

LIFE AMONG THE ECON*

AXEL LEIJONHUFVUD
University of California, Los Angeles

The Econ tribe occupies a vast territory in the far North. Their land appears bleak and dismal to the outsider, and travelling through it makes for rough sledding; but the Econ, through a long period of adaptation, have learned to wrest a living of sorts from it. They are not without some genuine and sometimes even fierce attachment to their ancestral grounds, and their young are brought up to feel contempt for the softer living in the warmer lands of their neighbours, such as the Polscis and the Sociogs. Despite a common genetical heritage, relations with these tribes are strained—the distrust and contempt that the average Econ feels for these neighbours being heartily reciprocated by the latter—and social intercourse with them is inhibited by numerous taboos. The extreme clannishness, not to say xenophobia, of the Econ makes life among them difficult and perhaps even somewhat dangerous for the outsider. This probably accounts for the fact that the Econ have so far not been systematically studied. Information about their social structure and ways of life is fragmentary and not well validated. More research on this interesting tribe is badly needed.

CASTE AND STATUS

The information that we do have indicates that, for such a primitive people, the social structure is quite complex. The two main dimensions of their social structure are those of caste and status. The basic division of the tribe is seemingly into castes; within each caste, one finds an elaborate network of status relationships.

An extremely interesting aspect of status among the Econ, if it can be verified, is that status relationships do not seem to form a simple hierarchical “pecking-order,” as one is used to expect. Thus, for example, one may find that A pecks B, B pecks C, and *then C pecks A!* This non-transitivity of status may account for the continual strife among the Econ which makes their social life seem so singularly insufferable to the visitor.

**Editor's Note:* Since many of our younger readers are, with the idealism so characteristic of contemporary youth, planning to launch themselves on a career of good deeds by going to live and work among the Econ, the editor felt that it would be desirable to invite an Econologist of some experience to write an account of this little known tribe. Diligent inquiry eventually turned up the author of the present paper. Dr. Leijonhufvud was deemed an almost perfect candidate for the assignment, for he was exiled nearly a decade ago to one of the outlying Econ villages (Ucla) and since then has not only been continuously resident there but has even managed to get himself named an elder (under what pretenses—other than the growth of a grey beard—the editor has been unable to determine).

Almost all of the travellers' reports that we have comment on the Econ as a "quarrelsome race" who "talk ill of their fellow behind his back," and so forth. Social cohesion is apparently maintained chiefly through shared distrust of outsiders. In societies with a transitive pecking-order, on the other hand, we find as a rule that an equilibrium develops in which little actual pecking ever takes place. The uncivilized anomaly that we find among the Econ poses a riddle the resolution of which must be given high priority in Econological research at this time.

What seems at first to be a further complication obstructing our understanding of the situation in the Econ tribe may, in the last analysis, contain the vital clue to this theoretical problem. Pecking between castes is traditionally not supposed to take place, but this rule is not without exceptions either. Members of high castes are not infrequently found to peck those of lower castes. While such behavior is regarded as in questionable taste, it carries no formal sanctions. A member of a low caste who attempts to peck someone in a higher caste runs more concrete risks—at the extreme, he may be ostracized and lose the privilege of being heard at the tribal midwinter councils.

In order to bring out the relevance of this observation, a few more things need to be said about caste and status in the tribe. The Econ word for caste is "field." Caste is extremely important to the self-image and sense of identity of the Econ, and the adult male meeting a stranger will always introduce himself with the phrase "Such-and-such is my field." The English root of this term is interesting because of the aversion that the Econ normally have to the use of plain English. The English words that have crept into their language are often used in senses that we would not recognize. Thus, in this case, the territorial connotation of "field" is entirely misleading for the castes do not live apart. The basic social unit is the village, or "dept." The depts of the Econ always comprise members of several "fields." In some cases, nearly every caste may be represented in a single dept.

A comparison of status relationships in the different "fields" shows a definite common pattern. The dominant feature, which makes status relations among the Econ of unique interest to the serious student, is the way that status is tied to the manufacture of certain types of implements, called "modls." The status of the adult male is determined by his skill at making the "modl" of his "field." The facts (a) that the Econ are highly status-motivated, (b) that status is only to be achieved by making "modls," and (c) that most of these "modls" seem to be of little or no practical use, probably accounts for the backwardness and abject cultural poverty of the tribe. Both the tight linkage between status in the tribe and modl-making and the trend toward making modls more for ceremonial than

for practical purposes appear, moreover, to be fairly recent developments, something which has led many observers to express pessimism for the viability of the Econ culture.

