

# Anthropology of Tax

A smorgasbord of insights, perspectives, methods and theories

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# Tax and Taxation?

Distinguish between tax and taxation (the practice of collecting tax)

Taxes finance governmental/public activities but serves political purposes  
(Musgrave 1959)

- resource allocation
- income redistribution
- economic stability

Taxation as a

social network ▪ human relationships ▪ social organization?

# Taxation create relations

- Most citizens pay taxes and most benefit from them
- Giving, receiving and giving again make society possible (Mauss). The way taxes are collected and spent informs on societal values
- Reciprocity and redistribution. A social contract?
- Tax is an explicit economic relationship between a citizen and his/her state and an implicit economic relationship with all other citizens
- People are more prone to pay taxes if everybody else pay their fair share. Or at least we *perceive* that this is the case

# Holistic

- Avoid easy explanations
  - Bad morals
  - *homo economicus*
  - Political, ideological, static categories
- Studying practices: seeing what people do, what tools and knowledge they apply, what they write and aiming to understand while they also sometimes - *often* - do not do what they say they do
- ANT (actor network theory)
- Things, technologies, theories and how humans in various roles (tax administrators, tax advisors, taxpayers) engage with these (BoII)

# Ethnographic examples

- Successful Swedish Tax Agency. Strives to be legitimate by simplifying, equitable treatment of taxpayer, moral mottos (Björklund Larsen)
- The promise of digitalization increasing compliance not fulfilled: Kenyan Itax (Osman Elmi)
- Ghanaians negotiate between tithes and tax (Kauppinen)
- Making "taxpayers" of indigenous populations reveal colonialist policies (Willmott, Sheild Johanson)
- Taxation difficult to disconnect from other public finances  
"Small places, large questions" (Hylland-Eriksen)

# Comparative

- Anthropology make comparison possible beyond legal – economic – organizational models
- Cooperative compliance (CC) is an OECD model to establish closer collaborations between tax administrations and MNE's in the name of efficiency and increased tax compliance
- A comparison of CC in 7 Northern European countries with very different outcomes
  - Studying guidelines is not enough – study actual practices
  - Moral will is not enough to comply but actual interactions
  - Quantified measurements seldom applicable in tax compliance
- Cultural, institutional and societal factors influence compliance practices and thus success of models

# A curious perspective on the future ...

and new technologies

- Digitalization, climate change, income and wealth gaps
- Avoid simplistic solutions. Tax is complex
- Holistic perspective - humans, things, technologies, practices in network
- Take people seriously. Good reasons for "irrational/stupid" behaviour
- Difficult/impossible to know people's intentions – *the why*. People do not always say what they do.
- Pre-established issues, categories cannot be taken for granted
- Organizations have one voice, yet peopled by many with various tasks, agendas and agency
- Giving voice to overlooked people

Rethinking money means rethinking tax – and taxation

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Thank you for your attention

Let the discussion continue...



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