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**Is “the Economy” really real?  
Economic Framework, Economic Metaphors and beyond<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract : Economic anthropology and sociology have for a century aimed at producing more realistic, and usually more holistic accounts of « real economic practices » than the ones usually provided by economists ; these attempts were both intellectually quite successful and socially rather frustrating. At the same time, it is commonplace among social scientists to use analytic terms borrowed from the economic realm to describe social phenomena: notions such as ‘monopoly of violence’, ‘linguistic market’ or ‘market of salvation goods’, ‘social capital’, moral entrepreneurs, ‘declining rate of symbolic profit’, etc. While a number of social scientists have used creatively such metaphors, the working assumption behind these uses is that the economic language offers more powerful tools for describing the world we live in. By implication, such metaphoric uses also assume that the economy constitutes a deeper, « more fundamental » level of reality. The very reality of « the economy » as being the « bottom line » of human life remains taken for granted. I will challenge this assumption from both an ethnographic and a theoretical prospective. Based on ethnographic inquiries in former sugarcane plantations in the Northeastern region of Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro *favelas*, I will discuss the way various actors make or not use of an ‘economic’ framework to describe their situation and actions. Theoretically, I will explore the notion of *oikonomia*, « government of the house », as potentially offering an alternative framework from which we can suspend our ontological belief in « the economy » and question its reality.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a very rough first draft. Please do not use or quote. This work has benefited from from the CNRS the project Capes-Cofecub « *Forms of government and ordinary economic practices* ».

« This life did not bring profit, it brought only loss »<sup>2</sup>. This is the way Josimar, a man of about 35 years, communicated to me, when we briefly met last October, his recent conversion to pentecostal evangelicalism. I have known Josimar, and his family, for many years, and, by contrast with his pious parents, he was always a « merry lad », and although married and with children, often escaped with friends to drink, play football, dance *forro* and « see the girls ». While such behaviour is considered appropriate for youngsters in the Zona da Mata, the sugarcane area of Pernambuco, in the Northeast of Brazil, it is deemed irresponsible for adults who have to take care of their family. Such a striking statement, using the language of economics to describe the experience of conversion, could easily prompt comments on the commoditization of religion in a neo-liberal world. I am not sure however how far Josimar's line should be construed as 'economic'. While I could not discuss this at length with him, my guess is that he was not talking literally of monetary loss or gain, but rather metaphorically : what was at stake was his soul more than his wallet<sup>3</sup>. Alternatively, Josimar's words could be interpreted in the framework of an « economy of salvation goods », to use Bourdieu's interpretation of Max Weber. In that case, the language of the economy provides an organizing framework that serves to order meaningfully the world of what is *a priori* seen as far away from economy, religion. The Weberian epistemological break here consisted in making a voluntarily reductionist use of the language of economics to gain new insights on religious phenomena and processes, providing a more realistic account than the ones clothed in the actors' language. The reductionist use of an economic framework was thus an extremely bold and productive move. What I want to do in this paper is to raise a few questions on the use of the economic language and economic metaphors in social sciences, and suggest that we might try to do without them.

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2 « Essa vida não dava lucro, so dava prejuizo »

3 The book-keeping of salvation is a current topic in Evangelical websites.

### 1. Economic anthropology and sociology: a more realistic account of “the economy”?

One could maybe sum up one century of economic anthropology and sociology as aiming to provide a more realistic account of economic practices and processes than the one offered by the discipline of economics. Half a century ago, Raymond Firth thus wrote :

Anthropologists may be apt to answer the three fundamental questions posed by economists, as for instance, by Samuelson : what commodities shall be produced and in what quantities ; by whom and with what resources of technology ; how is the total product to be divided among individuals and families ? (1964: ) 4

Anthropologists were better equipped, he argued, to recognize what local forms take « capital », « commodities », « labour », « consumption », etc (« the anthropologist (...) can look for capital functions in unexpected places ».20). Indeed, insisted Firth, the « examination of what are held as assets in a peasant economy reveals a range of goods a sophisticated Western observer might not be inclined at first view to include in the capital category ». (ibid. : 24).

For Raymond Firth, who had initially been trained as an economist in Auckland, and proudly presented himself, when I met him in 1991, as a member of the Royal Economic Society since the 1920s, the task of economic anthropology was to expand and adapt economics to non-standard (and usually non-Western) economic realities, such as encountered in ‘primitive’, ‘peasant’, ‘marginal’ or ‘developing’ economies.

