

Malinowski, Herskovits, and the Controversy over Economics in Anthropology

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From its inception, knowledge production in economic anthropology has been both stimulated and bedeviled by “scientific” economic thought focused on capitalism and its combined and uneven development in the world (Schumpeter 1954, 3). The logical integrity, analytical precision, and explanatory clarity of economic thought were stimulants. The bedeviling was a consequence of Eurocentrism, typically expressed around the issue

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History of Political Economy 48:4 DOI 10.1215/00182702-3687295
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of rationality and irrationality in economic performance as determined through the application of the textbook model of economic man as a self-interested rational calculator. This has occurred despite the ethnographic record showing that beyond the operational centers of capitalist civilization, even in their own rural hinterlands, *Homo sapiens* was situationally prone to rational, quasi-rational, or irrational behavior with differential outcomes regarding economic performance (Godelier 1972; Pearson 2000). Knowledge production in economic anthropology was also unduly influenced by the privileged claim of economic science as the proper study of economic life—which put younger sciences like anthropology on the defensive and seemingly under the tutelage of economic science for theoretical and methodological guidance. This also occurred, despite the fact that economic science was not concerned empirically, but mostly hypothetically, with economic life beyond the boundaries of Euro-capitalist civilization. It was within this structure of knowledge production dominated by the senior discipline that the subjects of the present article, Bronislaw Malinowski and Melville Herskovits, approached the relationship between their disciplines of anthropology and economic science.

Before the onset of the formalist-substantivist debate of the 1960s and 1970s, Malinowski's place in the history of economic anthropology had been significantly defined by two unconnected scholarly interventions: first by the economic historian Karl Polanyi and second by the social anthropologist Raymond Firth, Malinowski's student and successor at the London School of Economics. Both Polanyi and Firth emphasized the "richness" of Malinowski's "institutional analysis" (Firth 1957b, 212). Nevertheless, Firth viewed his mentor as a "common sense descriptive economist" with an inconsistent understanding of economic activity in systemic, analytical terms (226). Polanyi ([1944] 1957, 46–47, 272; 1968) elevated case-study material from Malinowski's Trobriand ethnography (e.g., Malinowski [1935] 1978, 27–28, 40–48; [1922] 1961, 167; 1926, 25) to universal status as illustrating the "social embeddedness" of all premarket economies by virtue of the prevalence of reciprocity and redistribution.

Not only did Firth belittle Malinowski's grasp of classical/neoclassical economics, he also disparaged his understanding of supply, demand, and price relationships (Firth 1957b, 212). He did so without direct knowledge of the contents of the preliminary report and other materials from Malinowski's final ethnographic research project in Oaxaca (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982; Malinowski 1940, 1941) that illustrated his mentor's working knowledge of market economics.

The editors of the key late twentieth-century textbook on economic anthropology, Edward LeClair and Harold Schneider, both students of Herskovits, portrayed Malinowski as a denigrator of conventional economic theory interested mostly in studying the social context of economic activity. In their view he held an outdated concept of economic man and rejected the proposition that Trobriand Islanders were motivated in activities of production, exchange, consumption, and distribution by material self-interest (LeClair and Schneider 1968b, 4–5). In contrast, they portrayed Herskovits as a supporter of conventional economic theory who was instrumental in making it respectable in anthropology. Along with Firth and D. M. Goodfellow, he was considered to be a pioneering advocate of the “theory of rational choice built around a principle known as the ‘calculus of maximization,’” which “assumes that people make choices among alternatives in a rational fashion, according to determinable principles” (6).

But is the prevailing view of Malinowski and Herskovits accurate? Not entirely, we argue. The recent availability of previously inaccessible material from the Malinowski Oaxaca project archives, the discovery of Malinowski’s unpublished review of Herskovits’s 1940 book *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples*, and new evaluations of Herskovits’s writings justify a reconsideration of the legacy of these two foundational scholars in the history of economic anthropology. This reconsideration will show that the twentieth century’s view of their respective places in the history of economic anthropology requires corrective fine-tuning.

We present first a biographical account by one of the present authors, Michael W. Young, of the ambivalent relationship that developed between Bronislaw (“Bronio”) Malinowski (1884–1942) and Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963). Malinowski’s unpublished review of Herskovits’s *Economic Life of Primitive Peoples* is especially important for providing glimpses into Malinowski’s late-career thinking on the relationship between anthropology and economics, as well as for clarifying differences between himself and Herskovits on that topic and on anthropology in general. In the second part of the article, the other author, Scott Cook, provides a discursive analysis of the review and of relevant economic writings of Herskovits and Malinowski. (Young’s transcription of Malinowski’s review is available as online-only supplemental material to this article <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00182702-3687295>.)¹

1. The field of research and body of discourse involving the issue of economics in anthropology, prior to N. S. B. Gras’s (1927) coining of the term “economic anthropology,” was labeled by the loaded and invidious term “primitive economics.” Even after 1952, when Herskovits appropriated

The Protagonists: Malinowski and Herskovits

The personal relationship of our protagonists had an auspicious beginning. From their first meeting in London in October 1924 and their second meeting in New York in March 1926, they cultivated a friendship based on mutual respect for each other's abilities. Malinowski was the elder by eleven years, an age difference reflected in the deference Herskovits usually showed in their early correspondence. In some respects their temperaments were similar: feisty, combative, and, as passionate believers in their subjects, occasionally "dogmatic and unyielding" (Jackson 1986, 110). They were tireless workers who drove their students hard and did not suffer fools gladly, and they were sometimes found by their colleagues to be "difficult." Their quick wits and mercurial displays of learning would have guaranteed lively seminar encounters.

