



THRIFT IN ANTHROPOLOGY: BETWEEN THRIFTINESS AND WASTING

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The
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Max Planck Institute
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ORGANISERS

Daniel Sosna (University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic)

Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Germany)

SPONSORS

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ABSTRACT

A small group of primarily anthropologists gathered in Pilsen to discuss the concept of thrift and explore its potential for understanding human economy. An incentive for this workshop was to explore inconsistencies and contradictions of thrift as well as its relations. We included both junior and senior scholars from different academic environments to bring their varied perspectives and stimulate the discussion. The format was based on nine longer presentations that left enough space for subsequent comments and questions. The core papers represented primarily ethnographic case studies from Europe, although there were also presentations focusing on a discursive level of thrift and North American and Asian examples. The workshop uncovered several different dimensions of thinking about thrift. It can be traced across different scales, refer to different temporalities, mobilize calculative reason, morality, and emotions. Thrift has a specific relationship to value that can operate in various regimes and their mutual tensions may produce contradictions.

CALL

In economic anthropology, thrift is one of the salient concepts related to economizing and making savings. Despite various theoretical approaches to thrift, it tends to be depicted as a coherent discourse or practice based on the logic of economizing. Such a sense of thrift, however, can be challenged by pointing to its internal contradictions. Thrift seems to exist in a specific relationship to wasting; both may unfold in the course of a person's life, within a community, and even simultaneously during the same events. Inconsistencies and contradictions associated with thriftiness may be understood as deviations but they can be also viewed as constitutive of the very notion of thrift. In summary, the Workshop asks: how can we conceptualize thriftiness as a relational domain that emerges via its ties to wastefulness?

The aim is to explore different notions of thrift and broaden the anthropological understanding of this concept. Starting with the conservative notion of thrift as a short-term sacrifice aimed at reaching goals in the future (Bardhi & Arnould 2005), it is possible to explore thrift as a relationship between means and ends. The ends are diverse and may transcend economy as Weber (2002) demonstrated. In addition, economizing directed towards specific goals does not necessarily constrict possibilities but may stimulate bricolage and innovation (Gudeman 2016).

Thriftiness represents the opposite to wastefulness, conspicuous consumption, and hedonism. Anthropological accounts from various parts of the world suggest that social practices and modes of thinking include both sides of the coin. The opposites are taken as critical starting points for the understanding of human societies. While Gudeman (2012) and Gudeman & Hann (2015) emphasize the critical role of thrift in household economy, Bataille (1985) elaborates on the need to release energy as excess. Careful management of leftovers and mending stand against feasting and conspicuous consumption. During shopping, thrift exists in the relationship to treat as its opposite

(Miller 1998). There is a question, however, as to exactly how these opposing tendencies relate to each other and unfold in everyday life.

Thrift seems to engage in various tensions and contradictions where wasting and spending are inseparable from thriftiness. The pursuit of hedonistic pleasures can be the main driver for thrifty shopping (Bardhi & Arnould 2005). Workers in industrial companies can carefully manage their expenses for food while engaging in heavy drinking. Landfill workers rescue value in the landfills while disregarding their wasting of electricity and water. As Wilk (2006) argues, thrift tends to be accompanied by its 'evil twin', the binge. Cognitive debates about the nature of contradictions (Berliner et al. 2016) present them as a fundamental feature of human life. The simultaneous presence of opposing tendencies and tensions can be explored in everyday decision-making, such as that which operates under the umbrella of ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010).

The Workshop will draw together scholars from different countries, academic environments, and regional interests. The bonding medium will be the main theme of the workshop and anthropological sensitivity and reasoning growing from ethnographic experience. The preliminary plan is to structure the workshop into the four sessions during two days. The first three sessions focus on specific topics while the last session will deal with the issues arising during the workshop.

Literature:

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- Weber, M. (2002[1904-05]). *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin Books.
- Wilk, R. (2006). Consumer culture and extractive industry on the margins of the world system. In J. Brewer & F. Trentmann (Eds.), *Consumer Cultures: global perspectives* (pp. 123-144). Oxford: Berg.

PROGRAM

Wednesday, October 17

19:00 Informal get-together in Beer Factory

Thursday, October 18

8:30 - 9:00 Registration

9:00 - 13:00 **SESSION 1**

Chair: Petr Skalník (University of Hradec Králové)

Martin Hájek (Charles University)

The semantic structure and dynamic of a discourse of low consumption

Juraj Buzalka (Komensky University)

Why post-socialist populists successfully build their support on thriftiness along with opulence?

