



Introduction

Thrift, Antithrift, Scale, and Paradox

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One of the editors of this volume (Daniel Sosna) observed of the newly independent Czech Republic in the 1990s that carefully washing out and storing used bottles had become an outmoded activity for grandparents as younger people eagerly turned toward purchasing new consumer goods. However, a decade later, reusing plastic became cool for the younger generation, now signaling being green and European. The other editor (Catherine Alexander) learned the arts of household thrift from a mother raised in wartime Britain. She mentioned her knack for using up leftovers in 2002 to a housewife in Kazakhstan who had been extolling her own expertise in feeding her family with limited resources during the Soviet years. The reaction was dismissive: “Why? When there’s no need?” Lauding a skill driven by necessity does not always translate into a habitus of value-driven actions (Alexander 2012). Clearly, thrift as virtue and rational economic action is not a given, even though economic and environmental crises seem to be ushering in a new age of thrift where such domestic concerns, more generally associated with households, have moved to the global stage and underscore national public policies.

Certain economic narratives of the twenty-first century might thus be seen as a morality tale. From this perspective, the present age, often dubbed the Anthropocene, is one where the natural world has been irreversibly damaged by human action: over-consumerism, corporate greed, inexorable capitalist expansion, resource extraction, and prodigal wastefulness that clogs the oceans and threatens the planet’s survival—“overheating” in Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s phrase (2016). This could be seen as an apocalyptic tale of the consequences of the forgotten values of thrift: low living

and high thinking, material care and repair, temperance, saving, and wise spending. The discipline of austerity succeeds the Bacchanalia of excessive expenditure and consumerism as a morally and economically necessary corrective. Such austerity measures, after the 2008 crash, deploy an economic model arguably more suited to the thriftiness of a household or grocer's shop, one that deplores the imprudence of the feckless, indebted poor, and cuts public expenditure as a fiscally prudent measure aimed at balancing the books for the good of the nation.¹ Austerity's dour "no pain, no gain" prescription echoes the "shock therapy" applied to Latin American countries and then the former socialist bloc by international lending agencies in the 1990s. Neoliberal austerity programs cull the weak and the poor. Having been encouraged to borrow on easy credit, those least able to help themselves are now enjoined to tighten their belts and learn the value of thrift.

But such a story crashes together entirely different scales, temporalities, actions, and values. Thrift, it turns out, is at once a potent, self-evident concept, but also one that is slippery, ambiguous, and mobile as well as mobilizing. At the very least, capitalist states are ambivalent about thrift. The capital of savings is needed to fund development, but spending is also required to create profit for industry, as demonstrated by the South Korean government's change in policies from encouraging thrift to promoting spending (Nelson 1996). This volume aims to capture the pervasiveness of thrift but also how it changes shape, transforms over time, and can bear multiple meanings and connotations in different places, domains (e.g., spiritual or secular; market or household), times, and at different scales. We use "scale" here to indicate a qualitative distinction between levels that, in the context of thrift discourse, is often eclipsed to suggest the distinction is merely one of size, just another level up or down. The key intervention made by this volume is to show how contemporary practices and moralities of thrift are intertwined with austerity, debt, commerce, welfare, and patronage across various social and economic scales and are constantly renegotiated at the nexus of economic, religious, kinship, and gendered ideals and practices.

Certainly, thrift seems to be an idea whose time has come. Alongside neoliberal retractions of state investment and the insistence that people should be self-reliant, thrifty practices that minimize spending and waste through mending and making do have acquired a certain hip and middle-class chic. Recycling in the name of environmental sustainability has also become something of a moral mantra, even if its efficacy is questionable (Alexander 2022). Since 2006, there have been numerous books and special issues dedicated to the history and reemergence of thrift (e.g.

McCloskey 2006; Yates and Davison Hunter 2011; Podkalicka and Potts 2014; Yarrow 2014; Hulme 2019, 2020; Färber and Podkalicka 2019). These are rich cultural-historical accounts, largely focused on North America and Britain, which also mine literature and economics, media studies, and consumer research to trace different normative narratives. These studies make it clear that there is no simple historical evolution toward and then away from thrift as consumerism takes hold—thrift is endlessly rediscovered in different forms and at different levels from households to mutual savings groups to state-organized wartime material economies (Yates and Davison Hunter 2011).

There has been limited conversation between this body of literature and the admittedly few interventions so far from anthropology that unpack how and why thrift is performed, negotiated, and experienced in everyday lives. This volume offers a response to the under-theorization and exploration of thrift as it is practiced—and indeed practiced upon people. Perhaps it has been eclipsed as an often feminized, domestic concern, echoing the marginalization of domestic labor from mainstream economics (see, e.g., Waring 1988 and feminist economics more broadly). And yet, ripped from its domestic context, that logic has strayed across scales to legitimize state and industrial austerity programs across the world, even though states and capitalist business are qualitatively different entities: states raise taxes, corporations maximize profit. Austerity policies, in turn, have profoundly affected how most households manage to get by. How thrift actually works, therefore, demands attention. Similarly, the rhetorical and practical effects of an ideal type of thrift—cost-cutting, waste-shunning, saving—are worth scrutinizing as it travels, unmoored from its roots, and is applied to quite different contexts.

In the chapters that follow, our ethnographic explorations, both within and beyond Europe and North America, challenge and extend how thrift has been analyzed. By investigating how these ideas appear, travel, prove irrelevant, are enforced, appropriated, clash with other norms, or seem to appear in quite different cosmologies, ethnographies of thrift enrich our understandings of this familiar but most protean of concepts. Moreover, beneath the normative, often disciplinary force of crude thrifty narratives (spend less, save more, cut waste), there are ways of managing limited resources that often go unrecognized as a response to poverty. What interests us here is not so much coming up with a new one-size-fits-all definition of thrift, but tracking practices of frugality, resource care, investment, saving, and wise spending, and how such customs are understood and expressed across different geographical regions and scalar domains.

Chapters and Themes

Five themes or questions run through this book. We start by taking thrift to be the careful management of resources to ensure a person or household has enough to sustain it. It is therefore oriented toward a future, typically involving minimizing expenditure and wastefulness. But thrift is also freighted with a multitude of linked characteristics—hard work, self-discipline, sobriety, rational forethought, restraint, the desire and capacity to save and accumulate—that are often used singly as synonyms for thrift. But, to take one example, it is too easy to read thrift into sober clothes and modest comportment, which may have nothing to do with restrained saving and spending. The Dutch Golden Age may have valorized thrift as a virtue, but the monochrome portraits of prosperous merchants not only paraded rich furs and velvets but the deep black, multihued dyes that were notoriously difficult and costly to achieve (Debra Weiss pers. comm.). Another age knew how to read displays of fabulous wealth into those layered shades of night (Schama 1987). This book unpacks those companion qualities, which sometimes appear to be neither necessary nor sufficient to achieve thrifty aims, and how thrifty ideologies have played their part in disciplinary discourses typically directed toward colonized peoples and the working class.

