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Humans and their Households: Ideals of Self-Sufficiency in Changing Economies

Review by Adam S. Green

Oikos and Market: Explorations in Self-Sufficiency After Socialism

by Stephen Gudeman & Chris Hann (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

How are anthropologists to understand households when markets and states are so deeply entwined within the human economy? *Oikos and Market* addresses this question with case studies drawn from long-term ethnography from six postsocialist field sites. It is the second volume in the Max Planck Studies in Anthropology and Economy series. The book's organizing theme is the blurring boundaries between households, ever-present and irreducible units of economic life (p. 13), and markets that can span international borders. Keeping households at the center of their analyses allows the authors to frame local transformations in terms of self-sufficiency, a varying ideal that appears in contrasting forms throughout the case studies. Differing values, norms, and languages shape self-sufficiency, which in turn supports household activities. Expanding the concept of self-sufficiency sharpens our understanding of human economy, as households nurture reciprocity and mutuality in their efforts to seize upon or insulate themselves from markets. These studies make a timely contribution to postsocialist studies, wherein anthropologists grapple with the transformative effects of collectivization and subsequent privatization of productive resources. They also offer enduring insights into the way people sharpen or blur boundaries between household and market, especially with regard to particular lives. These understandings resonate throughout anthropology.

Oikos and Economy contributes to a growing discourse on human economy, the holistic nexus of concerns that shape material transactions among humans (see overviews in Hart, Laville, Cattani 2010;

Hann and Hart 2011). In their introductory chapter, Gudeman and Hann develop a conception of the human economy that incorporates households. House economies provide anthropologists with a basic economic unit. They build on the foundational boundary between house and market described by Aristotle, laying the groundwork for examining a key paradox in economic anthropology: Aristotle's *oikonomia* serves as the foundation of many modern understandings of economy, but *oikonomia* stands apart from the money-getting activities that underlay markets. In fact, Aristotle found the pursuit of money for its own sake abhorrent. *Oikonomia* refers instead to the proper management of a "self-sufficient" household (p. 3). Household and community self-sufficiency are Aristotelean ideals, curiously contrasting with market aims. These ideas underlay anthropological approaches to economies.

The household supports our efforts to take care of ourselves by providing for the health, happiness, and well-being of those with whom we share "practical material realities" (p. 2). Incorporating the work of Chayanov, Polanyi, and many other contributors to the study of human economies, Gudeman and Hann offer a synthetic discussion of the processes that characterize house economies. They write that the house is "an incomplete irreducible unit of economy" that monitors, receives and contributes to foundational material flows, fosters mutuality and jointness, engages in activities that trend toward self-sufficiency rather than profit, and provides sites for innovation, entrepreneurship and thrift (pp. 13–14). Mutuality, joint endeavor that fosters a closeness we often associate with kinship and orients us toward commonality or connection with others, creates a meaningful separation between the kinds of transactions in which households engage and those of other kinds of economic entities, such as late capitalist corporations. This framework integrates the studies in the book and provides comparative definitions that serve future work in ethnography and archaeology.

Self-sufficiency separates the activities of households from those of other kinds of economic entities, such as corporations or collective farms, that operate at larger scales. The concept underscores the activities of all of the households in the study. It is most often an ideal rather than a reality. In Vidac's study on the Hungarian village of Szentpéterszeg (Chapter 1), Cash's investigation of rural Moldove (Chapter 2), and Light's discussion of the Kyrgyz village of Beshbulak (Chapter 4), self-sufficiency prompts households' efforts to sustain themselves despite growing participation in markets. In Szentpéterszeg, self-sufficiency is an idealized remnant from the presocialist past, something that was never a reality but provided an integrative logic for the people of the village. Vidac demonstrates that the collectivization of agriculture undermined processes of reciprocity that were served by the self-

sufficiency ideal. The subsequent privatization of land prompted Szentpéterszeg's households to participate in markets that brought migrants whose efforts were necessary to support the local economy, despite a persisting ideal of self-sufficiency.

