

The Intimate Economies Perspective

JAMES A. NYMAN AND KEVIN R. FOGLE

Social scientists often link the term intimate economies to sex work, particularly to prostitution (see Lyttleton 2014; Wilson 2004). While the phrase certainly includes this form of intimate transaction, the reality is that it encompasses many forms of intimate exchange. This reality is what we hope to illuminate in part through this volume. We also wish to begin a conversation about the deeply meaningful connections that are created when things are exchanged. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines intimacy, a value-laden term that carries multiple meanings (Zelizer 2005), as “1. (a) the state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity; (b) euphemism for sexual intercourse; (c) closeness of observation, knowledge, or the like. 2. Intimate or close connection or union. 3. Inner or inmost nature; an inward quality or feature.” The polysemy of the term means that conceptualizations of “intimate economies” can transcend the realm of exchange involving sexual encounters.

How can archaeologists see intimate economic transactions and their effects in the past? Where do these situations arise and how do they relate to market exchanges in the larger sense? In the most basic form, we see intimate economies flourishing on the edges, outside of formal organized markets. Intimate economic transactions happen at different, sometimes smaller scales. They can be clandestine but typically exist free of major restrictive oversight. Indeed, people are constantly blending their economic activities with their intimate relations in a variety of situations (Zelizer 2005). Human beings engage in countless exchanges of ideas, goods, and/or services with intimate partners or incorporate objects exchanged

in such settings into intimate contexts such as homes or other personal spaces.

Intimate economies are about the deeply meaningful relationships that form between people when goods or ideas are exchanged. Essays in this volume explore the meaning and consequences of intimate economies and the intimate exchanges and the long-term repercussions that may result. The intimate economic perspective we describe here and our colleagues articulate in this book is meant as a framework through which archaeologists can examine small-scale exchange and its social ramifications.

Transactions are at the heart of intimate economies—exchanges of materials, services, and/or information that create or reinforce relationships, connections, or bonds and that have meaningful consequences. Such transactions may be based on an exchange of equivalencies or, more commonly, of inequivalencies. Inequivalent exchange creates a state of indebtedness between two or more parties and sustains a complex connection between them well beyond the moment of transaction (see Graeber 2011). An intimate economy is one in which social actors in close connection intersect with the exchange of money or other tangible/intangible commodities with the result that the individuals involved define social roles, obligations, and/or rights (*sensu* Zelizer 2005).

Our approach to the study of intimate economies provides a way to describe and analyze important exchange systems that have powerful impacts on those who participate in them, even if they may or may not interpenetrate larger, global, capitalist economic structures and may in fact be virtually invisible when the interpretive focus leans to the broad scale. In a sense, an intimate economies perspective allows for discussions of how subcultures emerge and how social solidarity within a subculture may evolve.

In developing this volume, we wished to present the intimate economic perspective to a broad audience of historical archaeologists in the hope that others might explore patterns of localized exchange and intimate relations through this novel approach. Our goal is to provide an evocative lens through which archaeologists and other scholars can examine how people develop and maintain or redefine relationships when they participate in small-scale intimate economic transactions.

Intimate economic exchanges are often made between parties based on real, perceived, or misplaced trust—for example, between friends, family,

neighbors, partners—for goods, services, and/or information (Zelizer 2005). During intimate exchanges, social boundaries and identities are negotiated, close connections are created, and relationships are reinforced. Materials (tangible or intangible, alienable or inalienable) come to embody an emotional value in these transactions: both the producer and the consumer attach meaning to them (*sensu* Bridge and Smith 2003). While prostitution is certainly a form of such exchange, it is but one example of intimate economic relations.

Intimate economies, as we see them, are closely associated with embodiment theory because the things that are being exchanged in these transactions include ideas and not just goods. The nature and closeness of the relationships that form informs not only what people exchange but also how they use them to express their sense of identity, which is shaped by the transaction and the emerging relationship. What we are describing is firmly rooted in perspectives traditionally associated with postprocessual thought. While we accept this, we also acknowledge the importance of a more integrated approach to intimate economies that embraces the possibilities that positivist approaches offer.

The contributors in this volume develop ways of detecting and analyzing exchange systems for which traditional (usually Marxist or “post-Marxist” modern world theory) analysis is ill-suited or fails to recognize. The volume also serves to outline a typology of what this kind of approach looks like for other scholars of history and historical archaeology while rejecting the notion that overarching structures of capitalism render small-scale, intimate economies irrelevant or as merely futile and ineffective forms of resistance.

Traditional economic analyses tend to conjure mental images of dusty account books and long lists of goods produced or sold. One unique and defining aspect of this volume is that we contextualize the economic framework at a very personal and relatable scale. By exploring the everyday relationships that are at the core of every transaction, monetary or otherwise, we can help elucidate the underlying motivations, intentions, and emotions that drive localized economies. It helps, however, to situate the reader within the genealogy of the intimate economic perspective through a brief survey of how previous scholars have conceptualized the intersection of intimacy and social exchange.