

Blog post: Working with Dr Wesam Hassan as a research intern working on the topic of sustainability within economic anthropology

During the Autumn Term, I took my first ever module in anthropology, “Anthropology of Economy: Production and Exchange”. Coming from a background in Philosophy, Politics and Economics – and pursuing a philosophy postgraduate degree – this field was entirely new to me. I was curious about anthropology, as it seemed to be a field which incorporated aspects of both theory and applied case study. Anthropologists seek to understand human behaviour, and try to interpret people’s lives, their choices, their worldviews. This approach seemed very interesting to me.

The main takeaway I gathered from this course was that the economy is *situated*, historical, contingent, and highly localised, rather than deriving from universal principles of human nature. This was especially helpful to me, coming from an economics background with little knowledge of economic history. Understanding these models and paradigms as evolving and contingent – familiarising myself with different economic systems, modes of exchange, diversities of motivations – was extremely interesting. It helped me understand *where* my economics background was coming from. And it encouraged me to think about possibilities for *change*.

After finishing the course, then, my understanding of human behaviour and economic practices was more flexible, more socially embedded, more open and curious than it had been before. When I learned about the opportunity to become a research intern on the topic of sustainability from an economic anthropology perspective, I immediately recalled what I had learned in this module: one can challenge universalist assumptions by relying on ethnographic evidence, and situate sustainability historically and socially.

Sustainability is a complicated issue. In some cases, it feels like a “buzzword” used to indicate moral reflexivity and awareness of climate change, which ultimately might not lead to any genuine action. In others, thinking about sustainability confronts one with the realities of human-induced climate disasters, an impossibly sad task leaving one feeling helpless.

At the start of the internship, Wesam encouraged us (the four interns) to really think about sustainability, its different connotations, associations, what emotions we felt when using this term (helplessness? Boredom? Disappointment? Hope?) as a starting point upon which to derive what we really wanted to investigate. At the end of the internship, we were to produce lecture slides concerning responding to a specific research question on sustainability from an economic anthropology perspective, mingled with our own particular research interests and specialities (mine, for instance, concern philosophical issues). We were also to produce an annotated bibliography and the blog post I am writing right now. Throughout the internship, we would have the opportunity to meet with Wesam and communicate amongst ourselves, working together with her to produce a novel take on sustainability that might be used next year for the economic anthropology module. As someone who wishes, in the long-term, to do academic research and teach, this was an exciting (and daunting!) opportunity.

I was extremely unsure where to start. What approach did I want to take? What point did I want to make? What readings are “good enough” to be “lecture readings”? Finally, I approached this by pretending to do something I already knew how to do: preparing an essay. Following Wesam’s advice, I focused on the topic of degrowth and, from there onwards, behaved as if I was to submit an essay on degrowth. This allowed me to formulate a bibliography, consider main themes, objections, contrast authors’ approaches, etc.

In the meetings with Wesam, we discussed everything. The rabbit hole of anthropology of time I fell in which I ended up not using at all in the lecture slides – intergenerational justice – feminist pedagogical approaches to education – among other things. Having the opportunity to discuss these ideas allowed me to structure my thoughts, explore various ideas with the assurance that I would not go completely off-track.

The lecture slides and bibliography I ended up with were completely different to the initial themes I thought I would include. One thing stuck: the approach to degrowth was linked to economic anthropology insofar as it sought to challenge universal principles sometimes associated to economic systems – a variety of exchanges were explored, and degrowth’s deep commitment to pluralism fit particularly well within anthropology. Nevertheless, a pragmatic approach involving policies and scientific paradigms was also taken seriously in the lecture slides. In the words of Lévi-Strauss, “Anthropologists are here to witness that the manner in which we live, the values that we believe in, are not the only possible ones; that other modes of life, other value systems have permitted, and continue to permit other human communities of finding happiness” (cited in Walker, 2020:161).

This opportunity was the first I had of exploring research and teaching in a supported and structured way, which Wesam permitted. It made me temporarily leave the eyes and worldviews of a student to try and integrate those of a teacher trying to present, in the clearest way possible, key concepts that students can use to transcend the “buzzword” notion of sustainability. And it allowed me to develop an idea of sustainability which was based on a form of “pragmatic pluralism” challenging narratives of economic growth as necessary to increase wellbeing. This experience was a wonderful first step in learning how to do research and start thinking from a teacher’s perspective.