Their early friendship was tempered by several theoretical disagreements, which in time divided them. The first hint of these to appear in the public record was in Herskovits's otherwise admiring review of Malinowski's pathbreaking little book on primitive law, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1926). It was "dangerous to generalize from one people" (i.e., the Trobrianders), Herskovits (1926) wrote. This mild rebuke was echoed by Franz Boas (1926) in a more acerbic review in which he chided Malinowski for the narrowness of his theoretical approach, particularly his antihistorical stance.

Herskovits also faulted Malinowski on his failure to recognize the similarity of his functional approach to that of Boas—or rather, that Boas had quietly applied functional methods well before Malinowski's proselytizing fanfare. It pained Herskovits to learn that his mentor Boas and his friend

and promoted Gras's terminology, little used until then, the modifier *primitive* was still used in anthropological discourse with reference to nonmarket, precapitalist, or tribal economic life (e.g., Sahlins 1960a, 1960b, 1965a, 1965b; Nash 1966). Malinowski's work presents no exception regarding this usage; however, in his review of Herskovits's 1940 book he introduced the term "ethnographic economics" (1940–41) to refer to the study of the economic life of peoples on the margins of capitalism. He never employed the term "economic anthropology," possibly because he rightly considered it to emphasize comparative and theoretical, rather than ethnographic, content.

The belated changeover from the terminology of "primitive economics" to that of "economic anthropology" reflects badly on anthropology, which should have led the way in defining noncapitalist "economic others" in less invidious terms. The sad reality is that several decades into the twentieth century anthropologists simply tagged along with economists and others, oblivious to the ongoing transformative process of the expansion of world capitalist commodity and market culture and its implications for knowledge production.

Malinowski could not see eye to eye when they had so much in common. "I am glad to learn that an occasional tiff is to your liking as it is to mine," he told Malinowski in 1928, alluding to an exchange they had had concerning Herskovits's "pietism and devotion to the Master [Boas]," which Herskovits maintained was matched by Malinowski's veneration for Sir James Frazer. Herskovits was still unable to accept that the study of a single culture could yield general knowledge of cultural processes. "As you know," he wrote, "I do feel that studies of distribution if not carried too far are not entirely to be damned—but there I am treading, I fear, on one of your pet aversions, and I had perhaps not say any more about that aspect of the matter" (Herskovits to Malinowski, May 15, 1928, MPLSE 6/4).

While on lecture tours of the United States in April 1933 and May 1935, Malinowski visited Northwestern University, where Herskovits was beginning to establish a department of anthropology that would become internationally renowned for its African Studies Program. Of the first visit Malinowski remembered: "Believe me that the few days I spent with you and your wife at Evanston are among the nicest of the last few years" (Malinowski to Herskovits, December 22, 1933, MPY I/256). Following Malinowski's departure, Herskovits reported to Boas: "I was impressed by the extent to which he had become mellowed since he was here in 1926, and to which his point of view in general matters had broadened. I only hope you will enjoy him as much as we did" (Herskovits to Boas, April 10, 1933; quoted in Jackson 1986, 111).

Back in London that year, Malinowski undertook to find a British publisher for Melville and Frances Herskovits's coauthored book, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*. It was a generous act of friendship that earned their gratitude but yielded no practical result. Faber and Faber, "one of the best English publishers," was interested, Malinowski told Herskovits, and Geoffrey Faber had even suggested that Malinowski write a preface, which he was perfectly willing to do (Malinowski to Herskovits, November 27, 1933, MPY I/256). The deal fell through, however, because Faber could not be assured of world rights. *Rebel Destiny* was later accepted by a New York publisher, but Malinowski was probably annoyed that his negotiations on his friends' behalf had come to naught.

Of Malinowski's second visit to Northwestern, Herskovits wrote: "It was a joy to have you stay with us in Evanston and have the opportunity to talk about all sorts of things with such freedom—to say nothing of the stimulation that went with it." The students had been "enthusiastic" about his visit, finding his last seminar "especially stimulating" (Herskovits to

Malinowski, May 10, 1935, MPY I/256). When Frances Herskovits gave birth to a baby girl a few weeks later, Malinowski wrote to her with warmest congratulations “on the establishment of a family and lineage, which, so far as I can gather, is matrilineal. Since I myself have three daughters and no sons, you can see that I don’t disapprove of matriliney” (Malinowski to Frances Herskovits, June 27, 1935, MPY I/256). Later that year Malinowski sent Herskovits a second copy of *The Sexual Life of Savages* for use in his seminar, with “the hope that you will this time frustrate the puritanical censorship which removed a copy of my book from the shelves of your working library!” (Malinowski to Herskovits, November 8, 1935, MPY I/256).

Notwithstanding all this goodwill and camaraderie, their theoretical differences were hardening. Herskovits had decided that Malinowski was dogmatically “antihistorical” (a term that was in wide use at the time) and that his functionalism and his theory of culture based on biological needs could not adequately explain processes of culture change. In his short polemical book *Acculturation* (1938) Herskovits warned that the study of culture change “must not strain too much to integrate all aspects” of a culture and that “the less the sense of history, the more sterile the results” (22, 25). He was hostile, moreover, to the aims and methods of the “practical anthropology” that Malinowski had introduced to the International African Institute a decade earlier, thereby winning him the Rockefeller sponsorship that funded his functional revolution in Britain. Herskovits believed that the use of anthropology to aid the British government in ruling its African colonies threatened its independence as a scholarly discipline. In 1939 Malinowski devoted a substantial review article in the journal *Africa* to a point-by-point refutation of Herskovits’s criticisms. He did acknowledge, however, that Herskovits’s approach in *Acculturation* was “dynamic, integral, and concerned with the realities of the process” of culture contact rather than with “antiquarian details” and the mechanical transference of traits (Malinowski 1939, 32). Malinowski had come to the realization that functionalism need not stand in opposition to the historical approach, that they were indeed complementary. If only Herskovits could agree, their differences of opinion could be “made fruitful for the advancement of science” (46–47).