Whatever may have been the case in earlier times, the "fields" of the Econ apparently do not now form a strong rank-ordering. This may be the clue to the problem of the non-transitivity of individual status. First, the ordering of two castes will sometimes be indeterminate. Thus, while the Micro assert their superiority over the Macro, so do the Macro theirs over the Micro, and third parties are found to have no very determined, or at least no unanimous, opinion on the matter. Thus the perceived prestige of one caste relative to another is a non-reflexive relation. In other instances, however, the ranking is quite clear. The priestly caste (the Math-Econ) for example, is a higher "field" than either Micro or Macro, while the Devlops just as definitely rank lower. Second, we know that these caste-rankings (where they can be made) are not permanent but may change over time. There is evidence, for example, that both the high rank assigned to the Math-Econ and the low rank of the Devlops are, historically speaking, rather recent phenomena. The rise of the Math-Econ seems to be associated with the previously noted trend among all the Econ towards more ornate, ceremonial modls, while the low rank of the Devlops is due to the fact that this caste, in recent times, has not strictly enforced the taboos against association with the Polscis, Sociogs, and other tribes. Other Econ look upon this with considerable apprehension as endangering the moral fiber of the tribe and suspect the Devlops even of relinquishing modl-making.

If the non-transitivity of Econ status seems at first anomalous, here at least we have a phenomenon with known parallels.¹ It may be that what we are observing among the Econ is simply the decay of a once orderly social structure that possessed a strong ranking of castes and, within each caste, a perfectly unambiguous transitive status ordering.

GRADS, ADULTS, AND ELDERS

The young Econ, or "grad," is not admitted to adulthood until he has made a "modl" exhibiting a degree of workmanship acceptable to the elders of the "dept" in which he serves his apprenticeship. Adulthood is conferred in an intricate ceremony the particulars of which vary from

1. Cf., e.g., the observations concerning the Indian *jajmani*-system in Manning Nash, *Primitive and Peasant Economic Systems*, Scranton, Pa., 1966, pp. 93 ff. esp. p. 94: "For example, goldsmiths give polluting services to potters, and the potters receive pollution from herders, who in turn give polluting services to goldsmiths. In this exchange of ritually crucial interaction the goldsmiths see themselves above the potters and below the herders, but the herders are below the potters, yet above the goldsmith caste." Precisely.

village to village. In the more important villages, furthermore, (the practice in some outlying villages is unclear) the young adult must continue to demonstrate his ability at manufacturing these artifacts. If he fails to do so, he is turned out of the "dept" to perish in the wilderness.

This practice may seem heartless, but the Econ regard it as a manhood rite sanctioned by tradition and defend it as vital to the strength and welfare of the dept. If life is hard on the young, the Econ show their compassion in the way that they take care of the elderly. Once elected an elder, the member need do nothing and will still be well taken care of.

TOTEMS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

While in origin the word "modl" is simply a term for a concrete implement, looking at it only in these terms will blind the student to key aspects of Econ social structure. "Modl" has evolved into an abstract concept which dominates the Econ's perception of virtually all social relationships—whether these be relations to other tribes, to other castes, or status relations within his caste. Thus, in explaining to a stranger, for example, why he holds the Sociogs or the Polscis in such low regard, the Econ will say that "they do not make modls" and leave it at that.

The dominant role of "modl" is perhaps best illustrated by the (unfortunately very incomplete) accounts we have of relationships between the two largest of the Econ castes, the "Micro" and the "Macro." Each caste has a basic modl of simple pattern and the modls made by individual members will be variations on the theme set by the basic modl of the caste. Again, one finds that the Econ define the social relationship, in this instance between two castes, in terms of the respective modl. Thus if a Micro-Econ is asked why the Micro do not intermarry with the Macro, he will answer: "They make a different modl," or "They do not know the Micro modl." (In this, moreover, he would be perfectly correct, but then neither, of course, would he know the Macro modl.)

Several observers have commented on the seeming impossibility of eliciting from the member of a "field" a coherent and intelligible account of what distinguishes his caste from another caste which does not, in the final analysis, reduce to the mere assertion that the modls are different. Although more research on this question is certainly needed, this would seem to lend considerable support to those who refer to the basic modl as the *totem* of the caste. It should be noted that the difficulty of settling this controversial question does not arise from any taboo against discussing caste with strangers. Far from being reticent, the Econ will as a rule be quite voluble on the subject. The problem is that what they have to say consists almost entirely of expressions of caste-prejudices of the most

elemental sort.²

To the untrained eye, the totems of major castes will often look well-nigh identical. It is the great social significance attached to these minor differences by the Econ themselves that have made Econography (the study of Econ arts and handicrafts) the central field of modern Econology. As an illustration, consider the totems of the Micro and the Macro. Both could be roughly described as formed by two carved sticks joined together in the middle somewhat in the form of a pair of scissors (cf. Figure 1).

