Rethinking Moral Economy

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I establish three closely related claims. The first two are interpretive, the third theoretical. (1) The prevailing conception of moral economy in political science, presupposed by opponents as well as advocates, rests too heavily on the distinction between nonmarket and market-based societies. (2) The prevailing conception of moral economy reduces to the unduly narrow claim that economic incorporation of a nonmarket people is the basis for the moral indignation that leads to resistance and rebellion. (3) Reconceptualizing moral economy in terms of social goods reveals additional grounds for politically significant moral indignation and permits moral-economic political analysis of a larger set of cases and phenomena. Water politics in the arid American West illustrate the power of a conception of moral economy based on social goods.

Political scientists debate as intensely as ever the idea of a moral economy, which contains both descriptive and prescriptive elements. The descriptive element reflects the contributions of, among others, anthropologists and refers to the various, essentially noneconomic norms and obligations (e.g., reciprocity) that mediate the central social, political, and/or economic relations of a given (almost always pre- or nonmarket) people. The prescriptive element refers to moral economy's status and value as an instrument for social and political analysis. Whether used to evaluate the distinctive social and political features of various systems of exchange (Booth 1993a; Dalton 1961; Polanyi 1957) or to explain insurgency and rebellion (Gosner 1992; Scott 1976; Thompson 1971), the idea of a moral economy is a claim about the conduct of inquiry, of what to study and how. For many political scientists committed to alternative forms of inquiry, moral economy easily means above all else spirited discussion about "the most crucial questions of method and interpretation" (Booth 1993b, 953).

Parties to this debate in political science differ sharply over the value of what Frerejohn (1991, 301, n. 1) has fruitfully described as "the ethnographic starting point," the assertion, embraced by moral economists, that "the proper place to begin social analysis is with the meanings embedded in the social practices in question," that social practices "form the basis for the identification of actors and choices." Described more fully below, the debate over moral-economic political science reflects in part moral economists' opposition to the assumptions and approaches of rational-choice forms of inquiry, that is to say, economic assumptions about human behavior applied in settings in which, moral economists argue, narrowly self-interested calculations of gain or efficiency are absent or secondary.

Curiously, the spirited debate in political science has not featured the concept itself. In stark contrast with the disputes over the value of moral-economic political science, the question of what constitutes a moral economy draws little attention or controversy. Yet, moral-economic political science is only as effective as the concept of moral economy on which it rests. Silence on this central issue begs two questions. What is the underlying conception of moral economy presupposed by the parties to the dispute? More important, is it adequate? The next two sections reconstruct and critique the prevailing but largely unquestioned conception of moral economy in political science. Reconstruction and critique establish two points: The traditional conception of moral economy in political science (1) rests too heavily on the distinction between nonmarket and market-based societies and (2) reduces to the unduly narrow claim that economic incorporation of a nonmarket people is the basis for the moral indignation that leads to resistance and rebellion. The remaining two sections develop a more effective conception. Combining overlooked aspects of early moral-economic analysis with insights drawn from recent studies of community and collective action, I recast the concept in light of the constitutive, communal, and, especially, nested properties of social goods.

A conception of moral economy based on social goods captures the grounds for politically significant moral indignation more precisely than does the prevailing view. It demonstrates that the grounds for politically significant moral indignation do not lie only or even predominantly at the level of clashing economies or cultures. They lie instead at the level of specific social goods, at the intersection of nested sets of meaning and value called into question by equally specific changes in circumstance.

My revision also refines analysis. Given the nested properties of social goods, instances of resistance to what traditional moral economists often describe as commodification need not be viewed as resistance to all forms or degrees of commodity exchange, even of the good in question. Moreover, by focusing on specific social goods, rather than on overarching economic systems, I account for politically significant (although not necessarily rebellious) moral economies where traditional moral economists would least expect to find them: within modern, market-structured communities and societies. Water politics in the arid American West illustrate the powers of a conception of moral economy based on social goods.

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RECONSTRUCTION

The traditional notion of moral economy in political science reflects the seminal works of Karl Polanyi (1957) and E. P. Thompson (1971). It features the extraordinary phenomenon of a poor, premarket people contesting the dictates of a much more modern economic order.[1] Polanyi contributes the important distinction between embedded and autonomous economies. Embedded, typically ancient or primitive economies submerge production and exchange to the purposes and practices of far more significant social, political, or religious institutions. Autonomous economies function differently. Production and exchange are much more significant, increasingly serve economic ends, and operate according to the constraints of pervasive, impersonal markets. Autonomous economies define the modern era.

