

Max Planck-Cambridge Exchange for Economic Life (CAMP)

Workshop 'Critical Agendas in Economic Anthropology' (CAMP-01)

MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle, 25-26 May 2023

The founding CAMP workshop held at the MPI in May 2023 involved six researchers from the Cambridge department of anthropology and seven from the MPI, most of them postdocs and senior scholars, who were joined by a small MPI audience. Convenors Brumann, Sanchez and Xiang had asked all speakers to explain how their interests in economic anthropology had developed; indicate the concerns, contradictions and hopes in their research participants' engagements with economy; spell out their research agenda for the coming years; and think about the potential of their work to engage in critical world issues such as wellbeing, inequality and sustainability. Workshop participants lived up to this brief, giving the presentations a reflective bent, and this led to lively discussions and a convivial atmosphere.

Drawing on ethnographic case studies from Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia, participants considered a broad variety of economic activities ranging from waste collection to luxury production, all occurring in modern industrial, trade and service contexts. A number of papers took up community-governed lands, cooperatives, labour unions and shared goods, studying people's commitments to such collective ventures. The salience and valuation of party-political engagements varied greatly across cases, as also the observed actors' readiness to employ neoliberalism as an analytic and the depth of the ethnographer's own political engagement, resulting in "anthropology with an [activist] accent" in some cases. Value appeared as the creation of particular social spheres, transcending the purely economic; its connection to power and transformation was emphasized. The usefulness of carving out economic anthropology as a separate field and its degree of canonization were debated. Hegemonic discourse about the economy was found to be more impenetrable to anthropological interventions than that of comparable fields such as religion or society. The need to speak to the common person's concerns, rather than merely academic questions, was emphasized repeatedly. Participants unanimously perceived the exchange as rewarding, and the topic of satisfaction as against alienation in work and other economic activities was identified as a possible focus for the next meeting.



(Text and photo: Christoph Brumann, 2023)