Malinowski had tried to be conciliatory, but there is no surviving correspondence between them after 1935, and whether they managed to reconcile their differences cannot be read from the public record. Yet Her-

skovits spent the Lent and summer terms of 1938 in London, where he attended Malinowski's famous seminar at the London School of Economics along with the likes of Meyer Fortes, D. M. Goodfellow, Phyllis Kaberry, Edmund Leach, Lucy Mair, Siegfried Nadel, Ralph Piddington, W. E. H. Stanner, Fei Hsiao Tung, and Francis Hsu (whom Herskovits would later recruit for his Northwestern University department). Presumably, Herskovits would not have cared to join Malinowski's notoriously erudite and sharp-tongued seminar if the two men had not been on cordial terms.

Their divergent views on acculturation would have been familiar to LSE staff and students at the time, even though Herskovits's 1938 book on the subject and Malinowski's (1939) response to it were not yet available in print. How often the two men consorted outside the LSE seminar room is a matter for conjecture, but they most certainly would have engaged one another at the 1938 International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in Copenhagen in late July. Malinowski delivered an opening address on culture change in the economic and sociological sections attended by both Herskovits and Firth, among others ("Notes and News," 1939). For his part, Herskovits vigorously debated the *Führer* of the German delegation, the Nazi anthropologist Eugen Fischer, on the subject of race (Jackson 1986, 115). Malinowski, who devoted the rest of his life to denouncing Nazism, would surely have applauded.

Taking sabbatical leave in October of that year and leaving Firth in charge of the LSE department, Malinowski sailed for the United States to seek cures for his rheumatism and other chronic ailments. He was due to return in September 1939, but the war with Germany began that month and the LSE director advised him to remain in America. It is uncertain whether he met Herskovits again between 1939 and his death in 1942, there being no record of further invitations to Evanston.

An invitation of a different kind arrived in February 1940 when the editor of the *New Republic* invited Malinowski to review, in eight hundred words, Herskovits's new book, *The Economic Life of Primitive Peoples* (Malcolm Cowley to Malinowski, February 2, 1940, MPLSE). Malinowski rarely turned down review requests, and despite a very full writing schedule—including at least two other book reviews pending—he accepted. It is impossible to determine exactly when he read Herskovits's book or when he drafted the review, but it was most likely to have been in the months after his return from fieldwork in Mexico in October 1940 or

during the same period in 1941 following his second trip to Oaxaca. Early 1941 can be ruled out, as he was busy drafting his report on the economics of a Mexican market system (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982); likewise, in early 1942 he was completing *Freedom and Civilization* (eventually published in 1944). Everything else he worked on during the last few months of his life is well documented, and there is no mention of Herskovits or his book in Malinowski's correspondence covering this period.

Typically, Malinowski drafted a far longer review than required. Indeed, his book reviews often expanded into review articles—sometimes to the dismay of editors. But having decided there was something important to say, critical or otherwise, he would insist on saying it at whatever length. The fact that at the time of his death in May 1942 he had not submitted his review to the *New Republic* suggests that he was not entirely satisfied with it. The question arises why it was not published posthumously by his widow Valetta, who very quickly assumed the role of keeper of the flame. She inherited such an enormous backlog of completed or near-completed books, reviews, and essays to publish on her husband's behalf that it is hardly surprising she overlooked this particular review article among his bulging files. Or perhaps she saw it but dismissed it as of minor interest. One can only wonder how Herskovits would have responded had he been able to read it and whether he would have addressed Malinowski's criticisms in the 1952 edition of his textbook.

Ironically, the following year Valetta rejected a written proposal by Herskovits for a joint Anglo-American editorship of a collection of Malinowski's published essays. "He's the last person on earth who ought to edit Bronio's work," she complained indignantly to Audrey Richards. Without mentioning her sources, she added: "He continued always and persistently to attack Bronio, at times in a manner that no one could find acceptable, and I am amazed that he should have the impertinence to put forward this suggestion" (Valetta Malinowska to Richards, August 16, 1943, MPLSE).

Herskovits outlived Malinowski by twenty-one years, long enough for personal animosities to dim or dissipate. In a review of Firth's edition of commemorative essays by Malinowski's students, Herskovits (1958, 31) well remembered "with more tolerance and humor than was possible at short range, this *enfant terrible* of our science, with his insistence that Functionalism was the only true anthropological faith and that he was its prophet."

Comparing Malinowski's and Herskovits's Approaches to the Study of Economic Life

Malinowski's review of Herskovits's book highlights differences and similarities in their general approaches to anthropology, and it raises issues of theory and method that are important in comparing and contrasting their respective roles in the history of anthropological thinking about economic life. The sharpest differences in their approaches to anthropology regarding time perspective, cross-cultural methodology, and policy-related research (practical anthropology) are tangential, rather than central, to understanding their legacies in the history of economic anthropology as defined in the 1940s and 1950s by scholars like Polanyi and Firth, and in the formalist-substantivist debate and related discourses of the 1960s–80s.