Certain ceremonies connected with these totems are of great interest to us because of the indications that they give about the origin of mod-making among the Econ. Unfortunately, we have only fragmentary accounts by various travellers of these ceremonies and the interpretations of what they have seen that these untrained observers essay are often in conflict. Here, a systematic study is very much needed.

The following sketchy account of the "prospecting"-ceremony among the Macro brings out several of the riddles that currently perplex Econologists working in this area:

Figure 1-A. Totem of the Micro

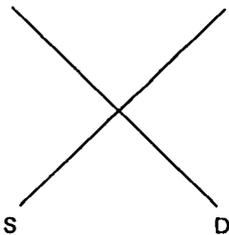
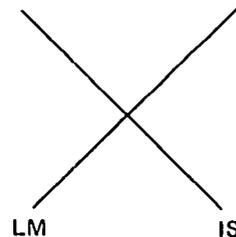


Figure 1-B. Totem of the Macro



The elder grasps the LM with his left hand and the IS with his right and, holding the totem out in front of himself with elbows slightly bent, proceeds in a straight line—'gazing neither left nor right' in the words of their ritual³—out over the chosen terrain. The grads of the village skip gaily around him at first, falling silent as the trek grows longer and more wearisome. On this occasion, it was long indeed and the terrain difficult ... the grads were strung out in a long, morose and bedraggled chain behind their leader who, sweat pearling his brow, face cast in grim determi-

2. This observation is far from new. One finds it recorded, for example, in Machluypp's *Voyages* in the account of "The Voyage of H.M.S. Semantick to the Coast of Econland."

3. The same wording appears in the corresponding Micro-ritual. It is reported that the Macro belittle the prospecting of the Micro among themselves saying that the Micro "can't keep from gazing right." The Micro, on their side, claim the Macro "gaze left." No one has offered a sensible hypothesis to account for this particular piece of lithurgical controversy. Chances are that far-fetched explanations are out of place and that this should simply be accepted as just another humdrum example of the continual bickering among the Econ.

nation, stumbled onward over the obstacles in his path... At long last, the totem vibrates, then oscillates more and more; finally, it points, quivering, straight down. The elder waits for the grads to gather round and then pronounces, with great solemnity: "Behold, the Truth and Power of the Macro."

It is surely evident from an account such as this why such a major controversy has sprung up around the main thesis of the 'Implementarist' School. This influential Econographic School argues that the art of modl-carving has its historical origin in the making of tools and useful "implements," and that ceremonies such as the one described above reflect, in ritual form, the actual uses to which these implements were at one time put.

Fanciful as the 'Implementarist' hypothesis may seem, it would be injudicious to dismiss it out of hand. Whether the Macro-modl can be regarded as originally a "useful implement" would seem to hinge in the first place on whether the type of "prospecting" ritualized in the described ceremony produces actual results. The Macro themselves maintain that they strike gold this way. Some travellers and investigators support the contention, others dismiss it as mere folklore. The issues are much the same as those connected with attempts to appraise the divining-rod method of finding water. Numerous people argue that it works—but no scientific explanation of why it would has ever been advanced.

We do have some, apparently reliable, eyewitness' reports of gold actually being struck by the Macro. While not disputing the veracity of all such reports, skeptical critics argue that they must be heavily discounted. It is said, for example, that the Econ word for "gold" refers to any yellowish mineral however worthless. Some Econologists maintain, moreover, that the prospecting ceremony is seldom, if ever, conducted over unknown ground and that what the eyewitnesses have reported, therefore, is only the "discovery" of veins that have been known to the Macro for generations.

One might ask how the practice manages to survive if there is nothing to it. The answer is simple and will not be unexpected to those acquainted with earlier studies of the belief-systems of primitive peoples. Instances are known when the ceremony has not produced any concrete results. When this happens, the Macro will take either of two positions. Either he will accuse the member performing the ceremony of having failed to follow ritual in some detail or other, or else defend the man's claim that the gold is there by arguing that the digging for it has not gone

deep enough.⁴

It is clear enough that, whichever position is taken, the “phenomena are saved” in the sense that the role of the totem in the belief-system of the caste remains unassailed.

