

Pacific Excursions in Economic Anthropology



George Selgin
Professor of Economics
University of Georgia
Terry College of Business



Course Description

Caveat Emptor: This is *not* a full-fledged introduction to Economic Anthropology, and for good reasons. First, a course of three weeks duration, and with many

distractions to boot, is far too short for a proper introduction to that (or any other) well-trodden field of study. Second, your instructor is not qualified to offer such an introduction. Indeed, he is not an economic anthropologist at all (his field is monetary economics), and as such is almost as unfamiliar with that subject's content as most of his students will (presumably) be.

So what sort of course is this? It consists, as its title suggests, of a series of "excursions" into economic anthropologists' territory—side trips from students' principle voyage towards their degrees, and also (as it were) from their (literal) voyage to the South Pacific. In these excursions I will serve as your guide, but only in the sense that William Bligh "guided" his faithful crewmembers to the then-unknown island of Fiji. My qualifications—not comparable to Bligh's, alas (but I don't employ the lash, either)—consist of my general knowledge of economics along with some familiarity (and here I have Bligh's advantage) with the sub-discipline's landmarks.

Our excursions are "Pacific" in two senses: first, and most obviously, because they concern the economic anthropology of Pacific (that is, South Pacific) peoples; and, second, because they are meant to be *peaceful* excursions. They are aimed at gaining an appreciation of how traditional societies far different from our own confront or have confronted fundamental economic challenges, and not at holding up such societies for critical assault from a Western standpoint. They are likewise aimed at gaining an appreciation of the usefulness of economics to anthropological research that eschews "economics imperialism" by also striving for an appreciation of what anthropology can teach economists. This isn't to say that the course avoids controversy altogether, however: on the contrary, the subjects treated are all rife with controversy—and the discourse among proponents of alternative approaches to them is often, as you'll see while working through the readings, anything but "pacific"!

Course Procedure

The course is built around readings, field trips, lectures by on-site faculty, and class discussions. Students will be asked to volunteer to serve as discussion leaders, by preparing a set of questions for discussion, to be supplied at the beginning of the session, and by moderating the discussion as it proceeds. (I may make these team assignments.) Other students are also expected to prepare one or more questions to raise during the discussions. The course grade will be based in large part on the quality of students' leadership and general participation in class discussions. There are also in-term written assignments and a final written exercise to be handed in and graded after our return from the South Pacific.

The Module Approach

The course is built around three principle topics or "modules," each comprising two sub-topics:

Module 1: Primitive Economies, or Primitive Economics?

1a. The Proper Domain of Economics;

1b. Economics and Anthropology: Irreconcilable Differences?

Module 2: The Allocation of Goods

2a. Ceremonial Exchange;

2b. Pacific Monies.

Module 3: Beyond Economics?

3a. Cargo Cults;

3b. Cannibalism: Myth vs. Fact.



The module approach combines lectures and discussion sessions with outside activities, all of which are supposed to contribute to a general grasp of the subject at hand. (You will find a fuller description of the approach, prepared by the program organizers, in your program packets.) The general idea is to be actively engaged in seeking better understanding of the subject through reading, participation in discussions, and field exercises.

Attendance

Punctual attendance at all scheduled, program-related activities, including group meetings, discussions, field excursions, as well as lectures and any other scheduled activities, is required. Participation in field activities (such as hiking, snorkeling, swimming, kayaking, etc) is voluntary and at the discretion of the student; however, should you wish not to participate you must inform the instructor and an alternate activity will be assigned. An excused absence or decision not to participate in one or any of these field activities will not affect your grade for the course. During the field studies, no student is to leave the group without the consent of the faculty supervisor. Unless an absence is approved by one of the instructors or the program directors, students will lose 10% of their final grade for each day or part-day they fail to participate. Any unexcused

absences *or continued/excessive late arrival* to program activities may, at the discretion of the Program Director, be grounds for dismissal from the program.

Readings and Written Assignments

Readings are to be read in advance of meetings devoted to discussing them; the dates given are those by which readings should be *completed*. Be prepared to read a lot: neither economists nor anthropologists are known for being terse! It is recommended that you plan to finish the first set of readings prior to arriving in New Zealand.

Module 1: Primitive Economies, or Primitive Economics?