Malinowski (1921, 15) interpreted Herskovits's views as compatible with his own approach to the "tribal economy," in which a special system of traditional economic values governed activities and spurred tribespeople on to efforts without the "interplay of supply and demand determining value and regulating all economic life." So, "the essential difference between the subject matter of classical economics and the economic pursuits of primitive peoples consists in the absence of markets, competition, marginal utilities, supply and demand, and that, therefore, some of the fundamental concepts which the economist uses in our modern system cannot be applied" (Malinowski 1940–41). These arguments were implicit in Malinowski's ([1922] 1961, 60, 516) early, well-publicized rejection of the textbook notion of "primitive economic man" as applicable to the tribal economy of the Trobriand Islands. However, given his continuing interest in economic change and his late-career study of a peasant market economy in Mexico, Malinowski's thinking about the analytical role of economic science in "ethnographic economics" (1940–41) shifted accordingly.

Malinowski (1940–41) noted Herskovits's emphasis on the absence of general-purpose money and "pecuniary standards of evaluation" in non-machine economies that are dependent mostly on manual labor as a main limitation on the applicability of conventional economic principles. He objected to Herskovits's handling of the issue of "primitive money" and criticized him for failing to recognize that ceremonial objects "accepted by the natives as payment for the pearls they fish for Europeans . . . are to that extent money" and that such payments actually reflect "the early stages of a process in which . . . European contact imposes a new type of exchange and new devices for carrying it out" (1940–41). Malinowski extended this

discussion by observing insightfully that “today . . . certain types of primitive enterprises are being transformed from their original nature into economic realities which enter fully into the world organization of production, exchange, and consumption” (1940–41). He further criticized Herskovits for overlooking the process of gradual development at which “there enters the element where some commodity interchangeable for a variety of others allows the appearance of choice . . . as a convenient medium of exchange . . . a measure of value” (1940–41). His focus on the implications of the inevitable, if uneven, emergence of general-purpose money and of money capital throughout the world economy either echoed or anticipated fuller considerations of the topic in the work of Marx and Polanyi as well as more recent contributions in economic anthropology (e.g., Gregory 1997; Graeber 2001; Hart 2001; Cook 2004, 95, 126, 131).

It was precisely in his digression on the changing nature of “primitive” money that the convergence of new knowledge sources exposed Malinowski’s unfinished thinking about anthropology and economics. The passages quoted above and materials from his Oaxaca project suggest that by 1940 he was working toward refining his understanding of mixed economies like Oaxaca’s and of changing tribal economies like the Trobriands’, where labor time and general-purpose money provided measures for quantifying economic variables, determining relative values, and measuring relationships among them, and hence facilitating the application of classical, Marxist, and neoclassical approaches in ethnographic economics.

Herskovits (1940, 465–66) scolded anthropologists (and, by implication, Malinowski) for manifesting a “sociological bias when studying economic phenomena” and burdening “the economic theorist with all of those traditional rules of social behavior, religious beliefs, and other masses of inter-related non-economic ethnographic and psychological data.” These were “encumbrances” to the study of the economic aspect of behavior (39–40). Herskovits implied that there was a need for rigorous conceptualization of the economic field to govern ethnographic data collection and analysis, almost to the point of invoking the economist’s main disencumbering principle, *ceteris paribus*, to reduce the number of variables to be analyzed. The economy “must be considered as constituting a body of data dealing with an autonomous aspect of culture” (466). Here Herskovits anticipated the issues of scope and method that would be debated in the 1970s (e.g., Cook 1974, 808–14).

Malinowski was more captivated than Herskovits by ideas of functional interdependency and empirical naturalism but less by propositions

of economic science. Economic behavior must be studied as it really is, and in the study of fully fledged institutions all elements of actual behavior must be included. Like the modern institutional economist, the anthropological fieldworker must study economic transactions as they happen and focus on problems of dependence, of relation, and of functionalism (Malinowski 1940–41). The ethnographer, although theoretically informed, must first proceed empirically, and then introduce theoretical models *ex post facto* for analytical purposes. In Malinowski's words, "We must study economic behavior as it really is and not as abstract theory would like us to have it. . . . When we deal with fully-fledged institutions, such as gardening, hunting, fishing, a native market organization, the political finance of an African chief, we must include all the elements of behavior and the ideas, motives, and values, which actually occur. In his empirical work the student of culture cannot create abstract isolates and force facts into them. . . . The process of abstraction must follow later. This is the task of theoretical analysis" (1940–41).²

We can infer from Malinowski's methodologically focused response to Herskovits, and especially from his positive view of Goodfellow's approach, that he was entertaining heuristic thoughts about the uses of abstract economic concepts and principles in comparative economic analysis and ethnographic economics. Despite his functionalist bias, Malinowski's response to Herskovits implied that, for theoretical purposes, economic elements could be disengaged or isolated from their sociocultural matrix to facilitate analysis. "To complain how difficult it is to detach the economic from other forces [or motives], simply implies a confusion between the legitimate fields of anthropological observation and theory. . . . The process of abstraction" must come after empirical work (1940–41). This does not imply that Malinowski's method was naively empiricist, but only that for him, as a matter of heuristic procedure, empirical data-gathering must

2. This is worded differently in an earlier version (Malinowski 1940–41): "In our society we have specific concrete institutions devoted to economic pursuits exclusively: the stock exchange, the factory, the department store are primarily economic institutions. Even there, psychology, social organization, the play on emotions and contingent sentiments, such as pleasing the mother through entertaining babies, enter conspicuously. Hence the modern institutional economist has been compelled to go beyond the abstract theory and to study economics as [it] essentially happens. In this he is following the example of the anthropological fieldworker."

