

## 07

# Economic Activity, Life, and Knowledge in the Anthropocene

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## Notes

This lesson is based on an interdisciplinary perspective that draws on anthropology, philosophy, and history. The purpose of the lesson is to examine the interconnections between the following three concepts: economic activity, economic life, and the knowledge economy. More specifically, I would like to show how material economic activity intersects with social economic life, and how both depend on knowledge economies to deal with environmental contingencies. This discussion is framed in relation to the potential anthropogenic ecological disaster often subsumed under the concept of the Anthropocene. After offering some theoretical considerations, the lesson concludes by discussing why Venice is an invaluable epistemic resource for understanding these concepts in practical terms.

## 1 Economic Activity

In the broadest and simplest sense, *economic activity* refers to the reproduction of the *material base* needed for human survival and flourishing. The material base includes resources, tools, and commodities. At the same time, it is nothing without human beings, who, in addition to consuming the material base, perform the indispensable work of replenishing and expanding it. This work does not happen naturally but requires arrangements for pooling, exchanging, and using things. In addition, by replenishing and expanding the material base through work, human beings themselves become material components of this base, which means that the reproduction of people is part of the reproduction of the material base. Such reproduction is never a matter of mere procreation and involves an entirely new layer of social institutions, which, in turn, condition and are conditioned by everything from exchange and work to consumption and replenishment. Thus, we see that even in the simplest sense, economic activity is already quite complex. In the epoch of a potential anthropogenic ecological disaster, the complexity of economic activity passes into sheer contradiction: the reproduction of the material base, in addition to being a necessary condition of continued existence, becomes the driver of possible human extinction.

To make sense of the complexity (though not the contradiction) of economic activity, economic theory often resorts to formalization – that is, to describing something in abstract and mathematical terms. The advantage of formalization is the ability to use the resulting formal schema in diverse settings regardless of the specific context. This is potentially beneficial to governance institutions, which must establish general interests among many competing parties, each with its own situated perspective. One of the most prevalent formalizations of economic activity involves modelling individuals as rational agents who seek to maximize individual utility under conditions of scarcity and competition in markets driven by the logic of supply and demand. In recent decades, after several shocking but predictable market crises, disconcerting growth indicators among developed and developing nations, and persistent extreme wealth inequality, the limits of this model's explanatory power can be reasonably questioned. What if, for example, economic actors are only partially rational on the best of days, driven not by competitive and innovative instincts but by a strong preference for comfort and habit at any cost, along with desires whose maximization frequently tends toward the self-destructive?

In addition to questions of what kind of human nature a model presupposes and how this affects modelling outcomes, the reproduction of the material base entails the *social reproduction* of society. Economic activity is never only a matter of

transactions in markets but of living in collective, cultural environments with complex provisioning mechanisms. Furthermore, the Anthropocene is a clear reminder that societies are not homeostatic, self-referential systems. Instead, economic activity involves *living in a world* that exceeds societal boundaries and practices, necessitating the development of knowledge economies. Therefore, to get a fuller grasp of economic activity, we must consider economic life and knowledge economies.

## 2 Economic Life

Besides economics, various other disciplines, such as political economy, cultural sociology, and social history, have proposed alternative explanations of economic activity. To move beyond economic formalism, the concept of *economic life* from economic anthropology is particularly useful. Economic activity is never separate from the division of labour, social stratification, cultural customs, and linguistic codes of the collectivity in which it takes place. Simply put, there is no economic activity without a society that enables and mediates this activity. Even the most formal economic models are enacted through *substantive societal actions* that involve laws, institutions, and languages as well as individual desires, motivations, and biographies. None of these categories are abstract – they all have determinate historical content that is particular to specific communities.

However, whereas formalist interpretations of economic activity tend to become detached from their social substance, the concept of economic life can all too easily convey a hermetic, siloed image of economic activity whereby human beings appear to live in enclosed communities strictly circumscribed by the circulation of their own customs and linguistic codes. In actuality, economic life is nowhere as bounded as the cultural structures identified by anthropologists would imply. Floods, droughts, and earthquakes interrupt natural cycles, migration and trading introduce new customs, and technological innovations shuffle societal arrangements. With the concept of economic life, the *living* component of economic activity is foregrounded, while *the world* in which this living takes place remains in the deep background. But just as economic activity is inseparable from society, so is economic life always conditioned by the world and its natural environment.

## 3 Environment

How can we talk about the world and its natural environment without falling into empty generalizations and abstractions? On the one hand, the environment never confronts us in its pure form – that is, devoid of human signification and meaning. We always make sense of the environment using the tools, customs, and codes on hand. At the same time, certain expressions designate places of encounter on the border of the cultural circle, where the line that demarcates a society comes into contact with everything beyond it. These expressions, although still conceptual and cultural, designate permanently incomplete concepts that can never be fully closed or elaborated with perfect detail. They remain open to contingency and introduce differences into the stable rhythms of economic life. The ‘environment’ is one such borderline concept.