The second element we consider is the prerequisites for thrift and whether people are able, supposing they are willing, to engage in activities that ensure a secure future. Is a surplus always possible for subsistence economies, or necessary, in conditions of abundance, or indeed wanted, where sharing has greater social value? In other words, is thrift always a choice or are there structural and material conditions or cultural logics that render it impossible, irrelevant, or repugnant? That is, how does thrift appear as an ethnographic category?

The third question follows on directly. What are the limits of thrift? When and why is it, or that array of linked qualities, repudiated? When is thrift just wrong? One immediate challenge for ethnographic comparison is that the English “thrift” is derived from Old Norse. Its subsequent encrustations of meaning in English, including its elevation to a virtue, may not seamlessly translate to other languages and places. The Portuguese term *economia* and the German *Sparsamkeit*, for example, simply emphasize spending little, saving, and living sparingly. Neither term carries much moral weight (Jason Sumich and Afia Afenah pers. comm.).² Nor is thrift always a virtue even in the chilly lands of North Atlantic Protestant sobriety. Without temperance it is a vice (McCloskey 2011). The figure of the miser is more consistently reviled, often in racist terms,³ than its counterpart, the spendthrift, which in turn can attract class judgments of not knowing the value of money.

Related to the above, future-oriented temporalities are an important element in both thrifty moralities and practices, but they appear very differently according to ethnographic context. Thus, secure futures might mean intergenerational sustainability at a planetary level (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), stewardship of resources in another lexicon, household resilience in withstanding shortage and continuing across generations (Gudeman and Rivera 1990), meeting the shorter-term demands of feeding, clothing, and educating children, or living in the present such that future salvation is assured. Calendrical and ritual rhythms also highlight the limits of thrift when a time for feasting trumps an imperative to save. Richard Wilk (this vol.) explores how discourses of both thrift and its various antitheses (e.g., laziness) are shaped by moralized temporal ontologies and orientations.

Finally, we flag up the appearance of thrift in different contexts, asking if it is always the same thing. Although, as discussed below, Maynard Keynes was not the first to identify or even name the paradox of thrift, he certainly popularized the idea that, in a recession, citizens' saving results in a sluggish economy, unemployment, and thus ultimately their inability to save (1936: 84). Nearly a century on and waist deep in another recession that apparently valorizes thriftiness, it is worth examining where and how thrift appears to migrate across scales and what paradoxes this presents—or explains.

This collection thus offers an anatomy of thrift and its paradoxes; its genealogies and reach; how it appears ethnographically in action and discourse; how it has been used, rejected, and reappropriated; and how it may serve to elide differences between, for example, individuals' comportment or economic actions, fiscal policy, and financial investment. One of the largest multinational life insurance companies is, after all, called Prudential, merging a sense of household thriftiness with financial investment. In so doing, we rethink concepts of generosity and its apparent opposite,⁴ thrift, which are at once over-determined and unsystematically theorized in economic anthropology, and engage with the paradoxes that thrift often presents. This book thus contributes to a reconciliation of studies of ethics and political economy, the former often emphasizing the individual; the latter, state and supranational structures. Few though they are, thrift studies often implicitly echo feminist ethics and the ethics of care literature (e.g., Noddings 2013; Buch 2015) in their concern with relationality, connecting individuals to household, community, kin, and other expressions of mutuality. We do not propose bringing these different bodies of literature together into one plane, but suggest how and where these different analytical approaches, levels, and scales articulate or are merged, and what happens as a result.

The remainder of this introduction explores first how anthropologists have engaged with thrift as well as the curious paucity of considerations of thrift in accounts of shortage economies (e.g., war, economic depression, socialist states, and the early years of postsocialism) and the field of waste studies. The next section flips this upside down. By approaching thrift from a different angle we consider how assumptions about thrift shaped certain key anthropological debates, which in turn raised questions about the purchase of thrift as either virtue or rational economic practice beyond its familiar stamping ground of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic. What emerges recapitulates familiar anthropological moves, understanding actions within local cosmologies and value regimes as socially embedded. This in turn highlights the limits to thrift in the places where it is most familiar, when, for example, enactments of generosity and ritual observance are appropriate and thrift distasteful. Logics of thrift and antithrift are often entwined but may be either valued differently or have distinct temporal rhythms.

The final section considers what the ethnographic chapters offer in terms of understanding thrift in different regions, tracing it across scales, and exploring apparent paradoxes. Together, the following sections and chapters show that paradoxes of thrift are not only found in the incommensurate nature of household and state forms of saving. Everyday thrift may require indebtedness, be tied to generosity, or be stimulated by abundance as much as scarcity.

Max Weber and Thrift

We start with a brief discussion of Max Weber's ([1904-05] 2001) *Protestant Ethic* thesis since this is often the key reference point for thinking through thrift. Weber's proposition was that the existential terror of damnation initiated by Calvinism⁵ together with the notion of vocation translated into calculative saving that produced this worldly signs of otherworldly salvation: increase of wealth through saving and profitable improvement of holdings. Such Protestant, inner-worldly asceticism (*innerweltliche Askese*) was a world away, he suggested, from the fatalistic Catholic peasant (see Rudnyckyj this vol.).

For Weber, the happy coincidence between inner-worldly asceticism and capitalist accumulation helps explain why capitalism took off in northern Europe in the sixteenth century. This mutually reinforcing duet was transformed into the consummate national characteristic of North America, alongside hard work and self-discipline, by Benjamin Franklin, Weber's favorite exemplar of capitalism (Yarrow 2014; Yates and Davison Hunter

2011). As in so many other instances, there were Soviet echoes with early twentieth-century America, both valorizing the housewifely virtue of thrift and material care, as Lewis Siegelbaum (2006: 11) describes for the Soviet regime where lack of consumer goods intensified the value placed on making do with little, if not saving.

However, Weber refers neither to thrift (Hájek et al. 2019: 65) nor the household but rather describes some of the characteristics that have come to act as metonymic shorthands for thrift: hard work, self-discipline, and saving. Weber presents a Protestant moralization of a certain kind of economic rationality that conflates practitioner with practice, person, household, and enterprise. Similarly, present frugality is intimately linked to both short-term worldly gain and eternal salvation. Thrift thus appears as both value- and goal-driven rational action, as much performative as instrumental (see Weber [1968] 2013; Kalberg 1980).