It is important not to misinterpret Malinowski's discussion of the role of theory in ethnography as ignoring the role of pre-fieldwork conceptualizations of reality. As Young (2004, 88) points out, "Malinowski had decided as early as 1911 that theory (and not experience, narrowly defined) must precede description: 'every precise description of facts requires precise concepts, and these can be provided only by theory.'"

precede theoretically driven analysis. This is the closest Malinowski ever came to anticipating methodological issues later raised in the formalist-substantivist debate.

It is likely that Malinowski was still contemplating further revision of his review at the time of his death. Fundamental issues of theory and method raised in the review remained unresolved in his thinking. Consider the recently published ethnographic monographs on his desk at the time he was invited to review Herskovits's book. The pioneering studies by Raymond Firth ([1939] 1965), Audrey Richards (1939), and D. M. Goodfellow ([1939] 1970)—all former students of Malinowski, at the LSE—introduced thought-provoking approaches to the relationship between anthropology and economics. As a common point of convergence, these new sources of knowledge explicitly raised, among others, the issue of the applicability of the classical/neoclassical economic toolkit in the study of economies on the capitalist periphery—an issue haunting Malinowski's thought from 1921 onward.³

His thinking was sharply challenged by Goodfellow's ([1939] 1970, 3) study premised on the notion that “the concepts of economic theory must be taken as having universal validity” and his illustration of this with ethnographic material from South African research. Goodfellow's study was more comprehensively dependent on neoclassical analysis and more ambitious in its advocacy of a new paradigm for social anthropology than were Richard's and Firth's studies. Malinowski briefly noted Herskovits's negative reaction (Herskovits 1940, 29) to Goodfellow's study, and then proceeded to praise it as “an entirely new and original conception of the value of the economic process; a conception which may perhaps allow us to extend some principles of classical economics to societies living in the pre-machine [preindustrial] age” (1940–41).

Goodfellow ([1939] 1970, 3) considered economic anthropology to be the “fitter” and “verifier” of neoclassical principles in economies “fundamentally different from our own.” For Herskovits (1952, 60n43), Goodfellow's argument made the “economic anthropologist an apologist for economic theories rather than an analyst of their applicability to non-

3. Another such issue was Malinowski's indifference toward defining the concern with economics-in-anthropology as a specific field of study. His use of the terms “anthropological economics” and “economic anthropology” in the final paragraphs of his review seems to conform to Gras's (1927) definitions. However, his earlier reference to “ethnographic economics” suggests that he may have been searching for an alternative to the notion of “primitive economics.” In any case, there is implied in his discussion advocacy of a necessarily functionalist *modus operandi* for studying a single economy ethnographically and of a heuristically more lenient or experimental one for the comparative study of economies—an approach that he never applied.

machine and non-pecuniary cultures.” Malinowski, by contrast, was not predisposed to dwell on the issue of applicability. In his view, any concept or theory had to be submitted to partial testing through empirical application; this could result in reframing it in more elastic terms or, possibly, in its rejection (cf. Malinowski 1944, 127).⁴

In the same period in which Malinowski was perusing these studies, he was in the midst of his Oaxaca research project, which exposed him not only to a new culture area, Mesoamerica, but also to the economic life of peasant-artisan villagers participating in a mostly monetized regional system of periodic markets in which barter was still practiced. Obviously, the principles and concepts of classical/neoclassical economics were more directly applicable here than in his earlier studies of the Trobriand economy. His preliminary report on this project, *The Economics of a Mexican Market System* (unpublished until 1957 in Spanish translation and 1982 in English), written about the time he was reviewing Herskovits’s book, included market economic analysis alongside descriptions of Trobriand-like examples of barter (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982, chaps. 7, 8).

4. Goodfellow followed Malinowski’s lead in positing a dichotomy between the forms and functions of economic activity and adroitly avoided the arbitrary imposition of neoclassical categories on non-European economies by careful ex post facto consideration of how similar economic functions, identified by neoclassical theory, are performed by non-European institutional forms. Whereas his approach was predicated on the assumption of the applicability of neoclassical theory to all forms of economic life (Goodfellow [1939] 1970, 8), like Malinowski, Goodfellow emphasized that the problem of the ethnographer was to test this applicability “against the facts which he gathered in ‘the field’” (6). Thus, Goodfellow salvaged the essential rationality of *Homo sapiens* even as cultural differences between simple and more advanced economies were pinpointed.

Together with his imaginative treatment of the entrepreneurial function of the male heads of Bantu households (81–82), Goodfellow deserves credit for his generally sophisticated neoclassical-inspired analysis of the problem of household management of economic resources/commodities (e.g., 57–58, 62–64). For example, he found that decision-making regarding grain was vested in different combinations of the people comprising the household (63), which shifted in composition according to the purpose for which the grain was used (65). Malinowski must have considered this to be an improvement over his own less-systematic handling of the economic management decisions in Trobriand kin-based groups and quite appropriate for the analysis of decisions in Oaxaca households regarding maize.

Goodfellow also applied rational choice theory to commodity transfers in terms of marginal units: the Bantu people were described as being always aware that “it is always the little more or less that counts,” so that in situations where customary transfers were said to be unvarying, “evidence points to the fact that a goat may be substituted for a cow, that handfuls of grain are carefully counted”—the “*minimum sensible*” is not large enough to reduce economic choice to a minimum (93). Malinowski may well have appreciated Goodfellow’s fine-tuned observations but would have insisted on more quantification and further empirical testing of the applicability of marginal analysis, which was peripheral to his main interest in wider issues of household and community reproduction. In any case, there is no evidence that he attempted marginal analysis in his Oaxaca report (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982) or in his field notebooks (Malinowski 1940, 1941).

