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Reading Notes on the “New Economic Anthropology” of François Régis Mahieu

Abstract

This note review is the translated and edited version of an article previously published in French. Our aim is to examine the “New Economic Anthropology” by François Régis Mahieu. Régis’s book analyzes the decline of economic anthropology and advocates for integrating it with traditional economics, proposing an evolution beyond the *homo economicus* model to address present challenges. The author promotes a holistic understanding of human economic behavior by integrating anthropological and economic approaches. The research investigates how economic anthropology can contribute to our understanding and resolution of present-day economic problems. In the current economic landscape, this revised article emphasizes the importance of Mahieu’s ideas.

Keywords: Mahieu, economic anthropology, *homo economicus*, traditional economy

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**François Régis Mahieu-nin “Yeni İqtisadi Antropologiya”sı
üzrə oxu qeydləri**

Xülasə

Bu qeydlər əvvəlcə fransız dilində nəşr olunmuş bir məqalənin tərcümə edilmiş və redaktə olunmuş versiyasıdır. Məqsədimiz François Régis Mahieu-nin *Yeni İqtisadi Antropologiyası*nı araşdırmaqdır. Mahieu-nin kitabı iqtisadi antropologiyanın geriləməsini təhlil edir və onu ənənəvi iqtisadiyyatla inteqrasiya etməyi tövsiyə edir, eyni zamanda *homo economicus* modelinin öhdəsindən gəlmək və mövcud problemləri həll etmək üçün inkişaf təklif edir. Müəllif insanın iqtisadi davranışını anlamaqda antropoloji və iqtisadi yanaşmaları birləşdirərək bütöv bir baxışı müdafiə edir. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, iqtisadi antropologiya müasir iqtisadi problemlərin anlaşılması və həllinə necə töhfə verə bilər. Cari iqtisadi mənzərədə bu redaktə olunmuş məqalə Mahieu-nin ideyalarının əhəmiyyətini vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: Mahieu, iqtisadi antropologiya, *homo economicus*, ənənəvi iqtisadiyyat

Introduction

The note review provided here is an edited and translated version of an article previously published in French under the title: “*New Economic Anthropology* de François Régis Mahieu: Présentation et Commentaires”. The original article was published by Mouloud Tebib (2023) in the *Management Intercultural Journal* (Issue 50/2023), spanning pp. 25–30 (6 pages).

In the *New Economic Anthropology*, Mahieu Régis investigates the origins of conflicts that contributed to the decline of economic anthropology and proposes solutions. The author highlights the historical relationship between economic anthropology and the traditional economic system, emphasizing how they have mutually supported each other over time. Economic anthropology has been built upon our understanding of the economic behavior exhibited by individuals and societies. Nevertheless, the author suggests that economics should advance beyond the *homo economicus* stage to gain fresh perspectives and effectively address the challenges of the contemporary world: “Our essay attempts to overcome these conflicts which have led to the virtual disappearance of economic anthropology (Hugon, 2016). It shows that these two disciplines complement each other and allow new understanding. The economy needs to go beyond the stage of *homo economicus* to open to the total person.” (Mahieu, 2023, p. 2).

Research

The *homo economicus* stage refers to a model that assumes humans act rationally based on economic self-interest. However, the author suggests that economics must progress beyond this

constrained concept and consider additional factors such as culture, values, and social interactions (Zalega, 2016; Efeoğlu & Çalışkan, 2018).

By fostering an interaction between economic anthropology and traditional economics, one can cultivate novel and enhanced perspectives on comprehending human economic behavior. The author emphasizes the significance of leveraging the anthropological approach to study and analyze the economy while considering cultural, social, and historical factors that elucidate the economic conduct of individuals and societies.

In general, Mahieu's work presents an open-minded outlook on the role of economic anthropology in broadening our comprehension of economic phenomena and aiding economics in addressing contemporary challenges.