Light adopts a harsher line of argument, writing that the material transactions that make up the economic lives of the villagers at Beshbulak are too thick with ritual meaning to reduce to market or commodity processes. These transactions, which supported social ritual, were damaged in centralized economic conditions. Social integration suffered at Beshbulak just as it did with the collectivization of farmland at Szentpéterszeg. Rural Moldove has also suffered in the postsocialist era. Cash demonstrates that few households are able to produce what they consume. Instead, they conceptualize self-sufficiency in terms of being *cu lume*, regardless of the resources a household actually possesses. *Cu lume* manifests in households' abilities to give to others, rather than their ability to provision themselves. Even if a household has enough money to provision itself through the market, the inability to produce for giving within the house denotes a lack of self-sufficiency. Cash demonstrates that self-sufficiency is an ideal in motion. It can be integrative even if the transactions it enables are superficially atomizing. These studies show that household efforts to foster self-sufficiency are locally constituted.

Food offers particular insights into house economies and self-sufficiency. Foods can integrate households and distinguish the kinds of goods they can produce from those obtainable through market transactions. Many of the authors write that the ability to produce and distribute food is an important component of the self-sufficiency ideal. In fact, producing certain foods comes to be emblematic of household activities. In Tocheva's chapter (5) homemade food that is clean and free of additives provides a draw for tourists to the Rodope Mountains in Bulgaria. Food is a key element of household's efforts to achieve self-sufficiency through "work in a closed circle" (p. 138). By making a full range of finished goods and employing all of their members, households close the circle, engendering intra-household entrepreneurship and increasing their own material resilience. Closing the circle helps us understand how households bring about a different ideal of self-sufficiency. While strengthening the household, closing the circle can damage status in the village and sharpen hierarchical roles. Also using food to frame a discussion of self-sufficiency, Monova's study of *ajvar* cooking in postsocialist Macedonia (Chapter 4) highlights key interconnections between states, markets, and households.

Ajvar is a preserved pepper dish that forms the basis of household integration. Joint preparation

activities link communities through household provisioning. While village self-sufficiency was undermined by socialist land tenure regimes, ajvar survived these transformations because of its role in social integration. Postsocialist states' efforts to tamp down village level ajvar production only served to strengthen its role as a distinctive status and cultural marker (p. 91). Householding thereby serves as a form of state resistance as well as a mechanism for delineating social boundaries. Here we move quite far from an Aristotelean ideal of self-sufficiency, finding instead an animated social process whereby a household dish serves to distinguish, integrate, and resist irrespective of the fact that its ingredients are provisioned by the market.

The volume ends with Vasile's study of Transylvanian forest dwellers (Chapter 6), who balance autonomy and sociality in an example of economic prosperity. Just as ajvar persisted through the socialist era, Vasile argues that Romanians retained a commitment to self-direction that shielded them from the everyday uncertainty resulting from the state's attempts to wean the country off foreign debt. A surviving "love of work" (p. 178) was complemented by social sanctions against saving too much money, bringing self direction and the circulation of wealth together in a way that inculcated the Romanian drive to "keep going" and "be one's own master." Householding processes again surround the production of a particular good, lumber, though unlike *ajvar*, lumber's value lies in its marketability as a commodity. To participate in lumber production, households maintain control of technology. Self-direction survived the food acquisition period, and entrepreneurial seizure of the means of logging freed people from the preceding social configurations. An ethos of circulation and technological control foster the economic growth in the region today.

Oikos and Economy reveals many trends in the way large scale political and economic transformations impact efforts to sustain everyday life. The synthetic household concept, presented in the introduction (pp. 13-14) with its distinct characteristics, provides a lens for investigating the human economy. Though all of the households in this study engaged in activities we also associate with other kinds of economic entities, such as entrepreneurship and seizure of land and other productive resources, all moderate their activities in an effort to sustain themselves. While they tend to favor self-sufficiency over profit-seeking, self-sufficiency is not a uniform ideal. To the informants who made these studies possible, self-sufficiency can be about giving all household members meaningful work, engaging in feasts and social rituals, providing assistance to other households, distinguishing themselves from other households, or drawing in tourists to sustain the local community. These insights transcend the particular theoretical and topical problems with which the authors engage, carrying with them lessons

about the general nature of material transactions among humans. Though an archaeologist and outsider to postsocialist studies, I look forward to employing the authors' findings in my own research to foster a comparative and holistic understanding of economic life.

References Cited

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Adam S. Green is an archaeological anthropologist who specializes in the comparative study of early states through the lenses of technology and political economy. He is interested in the roles of visual, information, and administrative technologies in economic transactions and conceptions of property. His focus is South Asia, and he has worked extensively in India. He has also engaged in fieldwork in Turkey and the United States. He earned his PhD in Anthropology from New York University in 2015, and is currently teaching in the Department of Anthropology at Georgia State University.



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