Thompson contributes several things. Beyond popularizing the term *moral economy*, he explains how and why the transition from an embedded economy to an autonomous market generated social and political unrest, even sustained organized violence. Drawing on his study of eighteenth-century English food riots, Thompson (1971, 78, 79) finds the "delicate tissue" of traditional social norms and reciprocities unable to accommodate the "cash-nexus" of the emerging market order. The clash was often traumatic. Those most at the mercy of the emerging order regarded the transition as unjust. Moral outrage and direct action followed. Thompson's most significant contribution is his understated concept of a moral economy, which political scientists do not incorporate as fully as they should. Generalizing from the particulars of the food riots, Thompson conceives moral economy as a popular consensus about what distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate practices, a consensus rooted in the past and capable of inspiring action (pp. 78–9, 108, 112, 131–6).

Reflecting the discipline's longstanding desire to account for peasant and Third World insurrections (Bates and Curry 1992; Lichbach 1994), the prevailing concept in political science emphasizes conflict and resistance. This emphasis speaks far more to a pattern of behavior rather than, as Thompson instructs, the nature of and sources for communal notions of legitimacy. Illustrations abound. Consider Scott's (1976) analysis of peasant rebellions in early-twentieth-century Burma and Vietnam. Peasants rebelled, he concludes, out of their desire to resist intensifying European colonialism and to restore ancient peasant ways and rights. Eric Wolf (1969, 276) explains peasant wars in Cuba, Russia, China, Mexico, and Algeria in similar terms, emphasizing the predatory nature and culturally disruptive effects of "North Atlantic Capitalism."

This pattern of behavior has even been used to reinterpret aspects of U.S. social and political history, in particular the actions of nineteenth-century premarket farmers in large portions of Georgia, Missouri, and Texas. Convinced that their communities and attendant "habits of mutuality" were threatened by a growing and impersonal market, yeoman farmers resorted to, among other things, populist revolt and social banditry (Hahn 1983, 53; see also McMath 1985; Thelen 1986). Resistance to economic incorporation also emerges in Strickland's (1985) study of newly freed blacks in the rice-planting sections of the South Carolina Low Country. In this instance, Low Country blacks jealously retained the independence and unsupervised time long afforded slaves by the traditional manner of rice cultivation (task work largely "out of the master's eye") despite postwar efforts by enterprising whites to regulate labor rationally on the basis of time, supervision, and wages.[2] Blacks resisted the emerging order simply by refusing to participate. Their subsistence skills and, unlike other sections of the South, the refuge of their well-established, extended families sustained the resistance. Judging from the literature, resistance to economic incorporation is indeed the preferred, and typically the only, recognized pattern.

The prevailing conception of moral economy is also a response to a prominent issue in contemporary political thought, "the controversy over 'the economic approach to human behavior,' over rational choice and related theories, *and especially over the understanding of nonmarket societies*" (Booth 1994, 653, emphasis added). This dispute dominates the literature, rendering *moral economy* more a label for the debate than a category for organizing experience. Although the arguments for and especially against moral-economic lines of inquiry do not debate the concept per se, they are revealing. Summarized below, they confirm the narrowness of the prevailing view and point, if only indirectly, to a compelling alternative.

Traditional moral economists maintain that, insofar as the economic approach privileges the self-interested individual, who narrowly but rationally calculates on the basis of unforgiving competition and the principle of utility maximization, it cannot fruitfully engage the many instances in which economic behavior is embedded in noneconomic institutions and values. Traditional moral economists argue that scholars gain little, if anything, by analyzing behavior in terms of what the actors themselves would recognize as strange or immoral, if even comprehensible. Scott (1976, 166) concludes that a strictly economic approach overlooks the more telling sociocultural components of behavior; it

[1] This notion is found throughout the literature, among early advocates as well as recent critics. Scott (1976) is the leading example of early moral-economic analysis in political science. More recent studies include Posusney 1993 and Heilke 1997. Among contemporary critics are Bates and Curry (1992) and Booth (1994), whose works are second-order analyses of the topic, although both rely in part on the authors' earlier studies of premarket societies, African and ancient Greek in particular.

[2] "The real social and cultural significance of the task system lay in the fact that a slave could finish the day's work at his or her own chosen rate. . . . Slaves who worked quickly often assisted others who were slower, thereby making task labor a collective experience. . . . Task work thus helped to fashion a moral economy that prized the virtues of independence, self-determination, and personal achievement, while encouraging collective responsibility for the completion of assignments" (Strickland 1985, 145).