His unpublished review and his ethnographic field notes and related materials from the archive of his Oaxaca project (Malinowski 1940, 1941; Cook 2015, 2016) are important new data sources for helping us understand influences on his thinking about the study of economic life. Since the Oaxaca project remained unfinished when he died in 1942, we can only speculate as to how Malinowski's contribution to economic anthropology might have been expressed in his planned (but unwritten) final project monograph.

Malinowski, Herskovits, and the Troubled Course of the "Economizing" Agenda in Economic Anthropology

The title of the second edition of Herskovits's *Economic Anthropology* borrowed a term first introduced in 1927 by N. S. B. Gras as "a synthesis of anthropological and economic studies" dealing with "the study of the ways in which primitive peoples obtained a living" (Gras 1927, 10; Herskovits 1952, v). Herskovits accepted Gras's vision regarding the future collaboration between anthropologists and economists so that "anthropologists could provide those in the economic field with facts in return for ideas and the fundamental issues involved in getting a living" (Gras 1927, 22). Among the latter, Herskovits (1940, 447) was especially drawn to the focus of economics on "concepts of value that determine . . . choices between alternatives that are inherent in the productive and distributive process"—a focus that encouraged quantitative marginal analysis of the allocation of scarce resources among alternate ends.⁵

5. In Heath Pearson's (2010, 175) retrospective and, at times, overwrought methodological obituary of Herskovits in economic anthropology, he states, "After all, Herskovits's 1952 discussion of the growth of knowledge since 1940 said nothing about new data having caused him to rethink his basic positions." In fact, Herskovits justified the publication of his revised edition in the following terms: "The fact that this revision has necessitated what in many cases amounts to a re-writing of the original work reflects in a very real sense the developments in the study of the economics of non-literate, non-industrial, and non-pecuniary societies that have taken place since 1940"; and, specifically regarding his new introductory chapter titled "Economizing and Rational Behavior," he explained, "The expansion and revision of the first section, which deals with theoretical and historical aspects of our subject, is likewise the result of this development, though it concomitantly represents a growing interest in the subject-matter on the part of economists (1952, vi)." These are, in fact, the very statements by Herskovits cited to justify my reference to "a change in attitude" (Cook 1966, 326) between 1940 and 1952 that Pearson expunged from the record. One wonders how Pearson was misled and why? Cf. Pearson 2010, 175.

The theme "Economizing and Rational Behavior" (inspired by a methodological debate with the economist Frank Knight) was given center stage in economic anthropology as the title of the

It would be a mistake, however, to minimize the limitations Herskovits (1952, 15, 16, 17, 20–24) perceived in the application of classical/neoclassical concepts and principles—especially, the rationality postulate—to the analysis of nonmachine economies (cf. Pearson 2010, 168–71). He was an advocate of the doctrine of “cultural relativism,” which stressed the “validity of the most diverse kinds of value-systems for the people who live in accord with them” (1952, 22) and prevented the imposition of Euro-American definitions of rationality on non-Euro-American economies. He warned against minimizing “the effect on the main lines of economic development and the shaping of economic institutions exerted by the presence of machine technology, the invasion of the evaluative processes by pecuniary considerations, and the high development of business enterprise” in the course of the comparative analysis of economies (487).

In 1940 Malinowski’s and Herskovits’s views about anthropology and economics had common elements. However, Herskovits’s (1940, 28) assertion that the “general principle of maximizing satisfactions is valid because it has a common-sense applicability that everywhere works in practice” was a harbinger of developments in his thinking. By the time he revised his book in 1952 his concern with the “calculus of maximization” had moved to a central place—although still with the important qualification of the need to culturally relativize its application. Despite Malinowski’s appreciation of Herskovits’s approach, his positive response to Goodfellow’s aggressively neoclassicist monograph, and his ongoing research in a significantly monetized peasant-artisan market economy of the Oaxaca Valley, there was little to suggest any inclination on his part to contribute to the rational choice paradigm.

In furthering the ultimate bridge-building purpose of his 1940 book, continued in his 1952 revision, Herskovits had to persuade anthropologists to share his belief that the economics literature was not entirely irrelevant to their shared concern of comparing the economic lives of nonmarket-economy “others.” By making selective use of economic concepts and

lead chapter in Herskovits’s 1952 revision of his 1940 textbook. The debate exposed Herskovits’s failure to appreciate the heuristic role of deductive model-building while simultaneously advocating the cross-cultural applicability of the maximization principle, which is difficult to validate empirically (Binenbaum 2005, 16; cf. Cook 1966, 325–26). This exposed a fundamental contradiction in Herskovits’s approach and explained his ambivalence toward Malinowski and Polanyi (Herskovits 1952, 7, 57, 181–82, 407–8). Herskovits’s paradoxical embrace of *Homo economicus* and the social embeddedness of the economy set the stage for the formalist-substantivist debate of the 1960s and 1970s (Cook 1974, 799–801, 814; 2004, chap. 4; Godelier 1972, 268).

employing quantitative methods to the extent possible (1940, 43), anthropologists could, presumably in an act of interdisciplinary altruism for the sake of scientific truth, “make it possible for the economist to draw materials from many civilizations rather than from one, when testing the validity of his theories” (40).