In more philosophical terms, the environment confronts us as *negation without an agent*: as that which interrupts cycles, breaks customs, and falsifies models, but without being intentional or directed. Such interruptions may prompt reflection and inaugurate change and innovation. Although the undirected negativity of the environment is most evident in large events, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, it is important to bear in mind that the environment is never simply ‘outside’ of a society and its economic life. Instead, we could say that it ‘fills’ the space between concepts, actions, and outcomes – in other words, the environment and its negativity are intimately present in daily life. If there were none of this negativity

within and without a society with its economic life, then models would be perfect representations of reality, and the same action would always produce the same result. Of course, this is not the case, and it is in large part because of the contingency of the world and its natural environment that economic life, both individual and social, can produce the most unexpected results.

#### 4 Knowledge Economy

To stay in touch with the environment, anticipate its contingencies, and navigate the uncertainty it generates, societies develop practices and networks for accumulating information, organizing it into structures, and putting these structures into use. In short, we can say that every society has a *knowledge economy*. Sometimes, scholars working on knowledge economies define them as the key structure of a social system's ability to reproduce itself, solve its problems, and achieve its aims. Although this is not incorrect, the excessive focus on the self-reflexive dimension of knowledge economies is a remnant of the cultural silo-thinking associated with the concept of economic life. If knowledge only ever referred to communities and their cultural devices, we would live in a worldless society without an environment – that is, in a highly predictable context with only minimal changes.

The event of the Anthropocene challenges this closed, self-referential understanding of social and economic life. In fact, a society does not need knowledge to reproduce itself – all it requires is custom and law to regulate economic activity. Instead, knowledge necessarily implies an other and an outside, that is, an environment that is negative in relation to society and its material base. Being constructed as that which mediates between a society with its economic base and the negativity of the environment, *knowledge as such includes negation* and grants the ability to say, 'This is not so'. For any transformation of our economic life and economic activity in order to face the potential anthropogenic ecological disaster, the negation of existing social and economic inertia offered by knowledge economies is indispensable.

#### 5 Epistemic Venice

The world and its natural environment are never accessible in their entirety. The same is true for the material base, society, and knowledge. We can only grasp these abstractions more concretely when they are localized in specific places. It is always in a place where the contingent environment collides with the established structures of society. However, places are rarely only material and inhabited by physical things – they are also epistemic and full of facts, narratives, and data. Consider Venice, which is both a location and a place. As a location, Venice has specific geographic boundaries and characteristics, such as its lagoon. On the other hand, as an *epistemic place*, Venice involves multiple knowledge economies conditioned by variations in economic life. For example, in the seventeenth century, local fishermen and water officials coincided in striving to preserve the common material base of the lagoon. The fishermen's extensive knowledge of this base was recognized by the authorities, which conducted regular surveys of the fishermen regarding the state of the lagoon, in particular after a recent river diversion meant to reduce concerns about rising water levels. Nonetheless, from the epistemic perspective of the local fishermen, Venice was inseparable from the flowing rivers and the abundant fish they provided, but for the local authorities also concerned with the city, water flows were a resource (and a risk) to be managed. Unsurprisingly, in their evaluations of the effects of the river diversion, the two groups disagreed and invoked alternative explanations: for the fishermen, the course of nature was set by God, while for the water officials, it was a byproduct of a long history of artificial interventions. Although the lagoon was a common material base for the shared economic activity of both groups, the fishermen and the water officers, conditioned

by differences in their economic lives, employed distinct knowledge economies to make sense of 'Venice'. The cases discussed in the other lessons of this course will provide many more examples of how multiple knowledge economies, interconnected with particular economic lives and relations to the world, coexist within the epistemic place of Venice.

Over the centuries, Venice has been, among other things, a maritime empire, a publishing capital, a manufacturing and exporting region, a global tourist destination, and a city threatened by the effects of the Anthropocene. As a result, Venice has acquired an epistemic density that facilitates the exploration of the connections between economic activity, economic life, and knowledge economies. This exploration can shed light on the aforementioned contradiction between the reproduction of the economic base and the potential anthropogenic ecological disaster. Therefore, Venice is an epistemic resource that can be leveraged beyond its physical location, in any 'place' where established social and economic structures are being unsettled by an environment that refuses to be a subservient partner in the reproduction of the material base of humankind.

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### Mandatory Reading

Gudeman, S. (2022). "Community and Economy: Economy's Base". Carrier, J.G. (ed.), *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*. Cheltenham; Northampton (MA): Edward Elgar Publishing, 45-55.

### Further Optional Reading

Omodeo, P.D. (2023). "The Invisible Fisherman: The Economy of Water Knowledge in Early Modern Venice". *Ichthyology in Context (1500-1880)*. Leiden: Brill, 364-91. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004681187\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004681187_013)

Renn, J. (2020). "The Economy of Knowledge". *The Evolution of Knowledge: Rethinking Science for the Anthropocene*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 145-70.

Virno, P. (2018). "Appendix A: Negative Actions". *An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*. Calcutta; London; New York: Seagull Books, 230-41.

Virno, P. (2018). "Appendix B: Double Negation: A Resource for Praxis". *An Essay on Negation: For a Linguistic Anthropology*. Calcutta; London; New York: Seagull Books, 242-50.