

CONFERENCE REPORTS

Report on the 2011 CUA Conference ***Market vs Society? Human Principles and Economic Rational in*** ***Changing Times***

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The annual conference of the IUAES Commission on Urban Anthropology was organized in collaboration with the University of the Peloponnese, Department of Social and Educational Policy. The conference was held in Corinth, Greece, between 27- 29 May 2011. It addressed the changes occurred in the international economy after the 1970s and the ensuing shift towards neo-liberalism in the 1980s that brought out a ‘rediscovery’ of the ideas of Friedrich Hayek. The view was put forward that the concept of liberalism was the ideological guise of economic globalization. Thus, the liberalization of market forces, as an ideological and economic project, has imposed a model of compliance through employment flexibility, the minimisation of social security, the fragmentation of social solidarity and the conceptualisation of the economy as money exchanged in the market rather than as an efficient management of resources.

Within this framework, the Conference’s task was to point out that states and policy decision-making are evaluated according to criteria related to the severity of macroeconomic strategies aiming at reducing fiscal deficits and cutting welfare and social benefits. Karl Polanyi’s claim has been confirmed that the economy has gained an independent life. Thus, the concepts of economy and society seem to be defined in terms of conflict rather than of harmonious coexistence. As a consequence, social life has become increasingly insecure and individualistic, the natural environment is being destroyed and the markets have changed into arenas of unfair competition and opportunistic speculation, while the unrestricted movement of capital jeopardizes the economic bases of the welfare state internationally and its subsequent ability to sustain full employment policies.

In addition the view emerged that for many people it has become gradually impossible to make the connection between impersonal market institutions and the reality that they

experience in their daily life. As anthropologists have shown, although people try to resist, explicitly or implicitly, ‘self-regulating’ economic processes, they would appear to play no role in the calculation of economic theory and practice.

The Conference’s basic aim was to address the complex connections between society and economy taking into account the processes that mark this often uneasy relationship in key social and political fields. Such aim was achieved satisfactorily by the large number of contributions. The participants were of a mixed origin mainly from European Countries, such as Greece, the U.K., Italy, Germany and Austria. The keynote speakers of the Conference — Dr Rosemary Harris, Emeritus Reader in Anthropology at the University College London and Mr Apostolos Ioakimides on behalf of the European Commission — offered acute discussions of the listed topics and of the issues and problems raised by policies and measures taken at national and European Level.

The organization of this Conference benefited greatly from the efficient and effective cooperation of the CUA Chair, Dr Giuliana B. Prato and of the local Organizing Committee. The Conference was sponsored by the Postgraduate Program ‘Institutions and Health Policies’ of Department of Social and Educational Policy at the University of the Peloponnese, the Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance (European Social Fund - Human Resource Development), the Municipality of Corinth and by the publishing companies Papazissis Publishers and Ashgate Publishing Limited.

On behalf of the local Organizing Committee