Does conventional economic analysis apply to all peoples or merely to “modern” (Western) societies? Does it address human action as such or only the activities of a special “type” of human agent—the notorious *Homo economicus*? In particular, do conventional economic notions provide a useful framework for understanding actions in and institutions of traditional non-Western societies, or must the study once known as “primitive” economics rest on radically different postulates from those found in conventional economic analysis?

Wednesday, December 19. “The Proper Domain of Economics”

[Ludwig von Mises, "The Treatment of Irrationality in the Social Sciences," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1944: 527-46.*](#)
[Richard McKenzie, “The Non-Rational Domain and the Limits of Economic Analysis,” *Southern Economic Journal* 46 \(1\) \(July 1979\): 145-7.](#)
(Optional) [Raymond Firth, “The Study of Primitive Economics,” *Economica* 21 \(December 1927\): 312-35](#), especially pp. 312-15 and 332 (from middle page) to 335.

*Note that in this essay Mises uses of the term “praxeology” to refer to the general “science of human action.” For our purposes, though, it may stand as a synonym for economics.

Saturday, December 22. Economics and Anthropology: Irreconcilable Differences?

[“Homo Economicus,” from Wikipedia.](#)
[Heath Pearson, “Homo Economicus Goes Native, 1859-1945: The Rise and Fall of Primitive Economics,” *History of Political Economy* 32 \(4\) \(2000\): 933-89.](#)
[James Ferguson, “Economics and Barbarism: An Anthropological Comment on Pearson’s “Homo Economicus,” *History of Political Economy* 32 \(4\) \(2000\): 991-998.](#)
(Optional) [C.A. Gregory, “Economics, Anthropology, and Political Economy: A Critique of Gregory,” *History of Political Economy* 32 \(4\) \(2000\): 999-1009.](#)

Module 1 written assignment, *due Saturday, December 22*: Prepare a brief (250 word) essay comparing the views of Mises and McKenzie concerning the proper

domain of economics (or “praxeology”). To what extent does each regard economic principles as applying solely to the ideal-type of “*Homo economicus*”? What implicit or explicit advice does each have to author concerning the usefulness of economic reasoning in understanding non-Western social institutions?

Module 2: The Allocation of Goods

In modern Western economies, goods are generally assumed to be “allocated” by means of monetary exchange, where exchanges are “quid-pro-quo” and are accomplished with the aid of a generally-accepted medium of exchange, which overcomes the limitations inherent in reliance upon strict barter.

To what extent does the allocation of resources in traditional Pacific economies depart from these conventional features of Western goods allocation? Do the departures suggest the irrelevance or inapplicability of conventional economic analysis? Do they point to violations of the fundamental postulates of neoclassical theory? If so, how?

Monday, December 24: Ceremonial Exchange

[“Gift Economy,” from Wikipedia.](#)

[David Hamilton, “The Great Wheel of Wealth: A Reflection of Social Reciprocity,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 24 \(3\) \(July 1965\): 241-8.](#)

[C. Toren, “Drinking Cash: The Purification of Money through Ceremonial Exchange in Fiji,” in J. Parry and M. Bloch, eds., *Money and the Morality of Exchange* \(Cambridge: CUP 1989\), pp. 142-64.](#)

(Optional) [Raymond Firth, “The Exchange of Gifts,” in *Economics of the New Zealand Maori*, pp. 393-432.](#)

(Optional) [Henry Rutz, “Ceremonial Exchange and Economic Development in Village Fiji,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 26 \(4\) \(July 1978\): 777-805.](#)



Thursday, December 27: Pacific Monies

[George Dalton, “Primitive Money,” in idem., ed., *Tribal and Peasant Economies: Readings in Economic Anthropology* \(Garden City, NY, 1967\), pp. 254-84.](#)

[Paul Einzig, selections from *Primitive Money* \(Oxford: Pergamon, 1966\)](#)

(Optional) [William Henry Furness, “Money and Currency,” in *The Island of Stone Money: Uap of the Carolines* \(Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1910\).](#)

(Optional) [Jacques Melitz, “The Polanyi School of Anthropology on Money: An Economist’s View,” *American Anthropologist* 72 \(5\) \(October 1970\): 1020-40, especially pp. 1020-23 and 1030-33.](#)

Module 2 written assignment, *due on Thursday, December 27*: In a brief (250 word) essay, agree or disagree with one of the statements below, each of which purports to be based on sound application of economic principles. Option (a): “Ceremonial gift-giving should be abolished because it diverts scarce resources

from productive employment.” Option (b): “The difference between a ‘gift’ and an exchange economy is more apparent than real, for in both cases, reciprocity of some kind is ultimately at work.”

