

Fall 2000 Newsletter

Economic Anthropology Syllabi

By Michael Chibnik

Richard Wilk (Indiana University) and Deborah Winslow (University of New Hampshire) organized a teaching workshop last April at the joint meetings of the SEA and the Central States Anthropological Society in Bloomington, Indiana. At the workshop Rick and Deb distributed five syllabi for undergraduate courses in economic anthropology taught by themselves and Michael Burton (University of California – Irvine), Jeffrey Cohen (Pennsylvania State University), and Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld (University of Iowa). Although I was able to attend only the very end of the workshop (which took place at the same time as a plenary session of the SEA meetings), I did pick up copies of the five syllabi. The courses – all taught at state universities -- seemed to be directed primarily at juniors and seniors. The great extent to which they varied has led me to ponder the lack of anything resembling a canon in our subfield.

The courses assigned most readings from books that the students were expected to purchase, but also required (except for Burton's course) some additional reading of articles and book chapters. Burton and Cohen assigned three books, Wilk and Winslow seven, and Colloredo-Mansfeld eight. The only overlap of books occurred in Wilk's and Cohen's classes, with both assigning Wilk's 1996 text (*Economies and Cultures*) and *Beyond Economic Man*, a 1993 book by Marianne Ferber and Julie Nelson. Since Rick was Jeff's dissertation adviser at Indiana, perhaps this is not surprising.

It would be foolish to try to make sweeping conclusions about the field of economic anthropology from looking at five syllabi. However, I am reasonably certain that an examination of more syllabi would not have resulted in consensus about what are the core books in our subdiscipline (or – less grandly – what might work in an undergraduate course). Furthermore, the courses differed considerably in what topics they covered and how much emphasis they placed on various aspects of economic anthropology. I looked, for example, at four topics that I thought would probably be covered in a course in economic anthropology — exchange systems among foragers, the substantivist-formalist controversy, dependency/world systems theory, and globalization/transnationalism. From what I could deduce from the syllabi, three of the courses covered foragers' exchange systems, three considered the substantivist-formalist debate, three considered dependency theory, and four transnationalism. No other topic was covered in more than two of the syllabi.

I am not sure what to make of all this. Although there is probably similar variability in the required readings (aside from textbooks) in introductory sociocultural anthropology courses, I suspect that certain topics (cultural relativity, ethnicity, religion, marriage and family) are covered by almost all instructors. But there may well be as much variability in books and content in courses on ecological anthropology, applied anthropology, or religion. Many of us were attracted to anthropology because of the latitude it allows in

topics studied and theoretical approaches. The syllabi I looked at suggest (perhaps to the surprise of none of us) that economic anthropology covers a lot of ground.

"Books in Economic Anthropology" By Michael Chibnik

I am always looking for books in economic anthropology that are thought-provoking and readable. Here are six books that I enjoyed reading (although a couple are slow-going in parts) and either already use or plan to use in my classes:

Kearney, Michael 1996 *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective*. Boulder: Westview.

This book cogently argues that conventional categories such as "peasant" and "immigrant" do not fit many people in an era of globalization and border-crossings. Kearney takes on a lot of big questions. He has strong opinions and is not averse to inventing jargon and using obscure quasi-mathematical formulas. But the book is mostly well-written and always interesting.

Ledeneva, Alena 1998 *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is a compelling account of the system of personal accounts and personal networks used to obtain goods and services under the rationing characteristic of Soviet Russia. I found the book amusing, intelligent, and intriguing.

Netting, Robert 1993 *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable, Agriculture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

A masterful summary of the issues that Netting focused on throughout his remarkable career.

Robbins, Richard 1999 *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

I have taught a large introductory course on "anthropology and contemporary world problems" for a number of years. This book examines many of the issues I cover (the rise of capitalism, world food problems, population growth, consumption, ethnic conflict, inequality) in a straightforward way. This is by far the best textbook on these topics I have seen.

Scott, James 1998 *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Scott has written a fascinating book about how the modern nation-state's need to simplify complex reality often leads to disastrous economic programs. He argues that any

centrally managed social plan must recognize the importance of local culture and practical knowledge if it hopes to succeed.

Steiner, Christopher 1994 *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is a wonderful multilocal ethnography of the trade in African art that shows well how cultural anthropologists can study commodity chains.

Michael Chibnik