The exclusive connection between Protestantism and an ethic of hard work, frugal expenditure, and saving has long been debunked by historians noting the fourteenth-century Tuscan merchants whose account books were inscribed with “For God and profit!” as well as the emphasis placed on hard work and thrift by Cistercian orders (Andersen et al. 2016; Spalová this vol.). Extending the ethnographic range again highlights that Protestantism is far from being the only moral framework centered on thrift and/or hard work. Sinah Theres Kloß (2016: 277–79; see also Singer 1966; Darling 1934) discusses ideas of frugal spending in Asian communities, while Confucian *suzhi* discourse is concerned with what superficially appear to be Protestant (here rendered as “neoliberal”) values of self-cultivation and discipline (Kipnis 2007; see also Lim and Sin Lay 2003). Confucianism emphasizes household frugality, a cultural code echoed in Japanese tradition and intensified (as elsewhere) during the second world war (Garon 2000) into a “hegemonic culture of thrift” (Uchiyama 2019) to serve national interests. But rather than join the queue of challenges to Weber, we should note his main point was that Calvin, uniquely, added predestination and eternal damnation to the religiously oriented, rational conduct of business (Weber 2001).

Although it was the first explicit, theoretical anthropological investigation of saving, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood’s *The World of Goods* ([1979] 2002) has been oddly forgotten by subsequent studies of thrift. They open with a clear statement that seeing thrift as a positive practice and attribute is culturally dependent: “Spending only a small proportion of income may in one place and time be called thrifty, wise and provident; in another it may be held to be miserly, mean and wrong. Conversely, a high ratio of consumption may be approved as generous, magnificent and good in one culture, while in another the selfsame behaviour may be called

spendthrift, feckless and bad” (2002: 12). This is then considered through their modification (2002: 24–26) of Weber’s analysis through different forms of social organization, allowing the possibility of comparing accumulation practices across very different ethnographic and historical contexts. Peasants, in their formulation, are rigidly controlled by landlords, socially peripheral, and unable either to compete or band together. Bare subsistence makes saving impossible. Weber’s “traditional society” is requalified as broadly egalitarian groups that typically reject individual accumulation; the group amasses wealth. Where individualism is strong, there are more incentives to accumulate but success is uncertain and risky, partly offset by insisting on the commercial virtues of honesty and hard work (2002: 25). This qualification of Weber’s typology, they suggest, allows his observations about who saves when and why to be more usefully applied to a wider range of contexts.

We propose a further qualification. The peasants that Weber characterized as fatalistic and opposed to Protestant drive need to be further divided between those operating in subsistence economies,⁶ where saving is unfeasible, and self-sufficient households, where thrift is valued and reserves possible. Another take is Eric Wolf’s observation that most peasants did and do produce a surplus, but this could not be converted into reserves as it was immediately taken by exploitative landlords (1966: 10). Such functionally subsistence households have been analyzed through a different kind of thriftiness, such as time thriftiness: only working as much as is necessary to meet needs, dubbed the “needs: drudgery ratio”, and later used by Marshall Sahlins to describe hunter-gatherer societies (1974). Again, the flexible use of unwaged family and co-operative neighborly labor (Chayanov [1923] 1966) can be seen as a form of thriftiness—or domestic exploitation.

The sense that subsistence farming is inimical to thrift is best summed up by George Foster’s idea of the limited good as the driving peasant orientation: anything that is good is finite, in short supply, and cannot be augmented by any human means, including hard work and thrift (1965: 296). Moreover, he trenchantly remarks, “It is pointless to talk of thrift in a subsistence economy in which most producers are at the economic margin; there is usually nothing to be thrifty about” (1965: 307). Thrift in such a hand-to-mouth existence is neither morally nor economically valorized (see also Wolf 1966).

Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera (1990) were the first anthropologists to explore thrift explicitly as an ethnographic category, juxtaposing it with classic political economy texts as conversations between local models of the economy, western folk models, and those of political economists. An updated version of that discussion by Gudeman starts this volume’s ethnographic chapters. Gudeman and Rivera distinguish between the kind

of saving that Weber saw as the motor of capitalism, focused on growth and profit, and the kind of saving described by rural farmers, which ensure adequate reserves are in place to enable the household to continue. The qualitative difference between these kinds of saving is played out as a distinction between household and market, replenishment as opposed to constant growth for its own sake. Such households differ from the bare subsistence described above.

The Household and Beyond: Anthropologies of Thrift

Gudeman's focus on the *oikos* or household reminds us that the virtue of frugality as minimal expense, has historically been located in the domestic, private sphere and thus sensitizes us to potential problems of extrapolating that virtue to other contexts. Such household management or economy centers on careful spending, shunning waste, and ensuring an adequate surplus to act as a reserve in case of hardship. There is also a distinction between natural increase through reproduction of people, animals, and crops, and market forms of increase based on trading, selling, and earning. The crucial point is that the household's future is one of generational continuity and security rather than the short-term, future-oriented growth that surplus indicates for capitalist enterprises. The environmental context is key: the households described by Gudeman and Rivera are relatively self-sufficient—itsself a prized quality—and exist in conditions of relative uncertainty: crops may fail, animals sicken, the weather turn. Reserves are therefore a necessary investment to displace the risk of failure.

Gudeman and Hann's (2015) volume considering household economies and self-sufficiency extends the ethnographic purchase of Gudeman's long engagement with thrift (e.g., 2001: 16, 182) as also being central to practices of preservation to postsocialist, rural central Europe and Kyrgyzstan. Here, thriftiness as restricted consumption again appears as a typical house process (Gudeman and Hann 2015: 14). Their emphasis on mutuality within and beyond the household to satisfy needs (as opposed to the calculated self-interest of the market) is a useful extension of what constitutes the household as well as indicating both the labor that goes into thrift and its endpoint or goal. Nathan Light makes this explicit by shifting from self-sufficiency to what he calls "social sufficiency" (2015: 101), emphasizing that in Kyrgyz households, "thrift enables people to make better contributions to feasts and social events" (2015: 104–5). This is an important recognition that individual and household thrift are often reciprocally enmeshed with broader social relations, which are crucially, but not only, manifested at ritual moments or to fulfill the exigencies of hospitality (Candea and da

Col 2012; Rakowski this vol.). Again, Koji Mizoguchi's (2016) study of Japanese domestic groups in the Yoji period suggests that household *groups* functioned as organizational and allocative units, again shifting the emphasis from independent household units.

There are also certain rural rhythms where sharing labor is a better use of everyone's time and resources. For example, in villages in the east of Turkey, groups of women (friends, kin, and neighbors) pool their cows' milk each morning to make cheese for each household turn by turn, spending more days at the houses of those with more cows. If each woman tried to make cheese from the small amount of milk she obtained each morning, the process would be harder and more wasteful. Similarly, at harvest time, groups of men move together from one household's fields to the next (Alexander 2002). Thrift may thus draw on labor beyond the household and be aimed at increasing the common good. Mutual saving groups are another example (Mizoguchi 2016; James, Neves, and Torkelson this vol.).