Sunday, December 30: Group Discussion

(Note: Plan to get an early start on readings for back-to-back sessions on January 2-3.)

Module 3: Beyond Economics?

Are some human actions simply beyond economic analysis, in the sense that they cannot be understood in terms of purposeful action aimed at the efficient satisfaction of wants? Are some activities better understood as being non-rational, if not irrational? Is there even a danger of serious misinterpretation arising from attempts, by hook or by crook, to identify a “rational” basis for all conduct? Or is the greater danger that of labeling action as “irrational” simply because it rests upon a radically distinct perception of means (technique), or set of valued ends, from those to which Western observers are accustomed?

Wednesday, January 2: Cargo Cults

[“Cargo Cult,” from Wikipedia](#)

[Paul Raffaele, “In John They Trust,”](#)

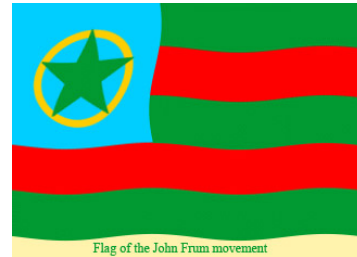
[Smithsonian Magazine, February 2006.](#)

[Peter Worsley, “The Tuka Movement of Fiji,”](#)

[in *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of ‘Cargo’ Cults in Melanesia*](#)

[Doug Dalton, “Cargo Cults and Discursive Madness.” *Oceania*, June 2000.](#)

(Optional) [Raymond Firth, “The Theory of ‘Cargo’ Cults: A Note on the Tikopia,” *Man* 141-2 \(September 1955\): 130-132.](#)



Thursday, January 3: Cannibalism: Myth vs. Fact

[Reay Tannahill, “Who’s for Dinner?” in *Flesh and Blood: A History of the Cannibal Complex* \(London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975\), pp. 137-64.](#)

[\(Various\). “Here be Cannibals: Cannibalism in the Fiji Islands.”](#)

[W. Arens, “The Mythical World of Anthropology,” in *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy* \(Oxford: Oxford University Press\), pp. 165-85.](#)

(Optional) [Marvin Harris and Marshall Sahlins, “Cannibals and Kings: An Exchange,” *The New York Review of Books* 26 \(11\) \(June 28, 1979\).](#)

(Optional) [Martin Gardner, “Is Cannibalism a Myth?” *Skeptical Inquirer* \(January 1, 1998\).](#)



Module 3 written assignment, *due on Thursday, January 3*: “The practice of cannibalism and development of cargo cults are both evidence of fundamentally

irrational or non-rational behavior, which cannot be understood in economic terms—that is, they cannot be reasonably construed as products of individuals' attempts to achieve desired ends through the efficient employment of available means. Economics is simply not applicable to them." In a brief (250 word) essay, agree or disagree with this statement.

Sunday, January 6: Wrap-Up Discussion. Final Exam Exercise T.B.A.

[Axel Leijonhufvud, "Life Among the Econ," *Western Economic Journal* 11 \(September 1973\): 327-37.](#)

Grades

1. Participation (20%). Students are encouraged to actively participate in class discussions. Participation means that students will ask informed questions and make statements based on the readings, lectures, guest lectures and their own observations they make while in New Zealand and Fiji. The grade is based not on frequency but on the quality of questions and statements and their relevance to the course.
2. Three written assignments—one per module (20% each).
3. Final exam covering concepts and terms: (20 %).

Academic Honesty

All academic work must meet the standards contained in the University's academic honesty policy (see "A Culture of Honesty"; www.uga.edu/ovpi). All students are responsible for informing themselves about those standards before performing any academic work. The penalties for academic dishonesty include (but are not limited to): award of a failing grade for the course, suspension, notification placed on the student's transcript of their having been found guilty of cheating, and expulsion from the university (see "Sanctions for Dishonesty"; www.uga.edu/ovpi), and ignorance is not an acceptable defense. Any cases of academic dishonesty will be reported to the University Academic Policy Panel.

Special Accommodations

Any student who requires special accommodation or assistance in this course must see the instructor before or at the UGA campus orientation meeting and register with UGA Disability Services (<http://www.dissvcs.uga.edu>). Some activities include moderate exercise, such as hiking and snorkeling.