More recently, economic anthropology and sociology, rejecting the models of economics as ‘abstract’, ‘ahistorical’ and therefore unable to understand real life situations, have been trying to provide more realistic accounts of “economic realities”, by uncovering the “social structures of the economy” (to use Bourdieu’s words) or discovering “how culture shapes the economy” (Zelizer 2010)<sup>5</sup>. This endeavor has been immensely productive and has enriched our understanding of “economic life” outside and beyond the market. However, while dominant perspectives in economic anthropology and sociology aim to formulate better grounded (more ‘realistic’) and theoretically more insightful accounts of the sorts of “economic practices” that ethnographers often confront in the field than do the standard market models of the economists, they still routinely use the “idiom of the economy” as a taken for granted frame of reference (see also Narotzky and Besnier, 2014; Motta & al. 2014; Shipton 2014). Thus, in a recent stimulating synthesis, Steven Gudeman (2016) proposes new anthropological insights on the economy. One interesting feature of his book is that he constantly stages discussions with a fictitious contradictor whom he dubs the « over-the-shoulder-economist », thus providing a

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4 Raymond Firth, B.S. Yamey (ed.), Routledge, 2013 (1964), *Capital, Saving and Credit in Peasant Societies: Studies from Asia, Oceania, the Caribbean and Middle America*

<sup>5</sup> The following section is taken from «Oikonomia or Governing the House. State policies, domestic practices and ‘worthy life’ in Northeastern Brazil », to be presented at the EASA conference in Milan.

dialectical approach that sets out the distinctive anthropological contribution to an understanding of economic processes. What Gudeman is really out to do is to propose a kind of “alternative economics”, putting the house, and the economy of the household, instead of the market, at the center of the model, while others (e.g. Narotzky and Smith) propose a “new political economy”. These works however meet a paradox: at the very moment when they question the practical reality of a distinction between the “economic” and the “social/cultural”, they reaffirm its analytical adequacy by adopting, together with the economic language, a way of ordering the world and a number of analytical reasoning.

While Firth’s position is probably shared by few economic anthropologists or sociologists today, it still captures a fundamental project of economic anthropology, even when it styles itself as aiming at a critique of market economics : answer, with its own resources, skills and theoretical apparatus, the « fundamental questions posed by economists » — even if it is to criticize them.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides an apt illustration. Bourdieu simultaneously pursued a critique of economics’ reductionism, and of the paradigm of *homo economicus* (Bourdieu 2000), and developed the project of a “generalized political economy”, reconciling Marx and Weber (Garcia 2014). Appropriating Max Weber’s sociology of religion in terms of “salvation goods”, he developed an “economy of symbolic goods”. Bourdieu was a *virtuoso* in the use of terms borrowed from the economic realm to describe social phenomena, with notions such as ‘monopoly of symbolic violence’, ‘declining rate of symbolic profit’. Economist Robert Boyer (2003) correctly rebates the cheap denunciations of Bourdieu as adopting a neo-liberal paradigm, pointing out that Bourdieu did use the notion of ‘interest’, but was interested in finding out different kinds of interest, specific to each different field. Boyer stresses the use of the economic language as providing metaphors : he thus notes that « the use of the notion of profit is more metaphorical than typically economic ». Commenting Bourdieu’s extended use of the notion of market (e.g. ‘linguistic market’, ‘market of symbolic goods’, etc.), Boyer admits the « limits of the transposition », granting that « the use is more metaphorical in most other fields ».

Economic metaphors provide a powerful ordering of reality, by simplifying it to a reduced number of phenomena. In other words, economic metaphors work as practical ideal-types, in a Weberian sense, ordering the infinitely profuse and complex real life. They provide a simplification and abstraction of a complex reality, making it graspable and orderly. While the heuristic potential of such ideal-typical reduction has been considerable, the metaphor has been wearing out, and its explanatory purchase has been drastically reduced over time. In many

cases, the use of a set of economic metaphors produces a rhetorical effect of systematicity and consistence which is largely fictitious and spurious. By implication, such metaphoric uses also assume that the “economic level” constitutes a deeper, « more fundamental » level of reality, as it is the one which provides the models for thinking social life as a whole. The deep reality of « the economy » as being the « bottom line » of human life, the really real remains uncritically taken for granted. In fact, among scholars today there are probably more people who believe in the economy than ones who believe in God!

What we need then is not only, as has repeatedly been done, to question the economic discourse (economics as a disciplinary discourse of truth), in a critical stance against the assumptions of *homo economicus* and market-centered paradigm, but, more radically, to question the very existence of « the economy ». Such a proposal might think paradoxical, because, as Westerners of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we share a deeply held belief in the « fundamental » nature of « the economy », which appears as constituting the ultimate reality of our world.

In order to try to gain a distance from this ontological belief, it might be useful to take seriously the idea, sometimes expressed as a half-joke, that “the economy” has become a kind of modern religion. In particular, it is helpful to revisit Geertz’s influential definition of religion<sup>6</sup> as "(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (1973).

It may be debatable if « the economy » produces what Geertz calls « moods », but its definition otherwise aptly captures the dimension of « the economy » as a frame of reference imbued with ontological value. For us, the economy is what Geertz calls « their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order » (*ibid* 89).

I have no space here to discuss in more detail how Geertz’s definition of religion fits more or less well to « the economy », but I find it significant to quote this :

it differs from art in that instead of effecting a disengagement from the whole question of factuality, deliberately manufacturing an air of semblance and illusion, it deepens the concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality. It is this sense of the "really real" upon which the religious perspective rests and which the symbolic activities of religion as a cultural system are devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable by the discordant revelations of secular experience. 112

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<sup>6</sup> My point here is not to discuss the adequacy of Geertz’s definition for religion, but rather to use it as a way to interrogate the ‘economic’ framework.