A world away from such rural concerns, Daniel Miller nonetheless positions his 1998 ethnography of thrifty shopping in North London as being in dialog with two other studies of the household and house. Thus, he notes that most decisions about everyday purchases are legitimated through some kind of appeal to thrift, whether that is monetary saving (e.g., "buy one get one free," "three for the price of two," "special," or seasonal offers), buying better quality items, or cutting excess and therefore waste by buying smaller quantities (1998: 53–54). Arguably, such spending is transformed into saving (*ibid.*: 7). "Arguably" because the irony of shopping choices being driven by the quest for thrifty saving, which is played upon by marketing and supermarket displays, is that consumers may end up spending more, unable to resist the lure of a reduced item they had not planned on buying or cheap but rotting fruit—which subverts the ascription of utilitarian motives to thrifty actions. Assuming not only that working-class and bourgeois thrift are the same (*ibid.*: 135; although, see Alexander 2022) but are also as essential to North London households as to those in Gude-man and Rivera's ethnography, Miller combines this postulation with Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones' (1995) work on the cosmological significance of the house/household to make his central point. Thrift, he suggests has moved from being a means to an end, to an end and value in itself, whether that is the experiential pleasure of finding bargains (Miller 1997: 61; see also Bardhi and Arnould 2005; Sosna this vol.) or that thrift now supplants the house as the means "by which economic activity is used to create a moral framework for the construction of value" (Miller 1998: 137). Thrift, Miller thus suggests, has a cosmological resonance, freighted with a relational significance directed toward the care of others (see also Cappelini and Parsons 2012).

Rhetorics of Thrift

Wilk raises a further point vis-à-vis thrift's antitheses, suggesting, with Miller (1998), that the apparent opposite impulses of selfish hedonism and selfless sacrifice are only rhetorically distinct: the binge is thought of as the evil twin of thrift (Wilk 2006), whereas in fact together they comprise the dialectic that drives contemporary capitalism (Wilk 2014: 322). This notion of thrift's wise spending and saving taken to pathological extremes as starvation is echoed in Sheldon Annis' (1987) account of Guatemalan peasants whose conversion to Protestantism was marked by adopting a thriftiness so austere that it amounted to economic anorexia (1987: 142) as a means of exerting control over an otherwise chaotic and terrifying social environment.

Thrift thus accumulates normative meanings and signs that play out in virtue-judgmental complexes, neatly indicated by Wilk's (2014 and this vol.) summary of the Caribbean distinction between the "grasshopper" young men, who are living for the day, as opposed to the "ant" grown-ups, who are responsible, saving and investing for the future (2014: 322). Such distinctions, as explored in some of the chapters here (James, Neves, and Torkelson; Diz; Wilk), are endlessly replayed as mechanisms of disapproval directed toward a subordinate group variously characterized as juvenile, undisciplined, lazy, or spendthrift—even if, as James, Neves, and Torkelson show, the people being castigated are in fact phenomenally adept at budgeting, using debt rather than money, despite the rapacity of many lenders. Thrift also has a long history of being a disciplinary mechanism of colonizing states, as Nancy Hunt described in her study of the Belgian Congo, where women were given "lessons in gardening, domestic economy and thrift" (1990: 458, see also Grant 2005: 53 and 106; and Kloß 2016: 277–79). Syed Hussein Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977) was a hugely influential study of how colonized Southeast Asian people were consistently denigrated from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The one group escaping the baseless accusations were subject, as he says, to another racial stereotype: "the patient, plodding, thrifty, industrious Chinaman" (1977: 75). Enjoining the virtues of hard work, thrift, and sobriety upon the laboring classes has long been a device to manufacture "respectability" and tractability. Austerity discourse once again displaces the structural logics of capitalism to individual responsibility (Gibson-Graham 2014).

Although the North Atlantic region and, to a lesser extent, colonized regions have their own traditions of thrift being either cultivated or enforced, the many regions of the world under state socialism in the twentieth century were often defined by chronic shortages (Kornai 1979), which necessitated mending and making do long after other places had left be-

hind wartime rationing. Yet little has been written on the effects of such a lack of goods alongside a state-promoted ethic of thrift—and indeed comradely care for objects—on household provisioning (pace Fehér, Heller, and Márkus 1983; Siegelbaum 1998; Schlecker 2005; Alexander 2012). It is worth remembering that shortage might range from nothing to erratic supplies to unfinished or unusable items, the former requiring alternative modes of provisioning (e.g., dacha gardens or shadow economies), the latter a range of creative skills (Alexander 2012; Gerasimova and Chuikina 2009).

In an atypical inversion of how colonizers caricatured the colonized, or indeed how the authorities judge subordinate groups (Wilk this vol.; Alexander 2022), in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods, thrift and restraint (Rausing 2004: 146) were used as national virtues that defined Estonians against Russians who were said to be “happy-go-lucky and hospitable, lacking industry, application, and predictability, drinking and letting themselves go” (ibid.: 21) and who had no sense of thrift as a virtue (ibid.: 22). Zsuzsa Gille’s (2007) evocation of the “cult of waste” in postwar, socialist Hungary describes how habits of collecting recyclables for the nation were inculcated in the population, although inappropriate storage often rendered such collections unthrifty and dangerous as chemicals leaked through rusting barrels. Gille emphasizes a political economy of material thriftiness rather than its effects on domestic economies. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the experience of state rationing and the promotion of thrift continues to shape citizens’ conception of the promised society (Schlecker 2005). There are generational differences in attitudes toward thrift but also what appears to be a paradox: younger people see thrift as outmoded in the new market economy but also judge as wasteful the etiquette of regularly providing more food that can be consumed. This is explained as the mingling of two thrifty traditions. Presocialist rural Vietnam was marked (like many rural areas) with long periods of austerity occasionally punctuated by ritual feasting. Under socialism, festivities were marked only by a thrifty cup of tea and sweets, which utterly failed to embody the care, affection, and communal obligations that lavish feasting should signal.

Thrift in Waste and Discard Studies

To these interventions we add the renewed attention that thrift, or related material practices, has received from scholars of waste and discard studies (e.g., Strasser 2000; Gille 2007; Alexander and Reno 2012; Eriksen and Schober 2017; Hawkins 2006; Sosna, Brunclikova, and Galeta 2019; see also Gudeman 2001) who unpack micropractices, within as well as beyond

households, revealing productive consumption within and between households as recovery, reuse, recycling, repair—and varieties of secondhand exchange (Holmes 2019). These acts appear as necessity and/or positive affect via the requisite creative skills and imagination (Martínez and Laviolette 2019; Alexander 2012), often robustly challenging the moralizing discourse of the “throwaway society” (Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe 2007). Susan Strasser’s (2000) work is a particularly fine study of the move in the United States from household practices of conserving scraps, which were driven by necessity, to such expertise becoming valued and turned to demonstrations of skill divorced from their conservation roots. Quilt making thus moved from a means to use leftover material to a craft for which makers buy “ready-made scraps.”

