

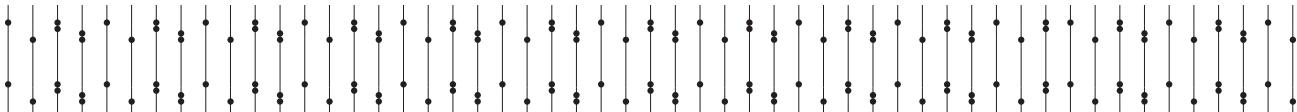
Núcleo de Pesquisas
em Cultura e Economia

Museu Nacional | IFCS
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ECONOMIC ETHNOGRAPHY: MODALITIES OF EXCHANGE AND ECONOMIC CALCULATION

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National Museum, Rio de Janeiro



POSITION PAPER

Economic sociology and anthropology have undergone a significant rebirth over the last few years. The long-standing division between western societies, where the sphere of economic activities was taken to be autonomous, and traditional societies, where it was seen to be indissociable from social relations, has been abandoned for good. At the same time, the boundaries between domestic, market and public economies have shifted: phenomena such as the mutable relations between the State and the economy, market expansion, women's access to employment, increased life expectancy for people with disabilities, global awareness of environmental issues and their relation to heritage and moral duty, and the appearance of a new division between paid and unpaid work in the digital economy have all prompted a consideration of these transformations (the crisis of the more powerful economies, the growth of 'emerging' countries) as a questioning of the distinct ways of thinking about the economy at the global scale.

The field opened up in this process is undoubtedly vast. In this colloquium we propose three lines of inquiry:

- a. The first is a cognitive ethnography, which involves describing the different kinds of calculations made by individuals and groups subject to these contemporary transformations. Whether the topic in question is credit, consumption, wealth, trade or the production of goods and services, how do individuals and collectivities count

their income and expenditure, their ‘bets’ and their gains or losses? How do they define ‘prices’? In which social settings is making these calculations openly legitimized, in which must calculations remain hidden, and in which is the very possibility of calculation immoral? How are these moral rules transformed, and how and on whom are they imposed? The use of money as a unit of account is one of the most powerful cognitive tools for calculation, because it is based on shared equivalences and because it enables arithmetic operations. What happens when a currency can no longer be used to count? Inversely, what happens when a currency is used merely to count and not to pay? Numbers also allow material and immaterial objects, along with states of the world, to be arranged and organized in the same fashion. Under what conditions is their use legitimized? All kinds of accounting records stabilize moral persons and fix the meaning of activities and exchanges. Who uses them? How does their use spread? Who are the specialists responsible for producing these cognitive tools: economists, administrators, lawyers, technical experts? What are the relations between these tools and the ordinary instruments of calculation used by people in their day-to-day activities?

b. Encompassing these questions and moving beyond the classical oppositions found in social anthropological understandings of the economy (substantivism vs. formalism, holism vs. individualism), we can ethnographically question the idea of calculation itself. What types of mental operations and tools are mobilized in order to ‘calculate’? What are the native categories used in everyday situations to describe what specialists call ‘calculation’ (or income, expenditure, prices)? What are the benefits and risks of using descriptive categories like ‘calculate’ to comprehend a variety of operations within this heterogeneous constellation of phenomena? And finally what kind of relations (dialogues, conflicts, reformulations) does an ethnographic critique of economic calculation have with the research agendas of anthropologists, sociologists and historians, not forgetting economists?

c. The third line of inquiry involves the comparative approach. By considering a variety of social and historical contexts, the colloquium can enable the construction of a research agenda for economic ethnography on the transformations unfolding in the contemporary world: in which situations can we observe the emergence of new forms of thought on the interconnections between the market, domestic and public economies? How do the new balances of power govern the divisions between what must be preserved (heritage, for example), what can be traded on the markets, and what can be shared?