For many of our contemporaries, such a depiction of the « really real » would adequately describe the way the « economy » appears as something which is taken for granted, as factual. Geertz also develops the notion of ‘religious performance », which encapsulates and makes ‘real’ some abstract beliefs. Drawing on that insight, instead of describing « the economy » as something « being there », one could look at « economic performances », or moments in which « the economy » is being performed and staged, such performances producing and legitimating the belief in its ‘factuality’.

Even if it is difficult to shake off a deeply entrenched ontological belief in the existence of “the economy”, we might try to suspend it for a while, and look for alternative frameworks for describing and making sense of daily practices of “making a living” and trying to “lead a good life”, or a worthy life. More consideration should be given to the ways in which historical transformations in the configurations of “fields of opportunities” and “frames of reference” shape expectations (de L’Estoile, 2014).

## 2. *Oikonomia*, the Greek and us : ‘Domestic Economy’ or Government of the House?

Economic anthropologists and sociologists have found a privileged inspiration in the work of Karl Polanyi (1957), who credited Aristotle with the “discovery of the economy” and drew more broadly on Greek philosophy. As Hann & Hart (2011) write, “*oikonomia* was conceived of as the antithesis of the market principle”. Working in the same tradition, Stephen Gudeman (2015, 2016) draws on Aristotle to develop an “anthropological economics” that begins not with the market, as standard economists do, but “from the house”<sup>7</sup>.

*Oikonomia*, as any student of Economics 101 learns, is indeed the etymological root of “economy”<sup>8</sup>. *Oikos* (οἶκος) has a wide range of reference in Greek: it connotes the house as a building, but also the family, the home, or an estate, or even patrimony<sup>9</sup>. *Oikonomia* is often translated as “domestic economy” (since « *domus* », house/ household, is the Latin term used to translate *oikos*), or as “management of the household”, a notion akin to “householding”, a

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<sup>7</sup> He writes that « Aristotle’s picture of community economy and exchange was the reverse of the contemporary market model » (2001 : 61). In a former work, Gudeman and Rivera (1990) argued that Aristotle’s views were present among Columbian peasants.

<sup>8</sup> *Oikonomia*, from *nemein* (to divide, to order) + *oikos*.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* (preceding Aristotle), includes both advice on the art to govern and augment the *oikos* (including not only the house as building but also all its related possessions, including land and other goods), and a treaty on agriculture. Foucault (1984) provides an excellent analysis of Xenophon’s dialogue under the title « La maisonnée d’Ischomaque » (1984b : 169-183).

term Polanyi coined but later abandoned (Gregory 2009). Such translations firmly locate the notion of *oikonomia* in the context of an ‘economic’ discussion. As a famous historian of Ancient Greece, Moses Finley, remarked, the very existence of « *the economy* » is taken for granted by scholars studying ‘economic phenomena’ in ‘other’ settings (be it Ancient Athens or the Trobriands) :

This learned activity presupposes the existence of "the economy" as a concept, difficult as it has become to find a generally acceptable definition. The current debate about "economic anthropology", largely stimulated by Karl Polanyi's insistence on a sharp distinction between what he called the "substantive" and the "formal" definitions of the economy," is a debate about definitions and their implications for (historical) analysis, not about the existence of "the economy. (1971 : 19)

Polanyi himself insisted that, for the Greeks, “only *the concept* of the economy, not the economy itself, is in abeyance, of course” (1957: 71)<sup>10</sup>.

Looking up the actual occurrences of *oikonomia* and *oikonomikè* in Aristotle’s *Politics* invites us however to challenge this received understanding of *oikonomia*. Aristotle initiates his argument by stating that *Oikoi* (households/ estates) are the basic components of the *polis*, the Greek City-State. *Oikonomia* or *oikonomiké* (οἰκονομική) is constantly paired and contrasted with *Politikè* (πολιτική, which refers to civic government/ rule). Aristotle draws a polar opposition between the government of citizens by the magistrate (*archontos*) in the *polis*, and the government of dependents, including slaves, by the master or administrator of the *oikos* (*despotès* or *oikonomos*).

It is evident from what has been said, that the government of a master [*despoteia*] and of a city [*politiké*] are not the same, or that all governments [*arkhai*] are not alike to each other, as some affirm; for one is adapted to the nature of free men, the other to that of slaves. The government of an *oikos* [*oikonomiké archè*] is a monarchy, since every *oikos* is governed by a single ruler [20]; but the government of a *polis* [*politiké*] is the government of free men and equals . *Politics*, [1255b]

Aristotle here uses the word *Archè*, which means rule or domination, or, more broadly, government. He represents *oikonomiké* and *politiké* as exemplifying two forms of government: one, in the context of the *oikos*, is exercised by the house-master on his dependents, the other, in the context of the *polis*, by the city magistrate on the citizenry. The *despotès*, master (in fact, the term means originally house-master, Benveniste 1967) rules as a monarch within the

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<sup>10</sup> Italics mine. This failure to recognize the presence of the “economy” is due to “the difficulty of identifying the economic process under conditions when it is embedded in noneconomic institutions.” (ibid.)

*oikos*.<sup>11</sup> In Latin, *Dominus* (master, and especially slave master) is derived from *domus*, referring primarily to the household, not the building; he has full *dominium* (the right to rule legitimately), in his house and on his family. So, for example, Aristotle states that the concern for the health of the members of the community holds as well for *oikonomia* as for *politikè*.