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misses "the central fact that the peasant is born into a society and culture that provide him a fund of moral values, a set of concrete social relationships, a pattern of expectations about the behavior of others, and a sense of how those in his culture have proceeded to similar goals in the past."

In the traditional view, the more appropriate emphasis is on cultural forms and values, on what Hahn (1983, 6, 85) describes as the "web of social life," meaning "ideas about justice, independence, obligation, and other aspects of social and political life, rooted in specific relationships and refracted through historical experiences." Scott (1976, 167) agrees: "Woven into the tissue of peasant behavior, then, whether in normal local routines or in the violence of an uprising, is the structure of a shared moral universe, a common notion of what is just. It is this moral heritage that, in peasant revolts, selects certain targets rather than others, certain forms rather than others, and that makes possible . . . action born of moral outrage." The abstract, atomistic, and narrowly utilitarian assumptions of economic analysis simply will not do. Instead, analysis must be phenomenological, capable of comprehending the cultural self-understandings of the actors themselves, that is, their sense of propriety, justice, obligation, and the like (Scott 1976, 3, 4).[3]

Responses to these arguments vary but fall into one of three categories. The most common is the claim that the norms and reciprocities of any given moral economy are reducible to and best explained in terms of self-interested, political economy. Popkin (1979, 18), for instance, in a study of Vietnamese peasants that overlaps Scott's, argues that "by applying theories of individual decision-making to villages, we can begin to develop a deductive understanding of peasant institutions and move the analysis back one step to the level of the individual. By using the concepts of individual choice and decision-making, we can discuss how and why groups of individuals decide to adopt some sets of norms while rejecting others." Peering beneath the veneer of collective behavior and a shared moral universe, Popkin finds a familiar "unifying investment logic" (p. 244) to Vietnamese peasant life, a logic less materialistic or income-oriented than that in the West, but rational and maximizing nonetheless.

A second and related response is that moral economists have a "too-pinched conception of the economic" (Booth 1994, 659). In short, they fail to appreciate its influence in social formations other than that of the market. Studies of the firm, family, and government demonstrate, critics argue, how obviously nonmarket features and institutions are clearly the product of primary economic forces and calculations. Summarizing the conclusions of Douglass North, Robert Bates, Michael Hechter, Edward LeClair, and Neil Smelser, Booth writes that nonmarket economies are best "understood in the light of the *transaction costs* associated with markets" (p. 658, emphasis added). The logic of this response is clear—converting nonmarket institutions into full-blown market ones simply incurs too many information, measurement, and enforcement costs. Retaining nonmarket features is in these instances cost efficient. The point, however, is that nonmarket does not necessarily mean noneconomic. For Booth, peasant moral economies in particular "lend themselves to retranslation into the vocabulary of the economic approach," whereupon "it becomes apparent that many of their behaviors and institutional forms are economizing responses to a situation of severe risk in regard to subsistence goods" (p. 659). The work on transaction costs by North and others questions the assumption of many traditional moral economists that modernity is distinguished by the role and place of economic calculation.

The third and even more substantive response addresses directly the "master assumption" (Booth 1994, 653) of moral economists, the concept of embeddedness. According to Granovetter (1985), embeddedness is in the end a matter of the degree to which economic behavior is affected by or submerged in social relations. Traditional moral economists err in two ways. First, moral economists so deeply embed economic behavior in what they think are social relations that "economic" behavior is not literally economic (oversocialization). Second, what moral economists present as economic behavior is actually an attribute of a "generalized morality," which Granovetter defines as a widely shared set of "implicit agreements to certain kinds of regard for others" (p. 489, citing Arrow 1974, 26). Generalized moralities, however, lead to other difficulties.

According to Granovetter (1985), generalized moralities, whatever their content, are not social relations. Truly social relations involve relatively continuous, concrete, and specific interpersonal ties; actors, fully aware of these ties and circumstances, respond accordingly. Truly social relations are ongoing, "continuously constructed and reconstructed during interaction" (p. 486). In contrast, generalized moralities are external, fairly fixed systems of norms and values internalized through socialization. Because they are internalized, their behavior-inducing clout is "contained," so to speak, "inside an individual's head" (p. 486). Therefore, behavior is "automatic," even "mechanical," and ongoing social relations are "irrelevant" (p. 486). Moral economists who embed behavior in generalized moralities paradoxically retain that to which they ob-

[3] Compare this kind of criticism of rational-choice modes of analysis with those of Sen (1977) and Monroe (1996), two scholars who work outside the tradition of moral economy. Sen recognizes that calculations of (even personal) welfare are much more complex than the undiluted model of self-interest indicates. They involve multiple rankings of different kinds of preferences, some of which are based on a sense of duty, as affected by morals and culture and as mediated by "commitment" to religion, class, group, or community (1977, 326–9).