MYTHS AND MODLS

In recent years, interest in controversies about whether certain Econ modls “work” or not (or in what sense they may be said to “work”) has dwindled. This is certainly not because the issue has been settled—it is fair to say that we are today less certain than ever of what the answers to the questions raised by the Implementarists would be. It is rather that our methodological perspective has changed so that the Implementarist issue is no longer seen as productive of “good” questions. The “New Econology,” as it is known, stresses *Verstehen* and, correspondingly, rejects attempts to appraise Econ belief-systems according to rationalistic criteria purloined from modern natural science.⁵

It has become increasingly clear that the Econ associate certain, to them significant, beliefs with every modl, whether or not they also claim that modl to be a “useful tool.” That taking “usefulness” as the point of departure in seeking to understand the totemic culture of this people leads us into a blind alley is particularly clear when we consider the Math-Econ caste.

The Math-Econ are in many ways the most fascinating, and certainly the most colorful, of Econ castes. There is today considerable uncertainty whether the “priest” label is really appropriate for this caste, but it is at least easy to understand why the early travellers came to regard them in this way. In addition to the deeply respectful attitude evidenced by the average Econ towards them, the Math-Econ themselves show many cultural patterns that we are wont to associate with religious orders or sects among other peoples. Thus they affect a poverty that is abject even by Econ standards, and it seems clear that this is by choice rather than neces-

4. The latter rationalization is the more palatable since it puts the blame on a different caste, namely the O'Maitres or O'Metrs (transcriptions vary) who do the digging work of both the Macro and the Micro.

The “diggers” caste is of special interest to those concerned with the underdevelopment of the Econ. Traditionally the lowest Econ caste, the O'Metrs, were allowed to perform only the dirtiest manual tasks and—more significant in Econ eyes—lacked a totem of their own. In more recent times, however, it is through this caste that industrialization has begun to make some inroads among the Econ. Free from the prejudices instilled through an education concentrating on modl-carving and the associated totemic beliefs, the O'Metrs take willingly to modern machinery and have become quite proficient for example, at handling power shovels and power mills. The attitude of the rest of the tribe towards these erstwhile untouchables taking the lead in industrialization is, as one would expect, one of mingled scorn and envy.

5. C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* should be mentioned here as essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in the belief-systems of the Econ.

sity. It is told that, to harden themselves, they periodically venture stark naked out into the chill winds of abstraction that prevail in those parts. Among the rest of the Econ, who ordinarily perambulate thickly bundled in woolly clothing, they are much admired for this practice. Furthermore, glossolalia—the ability to say the same thing in several different tongues⁶—is a highly esteemed talent among them.

The Math-Econ make exquisite modls finely carved from bones of walras. Specimens made by their best masters⁷ are judged unequalled in both workmanship and raw material by a unanimous Econographic opinion. If some of these are “useful”—and even Econ testimony is divided on this point—it is clear that this is purely coincidental in the motivation for their manufacture.

There has been a great deal of debate in recent years over whether certain Econ modls and the associated belief-systems are best to be regarded as religious, folklore and mythology, philosophical and “scientific,” or as sports and games. Each category has its vocal proponents among Econologists of repute but very little headway has been made in the debate. The ceremonial use of modls (see above) and the richness of the general Econ culture in rituals has long been taken as evidence for the religious interpretation. But, as one commentator puts it, “If these beliefs are religious, it is a religion seemingly without faith.” This interpretation seems to have stranded on this contradiction in terms and presently is not much in favor. More interesting are the arguments of those who have come to view certain Econ belief-systems as a form of quasi-scientific cosmological speculation. As an illustration, Mrs. Robinson’s description of what she terms the “Doctrine of K,” which is found prevalent among the members of the powerful Charles River villages, inevitably brings to mind the debates of the ancient Ionian philosophers over whether water, air, or fire was the “basic stuff” of the universe. The Doctrine of K bears, in fact, striking resemblances to the teachings of Anaximander.⁸ It is known, moreover, that in some other depts a “Doctrine of M” is taught but we do not as yet have an understandable account of it and know, in fact,

6. I.e., in several Math tongues—the Indo-European languages, for example, do not count.

7. The budding collector of Econographica should know that most of the work found on the market today is imitative and done by apprentices. Much of it is nonetheless aesthetically superior to, say, the crudely carved totems of the Macro and certainly to the outsized, machine-made modls nowadays exported by the O’Metr’s who have no artistic tradition to fall back on.

8. Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, New York 1968, pp. 22-23, aptly summarizes Anaximander’s teachings: “The raw material (of the universe) is none of the familiar forms of matter, but a substance without definite properties except for being indestructible and everlasting. Out of this stuff all things are developed, and into it they return; before this our world, infinite multitudes of other universes have already existed, and been dissolved again into the amorphous mass.”