The parallel drawn between the respective modes of government of the *oikos* and of the *polis* echoes the play on the polysemy of « government » by Michel Foucault (1984 : 728), when he suggests it encompasses both the government of the state and the “government of one’s wife and children”<sup>12</sup>. Foucault (1984) characterized the core of Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* as “an art of ruling”.

Aristotle draws a further distinction between *oikonomiké* and *chrematistiké*. *Chrematistiké* refers to the practices necessary for supplying the *oikos* with the necessities of life (*chrémata*), through production, or, secondarily, exchange<sup>13</sup>. For Aristotle, this matter of supply—which is quite similar to what Polanyi later called “substantive economy”—is important insofar as it guarantees the self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) of the *oikos* and hence is a condition for maintaining its autonomy. Supplying the *oikos* with the necessities of life (*chrematistiké*), is therefore subordinated to *oikonomia*, which is concerned with the government of persons rather than with the administration of things<sup>14</sup>. In that sense, *oikonomia* has a moral dimension, as it involves both the government of oneself and of other<sup>15</sup>. Polanyi (1957: 81) clearly points out this specificity of *oikonomia* :

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Saint Jerome writes “in navi unus gubernator, in domo unus dominus” (“in a ship one pilot, in the house one master”) (quoted by Benveniste 1967: 300).

<sup>12</sup> Foucault referred implicitly here to Aristotle and Xenophon. As he writes, « le mariage, les fonctions de chef de famille, le gouvernement de l’*oikos* supposent qu’on soit devenu capable de se gouverner soi-même » (1984b : 178).

<sup>13</sup> Polanyi points out that “*Chrematistiké* was deliberately employed by Aristotle in the literal sense of providing for the necessities of life, instead of its usual meaning of money-making” (p.92). He suggests it refers to “the art of supply, i.e. procuring the necessities of life in kind”. Finley’s interpretation is similar : « *Chrematistike* is ambiguous. (Its root is the noun *chrema*, "a thing one needs or uses", in the plural *chremata*, "goods, property".) *Chrematistike* (...) here has the more generic sense of acquisition, less common in ordinary Greek usage [than "the art of money-making"] but essential to Aristotle's argument. (Finley ; 15).

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle states that “*Oikonomia* involves more care for men than for the acquisition of things, more of the quality of men than of things, more of free men than of slaves”. Foucault (1984b: 171) sums up Xenophon’s approach of *oikonomia* as follows: “the domestic skill is of the same nature than political or military skills, in so far as it is about governing the other”.

<sup>15</sup> Among the various formulations of « gouvernementalité » by Foucault, I find the following most stimulating : « I call ‘governmentality’ the encounter between techniques of domination exercised on other, and techniques of the self ». He added that he was getting more and more interested in « the interaction which takes place between oneself and the other », and « the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself through techniques of the self ». Foucault, 1982 : 785.

The economy – as the root or the word shows, a matter of the domestic household or *oikos*— concerns directly the relationship of the persons who make up the natural institution of the household. Not possessions, but parents, offspring and slaves constitute it.

While Polanyi seems here fully aware that *oikonomia* for Aristotle is primarily about rule, his interest in countering the “market model” in economics leads him to enlist the author of *Politics* as a pioneer of the substantivist position, writing that “Aristotle’s adherence to the substantive meaning of “economic” was basic to his total argument” (1957: 82).

By contrast, *politiké* refers to “government” of the *polis* in the common-sense use of that term today, referring both to policy (administration) and to politics. For Aristotle, the specific character of *politiké* is that it is a government over citizens (*politai*), or equals, by contrast with the monarchical rule within the *oikos*<sup>16</sup>. Finally, it is useful to bring in an additional notion, *philia*, a topic much elaborated by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Philia* refers to the relational-affective links between humans, between friends, but also within a family, a city, or any kind of human community: it might best be translated as “mutuality”<sup>17</sup>.

Although I hope my reconstruction of the classical Greek use of *oikonomia* is historically well-grounded, I am not advocating an anachronistic return to an Aristotle’s use of *oikonomia*<sup>18</sup>. Rather I borrow from ancient Greek a term related to “economy”, but give it a Foucauldian twist that suggests the possibility of an analytical framework that might be opposed to the conventional ‘economic’ paradigm. It helped me in understanding my own field materials, and I will argue that it has wider applications.

To sum it up, the *oikonomia* perspective highlights the articulation between three interrelated aspects involved in the government of the house:

- a) the ability to rule *as a master* oneself, one’s own house and own land.
- b) everyday domestic practices aimed at supplying the “necessities of life” (what we can call, following Aristotle, *krematistikè*), so as to insure the autonomy of the house, either by production, by exchange in the market or by mobilizing networks of reciprocity and solidarity (*philiai*).

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt influential contrast of *oikos* and *polis*

<sup>17</sup> Noting that *philia* is “conventionally, but inadequately translated as ‘friendship’”, Finley (*op.cit.* : 8) suggests *mutuality* as an equivalent.

