to form a dialogue with the reader about what their personal concept of sufficiency and abundance reveals. Economic anthropologists would be well-served to review the volume and question how their interpretations of field sites or excavation assemblages might change if approached with a theory of abundance beyond a simple economic mandate.

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