10:30 - 11:00 Coffee break

Brizolit collective (University of West Bohemia)

On thrift and the bent space-time of social exclusion in the Czech Republic

Barbora Spalová (Charles University)

Thrift in (postsocialist) monastery: Restraint, thriftiness and sharing as values for monastic communities and society

Discussant: Catherine Alexander (Durham University)

13:00 - 14:30 Lunch break

14:30 - 17:00 **SESSION 2**

Chair: Stephen Gudeman (University of Minnesota)

Nicolette Makovicky (University of Oxford)

Thrift: The gift that keeps giving

Detelina Tocheva (Le Centre national de la recherche scientifique)

Building a house with unpaid labour: the changing meaning of a 'fictitious commodity'

16:00 - 16:30 Coffee break

Discussant: Don Kalb (University of Bergen)

19:00 Official dinner for the participants (restaurant U Salzmannů)

Friday, October 19

9:30 - 12:45 **SESSION 3**

Chair: Chris Hann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

Richard Wilk (Indiana University)

Thrift, time and moral balancing

Daniel Sosna (University of West Bohemia)

Managing flows of value: Thriftiness and wastefulness in a Czech landfill

11:00 - 11:30 Coffee break

Tomasz Rakowski (University of Warsaw)

Three dimensions of thrift

Discussant: David Henig (Utrecht University)

12:45 - 14:30 Lunch break

14:30 - 16:30 **SESSION 4**

Final wrap-up led by Stephen Gudeman and followed by general discussion

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Alexander, Catherine, Durham University, Durham
Brunclíková, Lenka, Independent researcher
Buzalka, Juraj, Komensky University, Bratislava
Gudeman, Stephen, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
Hann, Chris, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle
Hájek, Martin, Charles University, Prague
Henig, David, Utrecht University, Utrecht
Kalb, Don, University of Bergen, Bergen
Křivanec, Václav, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen
Lupták, Lubomír, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen
Makovicky, Nicolette, Oxford University, Oxford
Mašek, Pavel, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen
Rakowski, Tomasz, University of Warsaw, Warsaw
Skalník, Petr, University of Hradec Králové, Hradec Králové
Sosna, Daniel, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen
Spalová, Barbora, Charles University, Prague
Stehlíková, Barbora, Charles University, Prague
Tocheva, Detelina, CNRS, Paris
Tremčinský Martin, Charles University, Prague
Wilk, Richard, University of Indiana, Bloomington

SUMMARY

The first session was introduced and chaired by Peter Skalník. The first paper by Martin Hájek explored a genealogy and conceptual basis of thrift and frugality. Also, the author presented the results of his analyses of discourses on thrift. Then, Juraj Buzalka presented a paradox of the former Slovak socialist leaders who encouraged people to be thrifty while themselves parading an ostentatiously luxurious and lavish lifestyle. The next paper by Lubomír Lupták (Brizolit collective) described thrift in socially-excluded localities in the Czech Republic. The last paper by Barbora Spalová explored the contradictions of thrift using the contrast between more individual and collective management of value in Czech monasteries. Catherine Alexander lead the discussion and pointed at the reappearing themes in the presentations. She suggested new ways of thinking about thrift related to different scales, temporalities, abundance and shortage, austerity, maintenance and repair, and value.

The second session, chaired by Stephen Gudeman, was opened by Nicolette Makovicky who focused on ambivalences in lace making in Poland when this activity can be perceived simultaneously as productive and wasteful. Then, Detelina Tocheva described communal construction of houses in Bulgaria as a strategy of saving resources via mobilization of unwaged labour. Don Kalb commented on these two presentations and suggested individual, household, and political dimensions of thinking about thrift and put emphasis on the relational logic that may facilitate exploitation in Capitalism. Discussions continued during the official dinner.

The third session, chaired by Chris Hann, was opened by Rick Wilk who presented the results of his comparative research concerning consumption patterns among American and Asian students to point at a paradox that the attempts to follow more sustainable consumption may in fact increase the total consumption. The next presentation by Daniel Sosna focused on the contradictory practices of Czech landfill workers who rescue things and follow the thrifty strategy but waste with resources in other contexts. Tomasz Rakowski used a case study from rural Poland to demonstrate that the concept of thrift could be closely tied to self-sufficiency, care, and maintenance of social relations. David Henig commented on the papers and brought several themes that would need further attention such as vernaculars, shortage vs. abundance, materiality of thrift, guardianship, and commensurability.

The last session started with Steve Gudeman's reflection of the papers and discussions that occurred during the entire workshop. He connected the ideas to a broader economic theorizing and history of thoughts concerning human management of resources. He raised yet new dimensions of thinking about thrift such as risk, satisfaction, and efficiency. Then, the final session continued with the general comments of several participants and their ideas of how to use the concept of thrift to contribute to economic anthropology.

CONCLUSION

A selection of the contributions will be published in an edited volume. Papers will be prepared for publication by Catherine Alexander and Daniel Sosna.



Figure 1. Participants of the workshop.