<sup>18</sup> It should be unnecessary to disclaim any suggestion that using Aristotle’s notions entails sharing his views. One of Aristotle’s strong claims in *Politics* is that it is the natural inferiority of slaves and women that justifies their subordinated status. See also Xenophon, *op.cit.*

- c) the house as a place for attaining the “good life” (*eu zein*), materially and more particularly, morally: it implies achieving control of oneself and of one’s house, and being recognized by one’s peers as a “proper person”.

In a previous paper (de L’Estoile, 2014), I urged ethnographers be on the lookout for vernacular versions of what Aristotle called the “government of the house”, *oikonomia*. I will now try to illustrate by a few ethnographic instances how an *oikonomia* perspective differs from the usual economic framework.

### 3. “The economy” vs. *oikonomia* in a Land Reform settlement in Northeast Brazil

Instead of taking for granted that « the economy » exists everywhere all the time, even if is not recognized as such, one should rather ask where, when and by whom is « the economy » performed ? « The economy » is being imposed as a framework upon the persons in some asymmetrical situations. It is important to point out that « the economy » is not only an analytic framework, used by a number of specialists to order the world and act upon it, but also an asymmetrical framework in practical situations of interaction.

While the ‘economic’ framework defines the expectations of those who are trying to govern the Brazilian Land reform (be they State agents development projects managers, social movements), grassroot beneficiaries usually conceive of their situation and actions in *oikonomia* terms. Let us take a look at one such instance of « performance » of « the economy » in the context of . Early in the land reform process, in 1999, I attended a visit by some INCRA technicians to the Serra Azul settlement. They were commissioned to provide the INCRA headquarters with an estimate of all agricultural productions in the former sugarcane plantation which was in the process of becoming a land reform settlement (*assentamento*). They started by asking individually the beneficiaries about their production. One of the questions concerned the annual production of bananas. Banana is a fruit that is taken out weekly to be brought to the market in the form of regimes. People sell bananas by the dozen, often adding one in the process. The money earned from the sale of bananas is usually used on the spot, to buy other products. In other words, there is no need for agricultors to calculate the annual production of bananas, nor does such a figure make much sense for them. For the fruits, the people usually know approximately the number of trees (*pé de banana*) they have, but do not necessarily evaluate production in any precise way.

Finally, as the afternoon went on, the INCRA agents felt it took too long to operate each individual and opted for producing collective estimates. Thus they asked how many horses they were on the territory of the plantation (between 30 and 40 was the answer). For other crops,

since there was no totalization available, they proceeded by asking what was the average productivity of the land for manioc for instance, and multiplying it by the approximative surface declared by the agricultors. I looked baffled at the inquiry and the process of producing « data » on agricultural production. The figures on the paper had virtually no « reality », in the sense that their existence was completely independent from actual production. Of course, the situation was completely different for sugarcane production in the plantation (*engenho*). In that case, sugarcane production, both at the level of each sugarcane cutter, and the total plantation production is precisely measured (and object of strong contestations, between workers and overseers, and between plantation masters and « usinas »). Thus, the number of sugarcane tons produced by a given plantation is a ‘solid’ figure, its price, and the wages paid to workers make sense as it is an economic endeavour. The plantation was inserted in the world of the economy, even if, in other aspects, it also functioned in many ways like an *oikos*.

When I visited him last November in his plot,, in the Land Reform settlement of Bonito<sup>19</sup>, Seu Zé Joaquim took me around what he calls his *sítio*, showing the improvements since my last visit two years before. I like to visit him there, as it is a beautiful space, contrasting with many plots left abandoned by their holders. Although he lives in the nearby town, he spends his days there. He led me to an orange trees with its branches nearly breaking under the weight of oranges ; he told me he had recently discovered a well on his neighbours’s plot, and was irrigating using the pipes left over by a failed agricultural project years before. Seu Zé Joaquim is considered one of the most successful producers in the Land reform settlements of Coqueiros. He participates in three local markets each week, and has always a number of products to sell. « I won’t lie, I make a lot of cash (*apuro muito*) ). However, Seu Zé Joaquim is well aware of the difference between *apuro* (the quantity of monetary liquidity in his hands at the end of a market day or of a week) and *lucro* (profit). Commenting upon the maize he had planted, he told me : « This crop does not bring profit ». In order to prove his statement, Zé Joaquim then started to provide me with a detailed account s of his expenses : the aid he has to pay weekly to help him working his plot, especially to irrigate the maize, but also to weed it. He enumerated the quantities of fertilizer and weed killer he had to buy ; he mentioned the car he had to rent to take this to the market, and concluded that the sale would never cover his costs. He added, with

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<sup>19</sup> Bonito is one of three Land reform settlement projects (*projetos de assentamento*) in the Southern part of the State of Pernambuco where I have been conducting fieldwork since 1997 (de l’Estoile and Sigaud, 2001).

a smile : « It was Seu Carlos who taught me to do this : he told me : « Write down all your expenses in a notebook, even the food you eat when you go to work. Then you'll be able to know if you incurred a loss or a profit ».