The economic anthropological approach contribution

François Régis Mahieu further explains the contribution of the economic anthropological approach in understanding individuals as personal, social, and cultural constructions. When economic analysis is associated with a hypothetical imperative, it entails attaining maximum satisfaction by efficiently coordinating and utilizing the limited available resources. Through the economic anthropological approach, the intricate complexities of individuals and human society—encompassing structures, institutions, and functions—can be simplified using a binary approach. This enables the analysis and comprehension of the complicated and interconnected relations between individuals and societies and how these interactions impact economic behavior and decision-making processes: "The hypothetical imperative is linked to a possible action as a means of achieving given ends, hypothetical or real. Economic analysis builds most of its proposals on this type of imperative: rationally combining rare means for alternative use to maximize satisfaction. The person is multiple, like human society, its systems, structures, institutions, functions. Economic anthropology can only reduce, like other anthropologies, this complexity to a methodological fiction, most often a dualism." (Mahieu, 2023, p. 4).

In the context of psychoanalysis, there are well-known dualities that have influenced anthropological thinking. Two of the leading figures in psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, proposed binary concepts relating to human motivation and personality (Adler, 1949; Ricoeur, 2013).

Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasized the dual drives of death (*Thanatos*) and sex (*Eros*) as the primary motivators of human behavior. He believed that these drives, along with unconscious desires and struggles, shape individual psychology and influence social dynamics. This dualism remains part of the controversy surrounding the concepts of life and death drives (Meissner, 2009).

On the other hand, Adler focused on the individual's quest for power and superiority as well as the need for social affiliation and community (Briggs, 1994). His theory proposes a dualistic nature of human personality, balancing an individual's drive for personal achievement and dominance with their desire for social connections and cooperation. For this statement, Mahieu explains that: "The best-known dualisms in anthropology take place in psychoanalysis: Freud, with the double drive of death and sex, Adler (2004) with a double personality based on the solitary thirst for power and the need for human community." (Mahieu, 2023, p. 4).

It is a pertinent idea and reference in support of the author's approach concerning how these dual notions proposed by Freud, Adler, and even others—whether arising from psychoanalysis or otherwise—had an impact on anthropological thinking by providing insights into the complexities of human behavior and the interaction between individual desires and social dynamics.

1- Nature of economic anthropology:

The Author tries to discuss the "economic anthropology", which he considers not an independent discipline as much as an unknown part of economic analysis. It is not a substitute but a collection of resources and tools that shift research interest from the "individual" to the "person" by resorting to disciplines that have been rejected by economists, in particular psychoanalysis. In this chapter, Mahieu also recalls the main characteristics of the person through the phenomenological concept:

“The chosen conception of the person is inspired by phenomenology: the person is immersed in a world of rights and obligations and has the ability to assume responsibility”. (Mahieu, 2023, 05).

Economic anthropology explores both the inclusivity and the differences that individuals bring to themselves based on their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their communities and the systems of rights and obligations that arise from them. Economic anthropology aims to understand the complex relationship between culture, society and the economy. It recognizes that economic practices and behaviors are not only determined by universal principles, but also shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Furthermore, humans have the ability to create and adhere to systems of rules, norms, and values that govern their behavior and interactions. These rules are not only imposed from the outside, but are often created and internalized collectively, reflecting shared understandings and social conventions. Humans have the capacity to reason and engage in moral deliberation, which contributes to the formation of these rules.

“The rehabilitation of humankind passes through his/ her consideration as a person and no longer as an individual. How is s/ he different from animals? Humankind is autonomous and expresses his/ her will.” (Mahieu, 2023, p. 10)

Economic anthropology, in order to achieve its goals, need to adopt observations, surveys, and censuses, in addition to its need to extrapolate reality and social facts, which is a task fraught with dangers, as Mahieu says. The recommendation he makes is to do a comprehensive "Person" analysis.

The assumption of manifesting freedoms resulting from a person's choices, relates to personal contexts of freedom versus those named political or economic freedom. It is an assumption and analysis presented by the Author about liberalism related to the "person" and not “ideological liberalism.” Therefore, the discussion of freedom, economic practices and behaviors of ideological liberalism, which produces the results of “limited freedom.”

“We can, nevertheless, make the hypothesis of a “person” who manages his/ her constraints with a space of freedom.” (Mahieu, 2023, p. 12). We conclude that, economic anthropology, as in the work of many economists such as Becker and others, is done by integrating a human dimension into a primary economic issue.