William Rathje’s “garbology” (household waste analysis) upended assumptions that poor households shop for the cheapest goods on offer by showing that they typically purchase smaller, and therefore pro rata more expensive packages of goods than wealthier households (Rathje and Murphy 2001: 65–66). This highlights the structural constraints on thrifty expenditure, as Robert Tressell ([1914] 2012) vividly demonstrated in his novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, where, for example, the rich bought good quality shoes that proved cheaper in the long run than the endless pairs of poorly made shoes that were all the workmen could afford.

Weirdly, there are almost no studies of how domestic actions to minimize wastefulness fit within a broader framework of thrifty household provisioning, or if reuse and recycling are seen as ethical or simply necessary (pace Alexander 2022; Holmes 2019; Sosna, Brunclikova, and Galeta 2019). In other words, studies of household provisioning or shopping are rarely brought into the same frame as material strategies for delaying or reducing consumption by stretching the utility of items or indeed foraging either for wild food or scraps and discarded objects to be repurposed. What the studies above reveal, however, are the multiple and mutable everyday ethics and affects that shape acts of material care, plus the importance of material qualities and indeed storage in thinking through capacity for thrift (see also Balbo 2015; Alexander and Reno 2012; Alexander et al. 2009). They further show that thrifty actions of recovery and repair can also carry an affect of pleasure (Sosna this vol.; Alexander, Smaje, Timlett, and Williams 2009; Alexander 2012; Reno 2015), recalling the fun of the bargain hunt, irrespective of whether it may work out as a saving (Miller 1997; Bardhi and Arnould 2005). Nonetheless, the relationship between thrift and repair has not been systematically analyzed. A recent anthology on repair mentions thrift only once and that is simply a case of saving money by cheating (Khalvashi 2019: 106).

What we may take from such studies is that thrifty practices of saving money and materials through bargain hunting, sharing labor, and repair are widespread but rarely studied and even less in the round to reflect the numerous strategies to provide the household with security. These studies also suggest that repair, sharing, and saving money often serve as insurance against economic uncertainty. Although most of the studies above are centered on the household as a physically fixed entity as well as the kin it shelters, there is a sense that households, however self-sufficient, may often be embedded in broader communities. Moreover, even where thrift is valued, there are times when it is offensive, which adds a calendrical rhythm to Douglas and Isherwood's point that in other places and times thrift may be mean and wrong. The next section homes in on such ideas of antithrift.

Antithrift?

This section thinks through how thrift operates, or doesn't, beyond the North Atlantic regions where thrift is particularly freighted with moral valences. Such ethnographies may not explicitly reference thrift, but by understanding how a concern for thriving plays out through other environmental conditions (e.g., abundance) and different sociocultural logics, the material and cultural prerequisites for different forms of thrift are revealed, as well as their limitations. By moving to ethnographic contexts where thrift has less overt economic, social, and moral purchase, we gain a better understanding of the kind of thrift that actually exists in the places that most fervently embrace the rhetoric of its promise.

Agustin Diz notes (pers. comm.) that Marshall Sahlins' (1996) tracing out of a "western cosmology" of consumption and scarcity from the initial fall from grace (and abundance) onward not only provides a genealogy in which austerity is just the latest expression of this concern with scarcity, need, abundance, and ethics, but also implies that antithrift often seems to be "just around the corner." Thus David Hume (2006: 16) pointed out that if we did not live in a world of scarcity, we would not need a justice system. Keynes (1963: 369–70) imagined a future abundance that would require a reimagination of morality. Even Walt Rostow (1959) wrote that the final stage of capitalism would be an era "Beyond Consumption;" a time when "the problem and human agenda imposed by the fact of scarcity" would come to an end (1959: 14). Thus, although thrift/antithrift and scarcity/abundance are often distinguished as separate "states," perhaps it is more productive to think of them as two sides of the same coin (see Diz 2017 and this vol. for thrift and antithrift entanglements).

Arguably, rejecting the universal purchase of thriftiness as frugal saving toward future prosperity was foundational to social anthropology. Chris Hann and Keith Hart suggest that nineteenth-century economic anthropology aimed to test whether the principles underpinning contemporary western society were appropriate for a global system (2011: 1) or indeed were universal. Thus, Bronisław Malinowski revealed nonutilitarian logics and values impelling social action: the Trobriand Islands most emphatically did not conform to the ideals of bourgeois Central Europe. Writing about gift exchange, Malinowski noted that “there is no trace of gain from a utilitarian or economic perspective” (1978: 175). The complex gift exchanges he described appeared to turn commonplaces on their head. Status and social standing derived from giving away rather than possessing material wealth, the goal of utility maximization achieved through diligent thrift. While barter and utilitarian trade coexisted with prestations, the former lacked the prestige of the latter.

But Malinowski’s discussion of abundance⁷ and accumulation throws further shade on familiar contexts of resource scarcity, where hard work and careful accumulation counter uncertainty. In contexts where self-sufficiency is prized, such stocks act as a buffer against hard times, enabling resilience—the means to an end. But where increase and profit are valued, accumulation itself is the goal (Gudeman and Rivera 1990). All this presupposes an initial condition of shortage, or at least the likelihood of lean periods, suggesting that where this is not the case, exertion and amassing are irrelevant. But Malinowski documents that even though “all the necessities of life are within easy reach . . . abundance is valued for its own sake . . . beyond any possible utility . . . [the] love of accumulation for its own sake. Food is allowed to rot” (1978: 173). And considerable labor goes into creating such super abundance, not merely surplus but excess. Public waste, you might say, displaces private gain. The observation inspired Georges Bataille’s ([1949] 1988) insistence that all human economies are driven to work, produce, and store surplus in the service of wasteful luxury. Douglas and Isherwood’s ([1979] 2002) brief typology of which groups are more likely to save and why might have tempered such a claim.

Such magnificent giving and wasting is the very antithesis of thriftiness with its “waste not want not” logic. Clearly this accumulation is not to secure future material security. Rather, the piles of rotting food demonstrate the gardeners’ skill, much as the prized artistry of craftsmen creating unusable but beautiful objects is juxtaposed with the mundane products of the despised inlanders Malinowski calls “the industrials” (1978: 189). Hard work aimed at accumulation thus appears despite plentiful resources, suggesting that building stocks against scarcity is not the sole driver of such actions. Potlatch rituals are the apogee of such a value regime.