As I listened to Seu Zé Joaquim, a 62 year-old lean black man with a shrewed smile, I was initially fascinated by this account of transmission of book-keeping practices and 'economic reasoning' from Seu Carlos, the former boss of the economically very successful Bonito sugarcane plantation, to his former worker, who was to become a « small producer ». However, as I asked him more details about his accounting practices, I began to suspect that he was not actually keeping written accounts, and was just making up his book-keeping orally, for my own benefit, roughly estimating the monetary figures he was adding up.

On the whole, concluded Seu Zé Joaquim, what would be the « salvation » of the sitio (parcela) this year would be the oranges, thanks to the water he had discovered. When I asked him why he was planting maize, if he was making a loss with this crop, he replied : « I don't want my plot (parcela) to be ugly, as the ones over there. He was referring to his neighbours's plot, left uncultivated, and "left for the *mato* (bush) to take care". He went on to comment that in his opinion, Land Reform had been badly administered, as beneficiaries were provided with a plot, and in practice, be for a few failed development projects, more or less left to themselves. He suggested a different practice : beneficiaries should be asked what they needed to produce the kind of crop they wished, given the necessary means, and after two years, State inspectors should visit the plots and evaluate the agricultural results : those who had been efficient would be encouraged, and the lazy ones reprimanded. « In that way, seeing their neighbours with a « good life », those who have nothing on their plot would be ashamed, and either get to work to attain « a worthy life », or leave the Land Reform programme ».

The Saturday before, when I was discussing with him on the market, Seu Zé Joaquim mentioned that his aim was not to become « rich » but to attain a « worthy life » (*vida digna*). As I asked him what he meant by it, he said after a pause : « A worthy life is not to be depending from anyone, it is to be independent ».

What fascinates me in my conversations with Seu Zé Joaquim, beyond his talent for telling stories and anecdotes and his cleverness, is precisely the way apparently 'economic' issues, such as difficulties of access to credit, of transporting products to the market, or the inexperience of the so-called experts in charge of agricultural development projects, are intertwined with moral considerations about work, laziness or the failings of local politicians.

In other words, Seu Zé Joaquim, while apparently engaging in economic calculations, was indeed moved by *oikonomia* concerns: the conquest of autonomy, the concern for leading a *vida digna*, and for reputation, for being recognized as a proper person.

In the plantation system, the ultimate ideal of any *morador* (plantation worker living on the plantation) was to be granted a *sítio*, that is to say an isolated house on the estate, together with a garden and, most important, the right to plant fruit trees, which, in contrast with annual crops, meant long-term occupation and a degree of relative autonomy. In the plantation, gaining access to land was strongly linked to (and formally a consequence of) access to being granted a dwelling place. The *sítio* appears in many ways as a reduced version of the *engenho*. Part of the attraction of the land reform programmes to those living on the peripheries of small towns was the “dream of the *sítio*”, the perspective of gaining permanent access to some land to “sustain the house”, but also to *liberdade*, which, in a post-slavery, post personal domination context in Pernambuco, means the possibility not to be “ordered”, but to order, to rule as a *dono* over one’s house and land.

Zé Joaquim was also interested in the government of Land Reform. A long-time dedicated member of the Local Workers’ Union, he had been various times to Brasilia as part of Workers’ delegations. He participated in meetings, took the stage, and even met there a Federal Deputy, who later arranged to send him a sum to help him. He was then actively interested in what Aristotle termed *politikè*.

In the case of Land reform settlements, *politikè* involves three different sets, or scales, of relations:

- a) *politikè* covers the ‘horizontal’ relationships, within the settlement project, between the houses and the beneficiary families, and with the beneficiaries’ association
- b) it involves local politics and patronage at the municipal scale, with the mayor and municipal representatives
- c) finally, it must take account of the ‘vertical’ relationships of beneficiaries (individually and collectively) and the state agencies (or NGOs) in charge of implementing the policies of the federal government.

One of the important aspects of *politiké* is that it defines and modifies the fields of opportunities and constraints for the actors. In particular, « the economy » acts as a constraining framework, which is reshaping the field of constraints and opportunities of the various actors.

**“The house is mine, I am the one who rules here”**

“The house is mine, I am the one who rules” (*quem manda sou eu*) said Dona Maria one night in her kitchen, as we were having coffee (*café da noite*, which is the equivalent of dinner). “I have no husband, I have no boss”. I immediately opened my notebook and started to write her statement down, telling her I was precisely trying to understand this. She went on to tell the story to other neighbours, and we commented this repeatedly over the following days, for instance when I drove her to the INCRA headquarters in Recife, where she was trying to solve some issues (she is the current president of the association of the settlement). When she says “the house is mine”, she does not claim “ownership” in a legal sense. She knows perfectly well that the owner of the house, and of the land, is the Brazilian State. The context of her statement was a discussion of house chores: she was telling that, coming back from outside after a long day, she decided not to clean up her house and go to bed. She explained that she was “ruling” in her own house, because, being a widow, she had no husband to reproach her of not founding a meal, nor no (woman) boss who could reproach her when she would be back home of not having performed her duty. The situation of governing the house was then contrasted with other situations when she had been confronted to other claims to “rule her”. Each time I visit Dona Maria whatever the hour, she inevitably starts by making a list of all the household chores she accomplished since she got up, so demonstrating her excellence in her performance of the role of the *good dona de casa* (mistress of the house). Women, especially when they are masters (*donas*) of the house (either because they are alone, or because they are the one who is the official beneficiary, their male companion having come later), also use the language of rule, of being *dono*, master. Maria likes to present herself as a “free woman”, who had never been forced by anyone to do something against her will. Her claim to independence, from men in particular, is striking (she had her six children with a number of different fathers, presenting herself as the one who choose to leave her partners).

