

Anthropology, Economics and Development
Cross Disciplines
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Imagine these snippets from a conversation taking place after an anthropologist's seminar:

An Economist: You anthropologists tell good stories and provide examples, but what do they mean? What models do you offer? Where's the theory?

The Anthropologist: I was illuminating a complex, local situation. In your theories, it's all individual preference and choice, and getting the incentives right. It could be anywhere or nowhere. You economists don't recognize the difference that culture makes.

A Cross Economist: Okay. But how should we incorporate culture into our models? You haven't told us - at most it is an exogenous variable.

The Cross Anthropologist: But that's the point: culture is not a variable. You economists have such a mechanistic view of the world, and that is part of the culture of economics.

The Very Cross Economist: I don't know what you mean. We build models, critique them, and change them; and we offer solutions to real economic problems.

The Very Cross Anthropologist: Well, that' s part of the problem, too; we don' t prescribe or tell people what to do, we describe. And besides who gets to decide that the problems are "economic"?

How many of us have engaged in these conversations? But what is the quarrel all about, and why does the tension often emerge in policy and project issues? In the past decades, both economists and anthropologists have become far more reflective about themselves, although in different ways. Some economists have become critical of mainstream assumptions, even as mainstream economists develop and extend a powerful set of tools. Other economists even have studied how graduate students are disciplined into the discipline. For their part, anthropologists have been thinking critically about the role of the "objective" observer, the "facticity" of fieldwork data, the authorship and ownership of ethnographic information, the political and historical conditions that nurtured anthropology, and the perilous future of anthropology. Both disciplines are home to variant voices and both have blurry edges, but I think it is noteworthy that neither discipline has used the other as a critical mirror. To be certain, anthropologists adopt tools from economists, such as rational choice models, but why do many anthropologists blanch at the economists' suggestion that culture is a variable, an endowment, or a form of capital?

The different "world visions" of economists and anthropologists are closely connected to their variant ways of framing policy issues and development projects. I suggest that instead of trying to mix and integrate insights from anthropologists and economists in development projects - with the hope that a good shaking will produce a better drink - we should consider "professional" anthropologists and economists themselves as "targets" of a development project as well as experts in its deployment. Economists and anthropologists do share one idea: the importance of learning by doing.

Should we actively study our differences as they emerge in practical work? I still fancy the idea that thoughtful critique leads to creative solutions ("creative destruction") and breaches borders. What better situation in which to undertake an active cross-disciplinary conversation than a development project whose recipients would also be arbiters? (Is culture a variable in every economy, or is economy part of culture?) This way of thinking about development projects would partly transform their purpose, would more deeply implicate ourselves in the work, would require experimentation, and would need justification. So, I close with several questions.

Could such a complex project be carried out?

How might this way of framing development projects affect their outcomes?

Would the benefits be worth the costs?

Would anthropologists and economists want to participate?

Would such a project nurture cross-disciplinary thinking or just cross economists and cross anthropologists?