For Herskovits, the main theory that merited testing was the matter of choice conceptualized by Lionel Robbins (1935) as “‘a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses’ that involves a maximizing of satisfactions which is a universal of human society . . . and has a common-sense applicability that everywhere works in practice” (Herskovits 1940, 28). Herskovits seriously questioned the cross-cultural applicability of this theory. In effect, Herskovits resurrected Gras’s program for a comparative study of the human economy in which “anthropologists could provide those in the economic field with facts in return for ideas and the fundamental issues involved in getting a living” (Gras 1927, 22; cf. Herskovits 1952, vii). This relegated ethnographers to little more than fact gatherers for economists and surrendered comparative knowledge production mainly to economic science, not to anthropology (cf. Greenberg 1971, 71).

Apart from this obeisant posture toward economists and their science, Herskovits was indecisive in trying to reconcile his idiographic ethnographer’s heart with his nomothetic scientist’s brain. Thus, in contradictory fashion, he criticized the anthropologist Goodfellow’s ([1939] 1970) arguments supportive of the universal validity of economic concepts by references to broad aspects of a primitive economy (Herskovits 1940, 29), and he invoked the economist Frank Knight’s programmatic statement of “economizing” (ironically designed to eviscerate Herskovits’s approach to anthropology and economics) to exemplify a nomothetic framework for cross-economy analysis (Herskovits 1940, 41). To compound his contradictory posture, Herskovits (1952, chap. 1) elevated “economizing” to a position of prominence in his revised edition, and he extended his criticisms of Goodfellow’s approach (11, 48, 60). Knight was probably amused by this, but, ironically, his own brand of economics was fated to be short-lived, thanks to the mathematical takeover of the discipline in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶

6. Cook wishes to acknowledge Keith Hart for commenting on this discussion of the 1940 versus 1952 comparison of Herskovits as of interest “mainly for what happened to economics in the 1940s, during and after the war . . . when the math guys won (Tinbergen and Koopmans) and guys like Frank Knight became dinosaurs overnight” (personal communication, January 19, 2016).

Malinowski would have been lukewarm toward Herskovits's 1952 revision on the same epistemological grounds that underpinned his 1940–41 critique. Herskovits's rational choice orientation was dangerously close to disrupting the sequence of inductive method first, deductive method second—hence reducing the danger of imposing Eurocentric categories on non-European data—a danger that Herskovits (1940, 263; 1952, 23–24) himself recognized. For Malinowski, abstract analysis of economic variables detached from socioculturally interconnected data sets was implicitly appropriate a posteriori, assuming that a concern with quantitative and conceptual precision informed the ethnography. Still, as Malinowski ([1935] 1978, 459, 478) candidly admitted, his own ethnographic work lacked a systematic concern with quantification.⁷

Malinowski would also have noted how Herskovits's revision repeated his 1940 argument that ethnographers almost perversely buried economic activities in tangential cultural ones—hence encumbering economic analysis (Herskovits 1952, 59–60, 63). For Malinowski, the real purpose of ethnographic economics was to understand and explain the noneconomic encumbrances as a necessary part of the study of any economy.

Every statement Malinowski made regarding methodological aspects of his 1940–41 fieldwork on the economy of the Oaxaca Valley reinforced his self-image as an anthropologist practicing “ethnographic economics” (i.e., ethnography with an emphasis on economic activity). The final paragraphs of his preliminary report demonstrate his selective use of economic theory and his Weberian concern with isolating “economic” and “economically relevant” phenomena for analytical purposes (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982, 190; cf. Weber 1949, 190–91). They also show his concern with determining transactional exchange rates in an economy undergoing monetization and his recognition of the need to “attempt an assessment of production and consumption, of the value of labor” and consumer needs in money terms (Malinowski and de la Fuente 1982, 191). All this, he reiterated, together with “raising the standard of living of Indians and peasants, townsmen and artisans ought to be in the mind of the anthropologist as the lodestar of his investigation” (191). Malinowski's economics, then, was envisaged as an anthropological pursuit, informed by economic science and

7. In an earlier draft of his review, Malinowski (1940–41) criticized Herskovits for inconsistency on the use of conventional economic concepts in combination with sociological analysis—warning against a too-rigid use of one as opposed to the other: “Between the horns of this dilemma we seem to be swinging forward and backward . . . so that in one type of argument we are warned that exact economic concepts ought to be applied by ethnographer and theorist alike, and in another we are told that nothing is as dangerous as an abstract and precise analysis.”

including appropriate quantitative or abstract theoretical analysis, and with developmental implications for the lives of its subjects.

Herskovits's revision of his economic anthropology program came at a time of worldwide expansion of capitalism in many economies. In the 1950s, the primitive and tribal worlds were on the wane, and the "third world" of peasants, artisans, and rural proletarians was on the rise. These latter social actors were increasingly being incorporated into a global capitalist market economy, approaching a degree of integration. Under Herskovits's vision, economic anthropology should accept the principle of economizing as a universal trend and united in cooperation with economic science. By this means economic anthropology could ride the wave of "third world" development to emerge in the last decades of the twentieth century as a strong, vibrant, interdisciplinary field of study.

Not only did this not happen but, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a critic could opine that economic anthropology "survives as a small ghetto in anthropology, and barely that in economics" (Pearson 2010, 192). Tellingly, since 1990 citation counts for Herskovits's 1952 book have dropped to single digits in economics journals (177). Although admitting that Herskovits's project was flawed, Pearson (2010, 190) seems to attribute its unhappy fate mostly to its interdisciplinary mission, criticized in economics as well as within its home discipline. As argued above, however, Herskovits's project was doomed by internal contradictions that made it unviable in a rapidly transforming world economy.

