Anthropological Foundations of a Moral Economy

The concept of Moral Economy articulates concerns that economic forces can override moral behaviour which is conducive, indeed necessary, to establishing a thriving, flourishing society. Moral economies are sustained by central anthropological concepts such as sacrifice (R. Girard) and reciprocity in gift relations (M. Mauss). This project will explicate the anthropological foundations of a moral economy. We seek to utilise the tools of anthropology to excavate our modern predicament that has resulted from a failure in the prevailing model of economic theory. We will do this by excavating the historical discourse surrounding thrift and our ambitions for a thriving society; and by comparing flourishing communities that came into conflict with supra-communal forces.

Stream 1 – “Thriving”
Stream 1 seeks to establish an anthropological understanding of thrift. Although the etymological origins of the word are linked to thriving, thrift has been about frugality and austerity since the Puritan communal notion of it was over-taken by a more judgemental and economically-focussed version. It was with this change that thrift became aligned with moralizing discourses on individual responsibility. For example, Victorian thinkers such as Samuel Smiles emphasize the need for individuals to behave in financially responsible ways. Thrift as everyday practice was overtaken by such discourses and came to be seen as a specific economic and cultural practice based on frugality, often linked to respectability. But thrift goes far beyond a need for frugality, extending into choices about how to gain freedom, time, and autonomy. We aim to re-claim the 'moral' aspects of thrift with a view towards an ethics of thriving (a moral economy). An archaeology of thrift, underpinned by ethnography, can question, reconceptualise and provide policy directions for thrift as an alternative to current political and economic discourses on austerity, thereby re-conceptualizing thrift as a social activity.

Stream 2 – “Flourishing”
Stream 2 will provide comparative investigations of moral economies. The concept of a moral economy was popularized in anthropology by James Scott and has been an effective explanatory tool in interpreting social movements in China and regions within South East Asia in both contemporary and historic times. Drawing upon anthropological literature of both modern and 'traditional' cultures this research stream will bring an external frame of reference to bear on our modern economy. At the juxtaposition of local communities with market dynamics, and its ‘faceless’ alienating forces, there is a wealth of archival and ethnographic information to explore; From understanding a local community’s normative worldview, their subsequent perceptions and ambitions for a flourishing society to how unjust economic forces can be negotiated, resisted and potentially overcome. A comparative analysis coupled with ethnography will unveil the techniques of political economy and alternative narratives for a moral economy, thus explicating stratagems with which to identify and uncover forces at work in our own societies, and, vitally, to propose resources for those affected by austerity and economic hardship.

Who is flourishing? Why? How?

…as flies in a jar of honey, trapped in a single paradigm of thought from which we are finding it difficult to escape. We perceive the need for new thinking that will source new policies that address the human challenges of social inclusion, poverty elimination, gender equality, public health, and security in its widest sense…

— President Michael D. Higgins
New York University address 28/9/2015
This project is developed within the **Centre for the Study of the Moral Foundations of Economy & Society** at WIT & UCC. The project seeks to reinforce the ethical connection between economy and society and will be carried out under the Centre’s first research theme: *Recovering the Anthropological Foundations of Social Life* led by Professor Arpad Szakolczai.

**Dr. Alison Hulme**

Alison Hulme is a Teaching Fellow at Royal Holloway. Previously she has been a part-time Lecturer at University College Dublin, an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths College and a Visiting Lecturer at the University of Iceland and Beijing Foreign Studies University. She was also the 2014 Ron Lister Visiting Fellow at the University of Otago. Alison gained her PhD in 2011 from Goldsmiths Centre for Cultural Studies. She also holds an MA in Anthropology and Cultural Politics from Goldsmiths and a BA in Media Studies from Sussex University. Alison published a monograph *On the Commodity Trail* on Bloomsbury Academic in February 2015 and is currently working on her second - *21st Century Thrift*. She has also published two edited volumes on consumerism and has articles in various academic journals. She runs a blog at [http://commoditytactics.wordpress.com](http://commoditytactics.wordpress.com).

**Dr. James Cuffe**

James is a Lecturer in Social Science at Waterford Institute of Technology and is the current General Editor for the Irish Journal of Anthropology. Previously, he was a part-time Lecturer at University College Dublin and University College Cork. He was also a Visiting Lecturer at Beijing Foreign Studies University. James gained his PhD in Sociology from University College Cork and is a trained anthropologist with a BA and MA from Liberal, Social and Business College, Dublin (now DBS). He has published in English and Chinese on Sino-Irish relations, contemporary Chinese social thought, and, he has edited three volumes of papers for the International Political Anthropology book series on Contemporary Mimetic Revival. He maintains a profile at [www.cuffe.eu](http://www.cuffe.eu).

**Outreach**

Alison and James take on social research projects and consultancy work using their shared expertise in ethnographic methods and experience of work in the field in Ireland, United Kingdom and China. Previous clients include RPS Ireland and Exclusive Brands Torino.

![THE PRESIDENT OF IRELAND’S ETHICS INITIATIVE](image)