2- Anthropology and economic theory:

Regarding the issue of the difficulty of combining anthropology and economic theory, the author refers, in “Anthropology and economic theory, a difficult association”, that: “Economic anthropology is a minor part of the anthropological literature; this can be understood in the context of a primitive society where the economy does not appear distinctly. However, the reason for this minorization is that economic theory has its dogmas, notably utilitarianism and hedonism, which opposes the anthropological approach” (Mahieu, 2023, p. 22)

The Author, expose elements that justify the difficulty of this relationship, and how the macro economy, for example, and through its interest in major and inclusive variables, moves away from anthropology where the essence of its interest is 'humans', 'people', groups ... Etc. Talking about analyzing issues related to work, wealth and distribution makes macroeconomics not take into account the interactions resulting from the reactions of individuals. The author argues that the human race is present in its natural selfishness and is constantly transforming the best ideas to its advantage. It also exists as a social being, a constituent of societies that develop their own idiosyncrasies and resistances. Whereas macroeconomics can hardly take into account the human race. We can easily imagine the danger of caring only about rules (maximization under constraints) or universal standards (optimum).

On the other hand, Mahieu finds a convergence between anthropology and microeconomics. By studying the economy at the level of individuals, their preferences, their informal and formal interactions, etc. It is a situation linked to the analysis of the 'person' as in the author's thesis, where he explains that: “Microeconomics deals with a complex “personality”. Most often, this person is a dualist, made up of social constraints and free choices. This moral economy which characterizes the economy is “contradictory”, made up of constraints and strategies of free choice. The “person” for

Roemer is composed of a “social type” and a freedom that comes at its cost: responsibility” (Mahieu, 2023, p. 27).

This chapter, examining the nature of economic anthropology, split ends with the issue of methods, where Mahieu concludes that a combination of anthropological methods and tools with those associated with economic analysis is what gives us the methodology of economic anthropology through the structure of a person's experiences: fragility, which is the economy, and suffering, which is anthropology.

3- Integration of personal responsibility:

In this section, Mahieu talks about how the anthropological approach to economics involves shifting the focus from the individual to the person, while taking into account the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions that shape economic behavior. In this approach, the person is seen as embedded in a complex network of relationships, rights, and obligations that exist prior to the pursuit of individual happiness.

The idea of the “person” in this context is not just about responsibility, but also about the effective exercise of responsibility. Each person is constantly aware of his role and responsibilities within his community, and this awareness influences his economic decisions. The gains or losses associated with the various responsibilities play an important role in shaping their economic actions. (Ballet, et al., 2013).

The Author believes that freedom can only be understood through sequence, societal constraints → rationality → reasonability. A sequence highlighted by economic anthropology that confirms the initial assumptions of economic phenomena about the person, the responsible and the powerless (Mahieu, 2023, p. 49).

Societal constraint refers to the social and cultural norms, rules, and obligations that exist within a society. These constraints shape and influence individual behavior and choices. In economic anthropology, the recognition of societal constraints highlights the fact that freedom is not absolute autonomy but rather lies within the context of social and cultural frameworks.

Rationality plays a critical role when individuals navigate within these constraints of society. Rationality refers to the ability to make logical decisions and choices based on available information, preferences, and goals. It involves weighing different options, considering the consequences, and making decisions that align with one's interests and values.

Reasonability refers to the ability to make choices that take into account not only one's own interests, but also the well-being and interests of others. It involves a sense of responsibility and an understanding of the interdependence of individuals within a community.

The author has represented the relationship in Figure 3.3 (Mahieu, 2023, p. 51). The interaction between responsibility, rationality, and reasonability in the context of societal dynamics can be complex indeed. Responsibility, therefore, increases with the size of the community and the number of obligations. Individuals face different responsibilities that they need to fulfill, and the extent of these responsibilities can vary based on their roles and positions within society. Rationality comes into play when individuals evaluate the means available to meet their responsibilities. They evaluate and make decisions based on rational considerations, taking into account factors such as available resources, capabilities, and the probable results of their actions.

4- The Anthropology of Human and Social Weakness:

Mahieu deals with the issue of vulnerability (human and social weakness), starting from a philosophical perspective by Paul Ricoeur. Vulnerability originally referred to the possibility of a person being injured if not killed. This is not a new idea in philosophy and the social sciences. The basic concept, similar to frailty in Ricoeur's philosophy (Ricoeur, 1988-2003), vulnerability is very subtle in social economy: vulnerability at work, unemployment, poverty, harassment, etc.