Later studies of gift exchange investigated the division between the spectacular moment of exchange and the eclipsed women's work of, for example, cultivating pigs for gifting (M. Strathern 1988; Josephides 1985) and the complex negotiations required to amass enough to give (A. Strathern 1971). Perhaps, to stretch the term, we might see such careful work of growing, husbanding, and saving as thrifty but in the service of a different value system, privileging social relationships and creativity and the event of giving it all away. This interplay between privileged and discarded or eclipsed moments reappears, from a different angle, in Laura Rival's (2002) discussion of a Huaorani antiproductive trope that dismisses their own subsistence labor in favor of marveling at the forest's "natural abundance," not recognizing the labor of past generations that created such profusion. At the very least, this shows the limits of thriftiness and work aimed at individual maximization, but also reminds us that thriftiness and generosity are almost as entangled in Vietnam and Kyrgyzstan as in Melanesia and the Amazon, although in the latter regions the effort of producing such magnificence can be "disappeared" as Rival describes (2002) or eclipsed (M. Strathern 1988).

The debates around hunter-gatherers in the 1980s and 1990s were partly shaped by the assumed characteristics of thrift and rational behavior described above. Thus, the prevailing model until the 1990s was that these groups typically did nothing but hunt or gather, while James Woodburn further suggested a division into immediate-return and delayed-return systems (1980) where the former constituted instant consumption, the latter postponed consumption by using storage, with a suggestion that this carried greater social investment (Bird-David 1992a: 25).

There are several reasons for the immediate-return system. Food preservation in certain climates can be hard, while the constant mobility that is critical for hunter-gatherers makes physical storage impractical. Added to this, the year-round abundance of easily available food reduces the necessity of accumulation. Even when environmental conditions allow for storage, as Sahlins says, "Food storage . . . may be technically feasible, yet economically undesirable, and socially unachievable" (1974: 32). There is also, following Sahlins, a different sense and temporality to affluence, which again shifts how we consider the purpose of thrift. If careful accumulation is unnecessary to see people through future lean periods, then wealth or affluence may change to present-focused satisfaction of wants (see Wilk this vol.).

Nurit Bird-David changed the plane of discussion, suggesting a culturally distinct "cosmic economy of sharing" (1992b: 28) linking groups together. She demonstrated that while most hunter-gatherer groups have been engaged in other economic activities for centuries, these are less prized than

hunting skills and are also brought within the norm of immediate sharing. Gifts or portions may move from interhousehold unit exchanges within a group to those that link groups to each other. Arguably, this is also a different mechanism for offsetting potential future risk, subsuming individual units into broader sharing communities.

The question these debates provoke is whether we should understand thrift broadly as a rational mechanism for ensuring security, which plays out in some circumstances as household or individual accumulation for reserves and in others as a sharing economy⁸ or gift exchange system that maintains social relations. All three instances valorize one mode, whether self-sufficiency, gift obligations, or sharing, while engaging in many kinds of economic interactions. The second approach considers thrift as careful resource management that allows reserves, gifts, or sharing, or indeed all three at different points, but acknowledges that functional explanations of security are inadequate to encompass fully the cultural logics of gift exchange and sharing economies. The narrowest definition would be to take thrift as a category of economic action that pertains in circumstances of resource insecurity in sociocultural settings that value self-sufficiency, and is marked by both its means (frugal spending and accumulating reserves), and end (resilience, longevity, and sustainability). While the last is the easiest to work with, and the commonest, it can also lead to the moral censure of those whose careful planning is aimed at different goals or different ways of ensuring resilience.

Storage, which often seems a prerequisite for thrift (qua saving), has therefore less salience in most hunter-gatherer moral-economic universes but is crucial in very different circumstances. Although rarely mentioned, the socialist economy of shortage made storage a vital element in smoothing over erratic food supplies. Balconies and dachas were crucial for enabling periodic gluts to be stored, such as a sack of potatoes or bottled fruit and vegetables for the winter months, as well as the tools and equipment needed for such thriftiness (Alexander 2012). One manifestation of abrupt economic change in Kazakhstan in the early 2000s was the sheer quantity of glass jars and tools for gardening and building being sold by roadsides. This was explained as the need to earn money, but was also related to the new lack of *time* (with increased work hours) for cultivating dacha gardens and preserving produce, as well as higher fuel costs to travel to dachas. Without accessible storage and time, the resources necessary for thrift were severely curtailed. A growing interest in the affordances of storage again draws attention to the narrow bandwidth of thrift as a virtue: excess is as much a vice as too little. Thus, an inability to control stored accumulation risks being seen as pathological hoarding (Newell 2018).

All of which brings us to the limits of thrift.

The Limits of Thrift

The previous sections highlight two kinds of limitations to how we think about thrift. First, the various elements associated with thrift (minimizing outgoings, locating bargains or scraps to be repurposed, utilizing creative skills in making and remaking, working hard, developing self-discipline, planning carefully, saving, and storing) may exist and be given meaning and moral weight in quite different cultural logics. But when all or some of these elements are aimed at spectacular wasting, complex gift exchange, ritual observance, or sharing, we might wonder what the careful future-oriented thrift of the household aimed at replenishment has to do with any of this; and perhaps it doesn't at all—other than to note that its mechanisms are similar in form if not always meaning in other places.

But this also serves to remind us that thrift as frugality, its most common synonym, has its limits everywhere. There are times when it is wrong, even more so for those of high status and/or wealth. It is rare to find a place where largesse and generosity are not required at some point for ritual, celebration, or hospitality in some form (Bakhtin 1984; Schlecker 2005). The Roman virtues located *frugalitas* or simplicity in the domestic domain, *liberalitas* or generosity in the public sphere—needless to say, these were gendered spaces of virtue. Thus, whether a “bread and circuses” sop to appease the masses, the appropriate behavior of a political leader, a Melanesian Big Man, or the “ruinous feasts” that Clarendon described seventeenth-century English aristocrats being obliged to host (quoted in Trevor-Roper 1951; see also Alexander, Gregson, and Gille 2013), giving is typically linked to high status and the public sphere (see also Dietler and Hayden 2001). Hamlet's first quip is to decry the “thrift” that led to his father's funeral feast being turned into his mother's wedding banquet (Act 1, Sc 2, l,179–80). Arnold Bennett's stingy Ephraim Tellwright is roundly mocked for behaving inappropriately for his wealth and status (1902).⁹ However, this is not only an Anglophone theme. Al-Jāhīz's six-hundred-page *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'*, or *Book of Misers* (1978), dates back to 800 CE; and there are countless other examples. The common theme of these stories is that misers mistake means for the end, failing to spend wisely to maintain a material life and human relations. Thus, the moral necessity to turn enough profit (but no more) to glorify God, provide for pilgrims, and charitable giving is one of the monasteries' concerns in Barbora Spalová's chapter (this vol.).