If one were to dignify this primitive doctrine with modern terminology, one would have to put Anaximander in the “putty-putty, bang-bang” category.

little about it except that it is spurned (as heresy?) by the Charles River Econ. Spokesmen for the cosmology view buttress their arguments by pointing out the similarities between the Math-Econ and the Pythagorean brotherhood. Whether the Math-Econ know it or not, they point out, they do obey the ancient Pythagorean principle that "philosophy must be pursued in such a way that its inner secrets are reserved for learned men, trained in Math."

The sports and games interpretation has gained a certain currency due to accounts of the modl-ceremonies of the Intern caste.⁹ But even here it is found that, though the ceremony has all the outward manifestations of a game, it has to the participants something of the character of a morality play which in essential respects shapes their basic perception of the world.

THE ECON AND THE FUTURE

It would be to fail in one's responsibility to the Econ people to end this brief sketch of life in their society without a few words about their future. The prospect for the Econ is bleak. Their social structure and culture should be studied now before it is gone forever. Even a superficial account of their immediate and most pressing problems reads like a veritable catalogue of the woes of primitive peoples in the present day and age.

They are poor—except for a tiny minority, miserably poor. Their population growth rate is among the highest in the world. Their land is fairly rich, but much of the natural resources that are their birth-right has been sold off to foreign interests for little more than a mess of pottage. Many of their young are turning to pot and message. In their poverty, they are not even saved from the problems of richer nations—travellers tell of villages half-buried in the refuse of unchecked modl-making and of the eye-sores left on the once pastoral landscape by the random strip-mining of the O'Metrs. It is said that even their famous Well Springs of Inspiration are now polluted.

In the midst of their troubles, the Econ remain as of old a proud and warlike race. But they seem entirely incapable of "creative response" to their problems. It is plain to see what is in store for them if they do not receive outside aid.

One may feel some optimism that the poverty problems *can* be solved. While population growth may slow down in time, one can have little hope

9. One observer casts his account of this ceremony explicitly in parlour-game terms: "Each player gets 2 countries, 2 goods, 2 factors, and a so-called Bowley Box ..." etc., etc., and also compares the Intern game, in terms of intellectual difficulty, with checkers.

that the ongoing disintegration of Econ culture will be halted or could be reversed. Here the sad and familiar story of a primitive people's encounter with "modern times" is repeating itself once again. The list of symptoms is long and we will touch only on a few.

Econ political organization is weakening. The basic political unit remains the dept and the political power in the dept is lodged in the council of elders. The foundations of this power of the elders has been eroding for some time, however. Respect for one's elders is no more the fashion among the young Econ than among young people anywhere else. Authority based on age and experience has weakened as recognized status has come increasingly to be tied to cleverness in modl-making. (As noted before, many elders will be inactive as modl-makers.) Although dept establishments have responded to these developments by cooptation of often very young modl-makers as "elders," the legitimacy of the political structure in the eyes of the Econ people is obviously threatened—and the chances of a constructive political response to the tribe's problems correspondingly lessened.

The Econ adult used to regard himself as a life-long member of his dept. This is no longer true—migration between depts is nowadays exceedingly common and not even elders of a village necessarily regard themselves as permanent members. While this mobility may help them to cope with the poverty problem, it obviously tends further to weaken political organization. Urbanization should be noted as a related problem—many villages are today three or four times as large as only a generation or two ago. Big conurbations, with large transient populations, and weak and ineffective political machinery—we are all familiar with the social ills that this combination breeds.

Under circumstances such as these, we expect alienation, disorientation, and a general loss of spiritual values. And this is what we find. A typical phenomenon indicative of the break-up of a culture is the loss of a sense of history and growing disrespect for tradition. Contrary to the normal case in primitive societies, the Econ priesthood does not maintain and teach the history of the tribe. In some Econ villages, one can still find the occasional elder who takes care of the modls made by some long-gone hero of the tribe and is eager to tell the legends associated with each. But few of the adults or grads, noting what they regard as the crude workmanship of these dusty old relics, care to listen to such rambling fairytales. Among the younger generations, it is now rare to find an individual with any conception of the history of the Econ. Having lost their past, the Econ are without confidence in the present and without purpose and direction for the future.

Some Econographers disagree with the bleak picture of cultural disintegration just given, pointing to the present as the greatest age of Econ Art. It is true that virtually all Econographers agree that present modl-making has reached aesthetic heights not heretofore attained. But it is doubtful that this gives cause for much optimism. It is not unusual to find some particular art form flowering in the midst of the decay of a culture. It may be that such decay of society induces this kind of cultural "displacement activity" among talented members who despair of coping with the decline of their civilization. The present burst of sophisticated modl-carving among the Econ should probably be regarded in this light.