As of the second decade of the twenty-first century the ethnographic current initiated by Malinowski has been much more consistent and successful in knowledge production than has the comparativist current associated with Herskovits, which, in contrast, has proceeded haphazardly with inadequate methodology. Indeed, since Thurnwald's ([1932] 1965) pioneering work on the economic life of "primitive" communities and Herskovits's more broad-ranging studies (1940, 1952), there has been no comprehensive comparative project of comparable scope and scale conducted by an individual scholar. There have been a series of less comprehensive efforts either in the form of book chapters (e.g., Cook 1974), collections of essays (e.g., Sahlins 1972, Gudeman 1986), or more recently, introductory or advanced survey works (Wilk and Cliggett 2007; Hann and Hart 2011) that selectively review contributions to the field. There has also been an ambitious, if uneven, encyclopedia project that attempted a broad survey of the subfield in its ongoing differentiat-

ing and fragmenting development (Carrier 2012a). Its main contribution was to summarize, by region or topic, the results of many studies in ethnographic economics.⁸

Arguably, Herskovits's interdisciplinary project was abortive not only because he refused to accept Knight's (1941, 253–54, 260) blunt warning of the methodological and epistemological incompatibility between anthropology and economics (cf. Herskovits 1952, 510–12, 516). He misguidedly tried to resolve Knight's criticisms by embracing the universality of economizing with regard to allocation of resources but questioning it with regard to the rationality of individual choice or maximization. For him, the latter was culturally variable, invoking differing value systems; to assume otherwise was tantamount to Eurocentrism (24). Latter-day formalists following this tortuous path between universalism and particularism found themselves mired in sterile exercises identifying and measuring values, although the stuff of substantive economic life—so compelling to both Malinowski and Herskovits—was abstracted out of the scope of their observation and analysis.

In short, more than seven decades after Herskovits (1952, 18) brought the study of economizing and rational choice into the mainstream of economic anthropology with a vision of the potential benefits of marginalist metrics of utility and disutility and the *ceteris paribus* tool, the results have been disappointing. The record is plagued by a multitude of analytical problems around choices between variables such as paid and unpaid work, risk and uncertainty, and decision-making regarding cooperation. There is even equivocation concerning decision-making, whether it rests with the household head or with the entire household (cf. Chibnik 2011, 166–71). Given the uneven record of this formalist current of economic anthropology, its future seems unpromising.

8. There have been two separate yet intertwined currents of thought running through the history of the anthropological study of the economy: the ethnographic and the comparativist. These currents draw on a common bank of theory but are driven by separate sets of methodological means and nomothetic ends. James G. Carrier (2012b, 2–3) has observed that the anthropological perspective is fundamentally empirical and naturalistic. It rests on observation of peoples' lives as they live them. Moreover, extended participant observation, which is empirical naturalism, defines the field. This does not apply to "comparativism," which requires a distancing from "naturalistic empiricism" in the "ivory tower," where theory, history, and method intersect in the quest for broad, even universal, patterns. According to Carrier, "This comparative element often sits uneasily in a discipline the members of which establish their credentials through ethnographic knowledge and publications concerning a place that is different from others" (6).

Conclusion

Malinowski's general approval of Herskovits's 1940 thesis regarding economizing and his praise for Goodfellow's study, together with his emphasis on the difficulty of applying "some of the fundamental concepts which the economist uses in our modern system" in economies without money and pecuniary standards of evaluation (1940–41), exhibited a number of contradictions and mixed messages. He was surely no denigrator of economic theory but rather a proponent of cautious and selective use of specific economic principles and concepts in the study of economies on the capitalist periphery. Even in the study of a regional market economy like that of the Oaxaca Valley, his analytical focus on the supply, demand, and pricing of commodities was subordinated to understanding the sociocultural conditions and implications of their production and circulation in regional economic life.

Regarding the issue of the "capitalization of resources in primitive society," Herskovits (1940, 262) unintentionally identified in a nutshell the paradox at the heart of his project: "Without a ready measure of value, almost any approach that is not to be wholly qualitative calls for a number of special researches directed toward devising an adequate methodological attack, and this is for the future" (cf. 1952, 302). That future would never materialize in the form envisaged by Herskovits. This was due to several factors: first, the emergence of Marxist and substantivist alternatives to the use of conventional economics in anthropological inquiry; second, the indifference of the great majority of economists to the subject matter and findings of anthropologists; and third, the accelerating spread of global capitalism after World War II that effectively transformed the "others" into a culturally diverse panoply of economies, more or less integrated into global markets, and hence researchable by economists. These factors all contributed to the failure of Herskovits's program for economic anthropology (cf. Pearson 2010, 165–66).

Herskovits clearly promoted the study of economic science by anthropologists as a necessary source of understanding economic life cross-culturally, but he was by no means an advocate of the unrestricted application of specific economic principles and concepts by anthropologists to the study of economies on the periphery of capitalism. He flirted with the use of deductive methods and rules for eliminating noneconomic variables from analysis, but failed to demonstrate how this could be achieved in anthropological work. His relativist approach to values (and rationality) impeded his effort to reconcile relationships between universal and

particular elements in human economic life. His comparative project was ambitious in scope but clumsy and contradictory in execution. The interdisciplinary trajectory it projected for economic anthropology had its moment in the sun in post–World War II development studies, but it dissipated as globalization intensified in the late twentieth century—particularly so as disciplinary lines hardened and intradisciplinary specialization and fragmentation flourished.⁹

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9. One telling statistic regarding the contributions to economic anthropology of Malinowski and Herskovits derives from a citation count in the recent encyclopedic contribution to the literature by James G. Carrier (2012a). There are only two citations for Herskovits and eleven for Malinowski, three of which are multiple-page citations (cf. Pearson 2010, 190–92).

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