On a more mundane level, failure to spend *tout court* can be unthriftily: refusing the regular care and cost of keeping a roof watertight may end up as a cataclysmic expense; the false bargain, however thrilling the hunt, is costly. Thriftiness therefore carries a sense of prudence and balance (see Spalová and Wilk this vol.), of navigating between hoarding, miserliness,

and prodigality. As the frequently recycled aphorism has it: moderation in all things—especially moderation.

A final refutation of thrifty logic appears in Sophie Day, Evthymios Papatziarchis, and Michael Stewart's *Lilies of the Field* (1998), which focuses on marginalized people who, it is suggested, refuse future-oriented thriftiness qua saving as an act of resistance (but see Wilk this vol.). Acting in the present also suggests a more flexible, improvisatory approach to an uncertain world where savings may vanish in currency devaluations or soaring inflation. Questions of capacity may also limit thrift.¹⁰ Hand-to-mouth existence does not allow for material investment whether in extensive or intensive social relations. Accessible storage can be crucial for a household to prosper or get by during lean periods. Finally, the arts of thrift are vital whether darning, turning worn sheets sides-to-the middle, patching a roof, or countless other tasks—but they require time and sometimes tools.

Our opening understanding of thrift was that it comprised actions primarily aimed at household self-sufficiency, as a countermeasure to conditions of scarcity or uncertain supply. This sense of thrift can now be qualified. The household is not necessarily the unit of thriftiness or its endpoint; rather, a more expansive sense of communal or spiritual well-being might be sought (see Rakowski and Spalová this vol.). As such, we need to consider when and why thriftiness is actively devalued and when culturally mediated ideas of human thriving may require the antithesis of thrift.

What remains under-theorized, and what the last section discusses, is how, where, and why ideas and practices of thrift often rooted in the household have traversed different scales and to what effect.

Scale and Paradox

Bernard Mandeville (1714) first noted an apparent paradox of thrift: “As this prudent economy, which some people call Saving, is in private families the most certain method to increase an estate, so some imagine that, whether a country be barren or fruitful, the same method if generally pursued (which they think practicable) will have the same effect upon a whole nation, and that, for example, the English might be much richer than they are, if they would be as frugal as some of their neighbours. This, I think, is an error.” Popularized by Keynes (1936: 85; see also Samuelson [1948] 1998), the “paradox of thrift” suggests that an increase in individuals’ saving serves to reduce overall demand, output, and hence, eventually, the wealth of the national economy, a paradox updated in 2009 as the “paradox of deleveraging” (Eggertson and Krugman 2012). Debates continue over whether there are scalar differences between individuals and the national

economy in how thrift is practiced, what they might be, and indeed if “the global” is now another scalar concern. Thus, for example, another angle onto the scalar paradoxes of thrift could be that thrift is crucial to the engine of capitalist innovation and productivity at national and supra-state levels but leads to widespread environmental degradation and indeed to savage divides between metropolis and provinces, city and rural areas (Collier 2018). Friedrich Hayek (1929) and later other neoclassical economists rejected the paradox of thrift arguing variously (and controversially) that increased individual savings in turn stimulate production, or that export is a way of maintaining demand and production (i.e., the paradox of thrift incorrectly assumes a closed system). The insight that thrift as virtuous economic practice might have scalar limits is productive, echoing other limiting factors above.

This final section draws out how our ethnographic chapters extend the understandings of thrift examined above partly by considering how thrift moves across, or is affected by, different scales and domains, and the paradoxes this explains or presents. The first four chapters (Gudeman; James, Neves, and Torkelson; Diz; and Rakowski) are explicitly concerned with household thrift in, respectively, Panama, South Africa, Argentina, and Mongolia. The next three chapters, while nominally in the very different ethnographic settings of Czech monasteries (Spalová), Indonesian industry (Rudnyckyj) and a Czech landfill (Sosna), also show how practices and normative ideas of household thrift underpin rhetoric, belief, and action in these very different domains. The final chapter (Wilk) echoes Gudeman’s dialogic approach to excavating thrift narratives, bringing history into conversation with Belizean folk models that use thrift and laziness as modes of approbation and censure.

Each chapter offers further angles onto thrift based on its ethnographic specificity with subthemes highlighting other connections between chapters: thrift as a normative or disciplinary mode (James, Neves, and Torkelson; Diz; and Wilk); the many meanings and affects attributable to thrifty actions, or laziness (Sosna and Wilk); the role of worldly and spiritual asceticism (Spalová and Rudnyckyj); how thrift is a virtue of moderation (Spalová and Wilk) and can manifest in conditions of abundance (Diz and Sosna). As this introduction indicates, each chapter presents a different kind of engagement with thrift’s futures.

However, all chapters can be seen as being in conversation, whether directly or indirectly, with the kind of household thrift described by Gudeman. The contributors take this core idea and explore, for example, how regional, national, and global economies; local mutual saving schemes; loans; recovered objects for gifts or sale; and state welfare all variously shape how everyday economies are managed. To understand household thrift, it is

crucial to take account of these multiple, imbricated scales. Conversely, as Rudnyckyj draws out, locating state or industrial austerity as an extension of household thrift gives it a spurious legitimacy.

We start with an updated version of Gudeman and Rivera's classic engagement with rural household thrift (1990), which opens noting how thriftiness has become a pleasurable practice: "a means to ends activity became an end itself." The paradox here is highlighted by Keynes: the kind of thrift that enables a household to continue has a perverse effect on a market economy, which is grounded on a qualitatively different kind of thrift. Saving is enabled through minimizing expenditure and avoiding waste where possible. Although there is occasional recourse to local markets, the ideal here is the self-sufficient *oikos*. While future-oriented, it is not aimed at short-term constant growth, which is the radically different aim of accumulation in a market context. The next three chapters examine how such long-term thrift operates in very different contexts and where people are often at the mercy of state policies and market vagaries.

James, Neves, and Torkelson's chapter starts with the paradox of poor households in rural and peri-urban South Africa becoming embroiled in multiple forms of debt in order to provide education and care for family members. While this appears as a paradox to some observers, it is a necessity where state welfare payments are inadequate, or simply unpaid. Moreover, far from being "financially illiterate," the women who head the households in this study are extraordinarily canny in how they weave together different income sources to manage their budgets. Such sources range from a variety of loans, from viciously predatory loan sharks to local rotating savings and credit associations (*stokvels*). These women's struggles to provide exemplify the harsh ethical and economic choices of practicing thrift *in extremis*, the centrality of debt rather than money to such book balancing, and the ease with which such alternative means of thrifty management may be overlooked.