The author, moreover, points out that vulnerability is related to two variables, one that defines the person and the other the field or action that led to its emergence. Mahieu makes an important note that constitutes one of the elements of his approach, that the areas where usually cited and frequently linked to the concept are related to health, employment and altruism. On the other hand, responsibility

is one of the least studied areas of vulnerability, although it is related to the person. As he says, vulnerability is a typical concept of anthropology. It is about people whose fragility is largely related to economic variables. People, because of their responsibilities, are increasingly vulnerable. Weakness results from disproportionate responsibilities within and between generations. (Mahieu, 2023, p. 65).

5- The suffering of the person:

Mahieu deals with the issue of man and suffering. Mahieu indicates that one of the results of economic processes, benefit and suffering, is the person as a one who is mentally and physically affected by everything related to working, living conditions, unemployment, social anomia or loss of social solidarity and even: “fear” (Dejours, 1993).

What the Author wants to reach in this section is that the economic theory did not attentive to the person and therefore his suffering. Human suffering is unrecognized in economic theory; it concerns the person and is an extension of his/ her vulnerability (Mahieu, 2023, p. 81).

For Mahieu, “yet the economic calculation is incomplete within this framework and it is time to integrate into it other constitutive elements of the person (Ego, Id, Superego) of his/ her choices (desires, frustrations, impulses, traumas), without forgetting the fear of community constraints, highlighted by Freud”. (Mahieu, 2020, p. 81).

In classical economic theory, the attention is on economic benefit and material well-being. It is usually assumed that individuals make decisions based on their own self-interest and maximum benefit. However, it was ignored that individuals may face, as people according to the Mahieu’s proposal and concept, suffering because of the poor economic conditions in which they live, such as unemployment or poverty. They may have unmet basic needs, such as food security, adequate housing, and health care. Thus, their economic decisions may be greatly affected by the suffering and pressures they face.

Rather than treating individuals as rational agents motivated solely by self-interest, economic anthropology understands the complexity of human motivation and the influence of social, cultural, historical, psychological factors, and personality structure on economic decision-making. It acknowledges that economic activities are embedded in social relations and cultural contexts, and that individuals' economic behaviors are shaped by their interactions with others and their broader social environments.

By including the social, cultural and psychological aspects, economic anthropology seeks to modify the traditional interpretation and aims to understand the complex relationships between the economy and the person and how the balance is formed between individual freedom, social dependency and responsibility. We can summarize this positive interest and orientation as follow:

- Awareness of vulnerability and suffering: Economic anthropology recognizes that the person is not immune from vulnerability and suffering. It emphasizes the impact of economic and social factors on the well-being of individuals and highlights the need to address and mitigate these challenges.

- Going Beyond Individual Rationality: Economic anthropology goes beyond viewing individuals as purely rational actors motivated by self-interest. Understands the complexities of human behavior and decision-making, taking into account the influence of social, cultural, and historical factors on economic actions.

- Understanding a person's ability structure: Economic anthropology studies a person's capabilities, including their ability to communicate, act, impart meaning, and construct narratives. These abilities contribute to a person's identity and shape their economic interactions and experiences.

- Exploring the disproportionate nature of responsibility: Economic anthropology recognizes that the responsibilities attributed to a person can be disproportionate, resulting in potential stress and impairment. It highlights the social, cultural and contextual factors that contribute to the allocation and perception of responsibilities.

Consideration of obligations and rights: Economic anthropology recognizes that the person is an integral part of the world of obligations and rights. It recognizes the interaction between individual

agency and the social structures that shape a person's choices and actions. The person must navigate their responsibilities within the limits set by their background and remain reasonable in relation to others.

Conclusion

This note offers significant insights into economic anthropology and its contributions to the anthropological and economic fields. It is important to notice the pertinent history of anthropological knowledge, enrich the anthropo-economic theory, and highlight the need for further multidisciplinary research in this area. In conclusion, the new economic anthropology highlights the importance of using anthropological methods to study and analyze economics while considering cultural, social, and psychological aspects. It aims to provide a fresh perspective on understanding human economic behavior beyond the confines of traditional economic theories.

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