A central feature of the notion of *oikonomia* is that it stresses the importance of the ideal of « autonomy » —the capacity to define one’s own rules rather than obeying somebody else’s, of ordering and not being ordered— as an organizing concern in the people’s frame of reference. *Oikonomia* provides an alternative perspective on domestic practices, foregrounding the ideal of autonomy and mastery from the perspective of the housemaster or mistress<sup>20</sup>. The government of the *casa* (house/ family) is linked to government of the self. The ‘monetary’

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<sup>20</sup> I had no place here to pay justice to other equally important aspects of *philia* (relational / affective dimension) between house members and within configurations of houses.

dimension is of course important, in so far as the structural lack of money constrains the possibilities. However, ‘economic’ practices do not correspond to *oikonomia*, but rather to what Aristotle calls *Krematistikè*, the process of providing the “necessities of life” (*krèmata*), “things indispensable to live and live a good life”. *Oikonomia* seems particularly well fitted to the circumstances of a post-slavery society such as Brazil.

**“My house is of paper”: security, life and proper life in a Rio de Janeiro favela**

*Oikonomia* might also shed light on the centrality of the government of the house/ home in other settings, in Brazil, and beyond. I am currently in the process of using “oikonomia” to make sense of the practices of inhabitants of one of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas.

I visited Vânia on a Sunday of June in her small brick house in one of the numerous favelas of Santa Tereza, in the Northern Zone of Rio de Janeiro, where she has been living for more than 25 years, made up of one room, one living room, kitchen and bathroom<sup>21</sup>. While most of her neighbours have expanded their houses, horizontally and above all vertically (Cavalcanti, Motta), Vânia’s is still the same as I knew it in 1994. Vânia has been working over the years in a number of jobs, among them domestic cleaner (*faxineira*), telephone operator, caregiver for old people, etc. For the last 5 years, she has been earning one minimum salary by working as auxiliary in a private *creche* (nursery) for middle-class children.

Vânia evokes once more the story of that fateful day in 2009 when the police searched the favela for drugs, arms and « bandits ». Her son, who had been associated to drug dealers (marginally she claims), was in his bed, ill, with fever. Vânia told me that the police searched her house, and failed to find anything suspect. However, they arrested her son (as he was ill, he had been unable to escape), charging him with drug possession. He was severely condemned to a five-year term. This has been a turning point in Vânia’s life, creating a deep sense of insecurity, and making it difficult for her to feel « at home » in her house :

« When they came here, what did they do ? (...) This was in 2009, when they invaded and everything, the things, they tore my house apart. Since then I can’t make it to arrange (*arrumar*) my house, I can’t. I think this was a thing of trauma. Especially here in the room (she gestures towards her room). I try to organize, everything, but here, ... when I enter the room, this image comes to me...

- What image ?

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<sup>21</sup> I have been visiting this place as a friend since 1992.

- What they did ! I see the image of what they did in my room. They threw all my clothes to the floor, my ID papers, the clothes of my grand-child, they threw out all what was in the drawers, walking, you know, on top of it. An horrible thing they did here in our houses, really horrible. »

This invasion of her house by the police, who took on that very morning her son prisoner, is recorded by Vânia as a traumatizing event, which has drastically changed her relationship to her own house, over which she has no more control. It is as if she would be estranged from her own house.

While twenty years before she had described how she felt « rich », in comparison to those who were living in the street, because she had a house, which she was trying to improve, she now stresses her feeling of insecurity. A few minutes later, Vânia comes back to the regular shootings (*tiroteios*) that occur between the police on the one hand (shooting from the street above in the direction of the densified centre of the favela, where the *bandidos* are located) and the gang members on the other, who shoot back upwards in the direction of the street. On Friday, there had been various hours of shooting.

« This week, there were two days of shooting. I did not know where to run. I kept running from kitchen to bathroom, from bathroom to kitchen. You can't stay in the living room, because my house is of paper. The walls [made of standard bricks] can't stand rifle bullets, these things. We are not safe within the house, we are not. Sometimes, if you see there will be a shooting, if you can, it's better to go to the street. You don't feel protected in your house. »

She describes how she feels in her kitchen, wondering if the bullets, having to go through both the house wall and the internal wall, would still « get her ». Such a situation is an inversion of the whole cultural logic, where the house (*casa*) appears as offering a protection, however precarious and temporary, opposed to « the world » (Dumans Guedes, 2015) and « the street ». Her children told her not to go to work on that day, and stay at home. However, Vânia told me she can't afford not to go to work, even having to confront severe pain, since her work accident in 2012. If she misses one day of work, the loss (40 reais) is important, as she points out, mentioning the price of a *botijão* of gaz (70 reais). Vânia therefore is constrained both by the need to work to maintain the house, and the necessity of « running for her life », hiding like the rest of the inhabitants of the *favela* during the shootings.

