

Preface



My journey in anthropology began in the summer after my junior year in college when I lived in a small Indigenous village in southern Mexico. Unready for the experience, I accomplished little during those months but watched the people grow and cook the food they shared with me. I doubted that I could survive in their remote and difficult circumstances or succeed as an anthropologist.

Five years later I lived with my wife, Roxane, in lowland Panama where we spent a year and a half immersed in the life of a small village. Now I was trained in anthropology and business and was being supported to devise ways of enhancing rural development, prepare teaching materials for students of business, and undertake research for a PhD. From the first days of our arrival, I turned from analyzing the people's economy using methods I had learned in business school to exploring local life as a field anthropologist. I started with the villagers' economy centered around the house and soon expanded to their social and ritual practices, while I formed a grim view of their welfare and local environment.

A decade after the fieldwork in Panama, when I had a secure academic position, Roxane was teaching at a nearby college, and our three children were in school, I turned to highland Colombia and to collaborative fieldwork with a former student. I found that a people's way of conceiving economy may come from their ideas about the human body, the house, how the world has been made, and their religious beliefs. Economic life is often formulated through such images and metaphors, a perspective I had already used to understand some Western ideas about economy.

Then, shifting from rural economies to the periphery of urban markets in Guatemala, I considered how a house economy becomes a house-business and earns a small profit. What had been a product of making do in the house can become an innovation for sales.

After studying rural economies and their connection to urban markets, as well as histories of markets and market theory, I turned briefly to Cuba to see how a socialist economy operates at the house level and compare it to my prior studies.

Shortly after this journey, I directed a research team undertaking a comparative study in six former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. We found a revival of the house economy after the socialist framework collapsed as well as a resurgence of rituals that support it. Many of the local economic practices in this historically distant place were recognizable to me from my prior journeys in Latin America.

From the first days of fieldwork, my aim was to develop a theoretical perspective for analyzing economy. I do not emphasize that part of the journey, which mostly took place away from the field, but the intention is implicit in what I did while doing the fieldwork and a few of those conclusions are woven into the text.

Throughout the journey, I interacted with many anthropologists and other social scientists who expanded my thinking, and I was fortunate to have university colleagues and students who supported me as well. With my thanks to them for many conversations and written communications, those parts of the journey are not described in order to focus on the anthropology I pursued in the field.

The text, arranged by the flow of time, is divided into five titled chapters. To preserve their anonymity, I have changed the names and features of the people I met during fieldwork but known figures are presented as I saw them.

Growing up, I learned about making do when my family was putting together a dinner from leftovers or I was constructing something with my father. In fieldwork, I saw people making do as they worked in the fields, repaired a tool, assembled a meal, or made something for sale. Much later, I realized that making do captures some of my fieldwork practices and their presentation in this book.