In some senses, Agustin Diz's chapter flips the South African example on its head, but it also shows that household thrift can only be understood through the interplay of the state and broader economies. Again, state welfare payments are a vital resource for indigenous Guaraní households, but here such grants are lavish. Such wealth has been enabled by a global boom in soybean production and filtered through various national and regional brokers. Despite such local prosperity, welfare is still focused on women as responsible for household thrift. Indeed, the various forms that houses take (from mud huts to robust constructions) is read locally as an indication of wise thriftiness versus lack of foresight, prefiguring Wilk's discussion.

Tomasz Rakowski's chapter, focusing on a largely postpastoral community of Torghuts in rural and urban Mongolia, opens with the paradox of

thrift, or wise stewardship of resources, as simultaneously keeping together while giving away. This makes sense as an extension of pastoral logics where a group's survival relies on cooperation and generosity, echoing the discussion of sharing economies above. A further paradox emerges from how the principle of giving and maintaining operates across scales and domains as diverse as the local township and region, the urban business community of Torghut migrants, national politics, and rituals to preserve cosmological harmony. Far from finding distinct forms of thrift and different logics separating household from economy, profane from sacred spheres, Rakowski shows a common logic of preserving the life force at each scale, which therefore appear as recursively related—at once different and the same.

Spalová considers two Czech monasteries following the Rule of Benedict, which advocates frugality qua living sparingly for the monks' spiritual salvation. Simultaneously, they have a duty to glorify God through beautiful buildings that endure and to provide charity. Such obligations present a dilemma as to how much they should profit from their resources to fulfill these commitments. Spalová suggests there are distinct forms of thrift: individual asceticism (frugality) and calculative management for the monasteries' holdings (thrift). Both are subject to moderation. Excessive asceticism is as frowned upon as luxurious living. Profit seeking is tempered to provide just enough to meet the monasteries' responsibilities. Ensuring monasteries have the wherewithal to continue, fulfilling their spiritual and earthly purposes, mirrors the logic of household thrift. Their business dealings echo social enterprises where profit is channeled back into the communities to which they are connected. This nuances the kind of thrift typically associated with market enterprise as well as highlighting how household thrift may appear in quite different domains, as the next chapter also shows.

In critical dialogue with Weber's emphasis on worldly asceticism shaping western capitalism, Rudnyckyj explores the changing purchase of such ideas where economies have long been shaped by quite different religious, social, and economic forms: Islam, moral economies of patronage, and soft budget regimes where deficit and over-spending have little effect. The chapter focuses on the introduction of cost-cutting measures associated with market capitalism elsewhere that aim to minimize costs and wastefulness and maximize growth. To galvanize its workforce, the management of a steel company relies on reinterpretations of Islamic texts to instill worldly ascetic values, including thrift and hard work, in workers. The implication is that by drawing on a household model of thrift at the scale of state or industry, households are reimplicated in the effects of cost-cutting as workers keep or lose their jobs in ensuing austerity regimes.

Returning to the Czech Republic, but remaining in the world of work, Sosna's chapter considers the apparent paradox of landfill workers who appear to be at once thriftily retrieving usable items while wasting other resources such as fuel and utilities at the site. The paradox is resolved by switching from a lens of ecological thriftiness or resource management to understanding many of these actions as part of the household thrift and reciprocity encountered in previous chapters. Items salvaged from the landfill may be sold, used at home to avoid spending, or given as gifts. Money received from fiddling fuel usage similarly replenishes household coffers. Intertwined with these reasons are the joy of hunting for recoverable items and wasting utilities as acts of resistance against an unpopular employer.

We end with Wilk's chapter that reminds us that thrift and cognate attributes, such as laziness, are ethical economic behaviors and thus forms of judgment and boundary markers. Further, they are essentially twined with temporal ontologies. In Wilk's neat phrase, thrift is time travel, displacing present labor to future security, enacting foresight and prudence. Unthrifty prodigality and laziness are present-oriented and often linked to other tropes of being infantile and primitive. The paradox is that these figures of speech are not only familiar from colonial discourse about subordinate groups, but also are used by Belizeans to describe a common individual and national pathology. Such images are also customary at the scale of global political economy as states are judged on whether they are "responsible" (thrifty) and thus worthy of becoming indebted to international lending agencies. Wilk ends our ethnographies of thrift with the pointed observation that there is much to be said for a slower, more present-oriented way of life. In another lexicon, this might be considered mindfulness.

Together, these ethnographies at once expand and contract how we think about thrift. The drive for households and kin groups to secure their longevity and well-being is profound and widespread. Those households, however, are frequently enmeshed with wider kin groups, neighbors, and communities that share labor, exchange gifts, receive charity, or lend, demand, and jointly save money. Such communities may orchestrate ritual giving alongside, and as part of, enabling the survival of individual households. The household, sometimes stretching across village and city, proves elastic in its organization of resources.

But most strikingly, it is apparent that household thrift is also profoundly shaped by global commodity prices, state welfare regimes, and the competence or otherwise of officials and regional and local economies, including complex credit mechanisms and the affordances of waged work. Without taking into account how households are affected by but also navigate these multiscalar circuits, we cannot begin to understand how people craft a

good life in an uncertain world. The fact that the concept of thrift crosses so many boundaries within and between disciplines makes thrift into a fruitful connection between theory and action, or philosophical and practical approaches. As this book shows, ideas of thrift carry us beyond individual ethnographic studies, to the kind of ethnological comparison that was once central to anthropology.

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Notes

1. See Catherine Alexander (2022) for a detailed historical ethnography of how moralized ideas of household thrift have been used in Britain (and elsewhere) to justify savage cuts to public expenditure that directly prevent low-income households from enacting the very thrift they are enjoined to practice.
2. Other German speakers suggest a range of moral overtones to *Sparsamkeit*.

3. Shylock, who confuses his daughter with his ducats, is described in animal metaphors.
4. “Apparent” because, as this Introduction and the following chapters make clear, this is a false dichotomy. Rather, thrift typically appears as a means to enable the equally morally necessary act of generosity.
5. Despite being called *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber is clear that the particular ethic to which he refers was driven by ascetic Protestantism starting with Calvin.
6. Understood as those where surplus is minimal or nonexistent.
7. Malinowski describes islands’ agricultural fertility (1921: 2) such that the islanders’ hard work is richly rewarded.
8. Contemporary discourse about a new sharing economy is divided between celebrating its potential for thriftiness and sociality and seeing such claims as a mask for exploitative, predatory economic relations (Frenken and Schor 2017).
9. Thanks to Deborah James for this reference.
10. Another instance where expansion is rejected is where pastoral communities may limit herd size to one that is manageable or convert surplus animals into a different kind of reserve, such as land (Barth 1961: 106).

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