Vânia is talking to me, as she had repeatedly done in a number of occasions, of the difficulty for a *favela* mother to make a living, raise her children, maintain her house. Such terms as money, salary, wages, social benefits, prices, crop up in her talk. What I am arguing is that we

should not necessarily assume from the presence of these notions that Vânia is talking about something ‘economic’. While it is theoretically possible to describe Vânia’s situation in terms of « preferences » for life or food, it seems rather obvious that an ‘economic framework’ is largely inadequate to make sense of her situation. A formulation in terms of *oikonomia* seems more appropriate : the control of her own life, of her autonomy, the effort to conciliate the search for protection and the aspiration to autonomy, to govern her own life.

She feels the constant presence of the police (the local Unity of Pacificatory Police has an outpost in two containers at about a 100 meters from her house) as an intrusion, as they are trying to govern the daily life and recreations. « If you put music too high, they will object and come ». She feels that the police are « ruling » (*mandam*).

What I am trying to indicate is that in such a context, it does not make much sense to distinguish in Vânia’s life an « economic subsystem », aiming at the reproduction of the force of labour. As most *favela* inhabitants, she is trying to lead a life and a worthy life in a complex situation involving conflicting modes of government : the drug gangs, the police, the State (however precarious and intermittent it appears from the poor’s perspective).

### **Conclusion :**

What I have been trying to do here is to explore the notion of *oikonomia* as offering an alternative framework to the conventional ‘economic’ paradigm. I deploy *oikonomia* as a theoretical construct at three different levels:

- 1) I offered an historical reconstruction of the meaning of *oikonomia* in classical Greek, referring not to “domestic economy” but to “government of the *oikos*”
- 2) I then applied the notion of *oikonomia* as a tool for an ethnographic understanding of domestic practices in the post-plantation world in the Nordeste and in Rio favelas.
- 3) Finally, I suggest that *oikonomia* offers an alternative framework that may take us beyond the usual “economic” framework, opening up new perspectives. *Oikonomia* provides a template, an alternative framework, that allows us to explore a set of specific vernacular versions in various social, historical and cultural configurations.

Analytical constructs such as “domestic economy” (Zelizer 2010, “householding” (Polanyi) or “house economy” (Gudeman), while aiming to move beyond standard economics paradigms by showing that “economic” and “social” phenomena are entangled, more or less implicitly take for granted an ontological divide between “the economy” and the rest. This is partly the result of a (repeatedly frustrated) longing to demonstrate to economists and policy-makers the “relevance” of economic anthropology and sociology. Typically one might design a research

on the consequences of a given housing “public policy” on households and “domestic economies”. While this is undoubtedly an important issue, such a framing nevertheless runs a risk, out of excessive respect for “the economy” as a framework, of limiting the potential heuristic contribution of ethnography. One problem is that speaking of “domestic economy” already predefines the kind of questions we can raise while excluding others. Let us be bolder and experiment with new analytical frameworks. What happens if instead of the usual pair “public policy”/ “domestic economy”, we try to frame an issue rather in terms of *oikonomia*, government of the house and *politiké* (policy and politics)? Such a move would allow to shift the focus from the « economic » aspect to the « government » aspect, in the broad sense of government of populations, government of the family, and government of oneself.

This ‘economic’ framing fails, however, to grasp the beneficiaries’ perspective and experience. *Politiké*, both nationally (with the framing of Government policies), and locally, certainly plays a crucial role in the life of Land Reform beneficiaries or *favela* inhabitants, as it is instrumental in shaping the fields of opportunities and constraints. Becoming a beneficiary of the land reform program drastically transforms the range and scope of opportunities of those involved.

What I propose is then twofold: on the one hand, a moratorium on the routine use of the language not only of economics, but also of “the economy”, as analytic tools to describe social processes. On the other hand I offer *oikonomia* as an analytical concept which a) makes more room for native understandings; and b) replaces an obsession with the markets with a concern for the relationships between various forms of government and more broadly for what makes for “life and good life”. Ultimately, it might offer a potential alternative framework for exploring social worlds where “the economy” has become a naturalized frame of reference.

The fundamentally *ethnographic* character of this endeavour is not only methodological, with the use of fieldwork method, but, more radically, is the option for a point of view, privileging the *native* conceptions (the ones of our interlocutors in the field) as a way to suspend our ontological belief in the existence of a specific world “sphere” or “level” that would be “the economy”, or “the economic” (beside the ‘political’, the ‘religious’, the ‘cultural’). We will attempt, by drawing on these local constructions, to put into question the economic framework itself. In other words, the challenge is not only to claim, as economic anthropology and sociology have successfully been doing for a century, that there are some affective, political, moral, aspects in economic phenomena, but to explore an alternative frame of analysis. The challenge is to try to do without the “language of the economy” (including in its metaphorical uses) to describe and explain practices and processes (except when they appear as native

categories). One shall pay special attention to the transformations of fields of opportunities and constraints, and the diversity of the frames of reference of the actors, contribute to defining practices oriented towards securing life and “good life”. A central aspect is to bring back the dimension of “government” at the heart of analyses that, by being defined as “economic”, tend to systematically evacuate or underplay the political dimension.

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