Based upon her study of altruism, Monroe (1996) rejects individualistic self-interest as "an all-embracing theory of human behavior" because it "distorts and limits our understanding of what it means to be a human being" (p. 236). Altruists in particular act well outside the context of calculated costs and benefits; their often personally risky acts of selflessness are instead spontaneous and rooted in their deeply felt connection to all other human beings. Monroe prefers an approach she describes as "perspectival" (p. 15), in which nonutilitarian world views, core values, and a sense of self figure at least as prominently as self-interest.

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ject in the strictly economic approach: "atomized decision making even when decisions are seen to involve more than one individual" (pp. 486–7).

Booth adds to the critique of embeddedness. He rejects the use of the concept by moral economists to distinguish sharply the character and manner of submerged, premodern economies from modern, autonomous ones, a distinction that many of them take somewhat for granted. Contrary to the claims of Polanyi in particular, he believes close study of ancient Greece proves that narrowly rational, economic behavior is never so embedded that it is "theoretically indistinct," not to mention "invisible" (Booth 1993a, 6; 1994, 654, 655). Furthermore, study of modern market society proves that narrowly rational, economic behavior is never so autonomous that the very concept of economy must be regarded as "a product of modern society" and not truly applicable "to the theoretical/moral universe of non- or precapitalist worlds" (Booth 1993a, 6). In the end, the notion of embeddedness blinds moral economists to the analytically important fact that all economies (ancient and modern) are simultaneously economizing and normative in nature, although in varying degrees.[4]

CRITIQUE

According to its severest critics, moral-economic political analysis is flawed. It misreads the nature of human behavior and, therefore, the politics that flow from it. It may stimulate reflection but is not a particularly powerful or credible line of inquiry. Rejection, however, is premature. Rejection presumes that the traditional notion of moral economy is conclusive. It is not. Interestingly, Booth's study of ancient Greece is itself cause for rethinking the concept, although for reasons other than those Booth emphasizes.[5]

According to Booth, the moral architecture and economy of ancient Greece reflected fundamental ends and values of the household, the primary economic unit. As epitomized by Ischomachos in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, the household rested on careful, even rational calculations of utility. More precisely, its economy turned on "the managerial role of the wife [in relation to servants and children] . . . the need for overseers [in relation to slaves], and . . . the issue of how to motivate the wife and overseer to do the master's work efficiently" (Booth 1994, 659). The value of efficiency, however, lay not in maximizing the master's wealth but his leisure, a prerequisite for meaningful participation in political affairs and for living a good and beautiful life.

The example of ancient Greece, used by Booth to refute the "radical exceptionalism" (1994, 662) of market society, yields other insights. In short, that society does not conform to what contemporary political science would have us believe constitutes a moral economy. It was unquestionably a normatively embedded economy and society, which Booth describes as anticommercial, as dedicated to a life of "detachment from provisioning activity" (p. 660), but it was not a marginal society of subsistence-oriented peasants rebelling against the callous forces of economic incorporation. The Greek example challenges political science's preference for conceiving moral economy in terms of premarket communities and cultures clashing with far more commercial ones. Equally telling challenges are not limited to cases drawn from the precapitalist world, as two recent studies demonstrate.

Somerset County, Maryland

Community, culture, and economic development are the subjects of Meredith Ramsay's (1996) research on Princess Anne and Crisfield, Maryland, two Somerset County communities recently gripped by economic crisis. Both were in trouble because longstanding modes of production (agriculture in Princess Anne, commercial fishing and seafood packing in Crisfield) sharply and irrevocably declined between 1986 and 1991, making Maryland's poorest county only poorer. Calls for economic revitalization were frequent and popular, but residents routinely rejected commercial real estate projects. In fact, elite-sponsored real estate initiatives in Princess Anne spawned an unprecedented electoral uprising. Voters swept out of office a number of progrowth establishment officials and even elected their first black representative. Ramsay attributes these and other outcomes to "a nearly universal commitment to a shared way of life" (1996, 8), despite racial, class, and other divisions, a way of life in which "community mattered" (p. 9).

Two aspects of Ramsay's study stand out. First, her study is firmly grounded in the moral-economic axiom that "all economies are enmeshed in the political, social, and moral life of particular places" (1996, 9).[6] Echoing Hahn, Ramsay emphasizes "way-of-life vari-

[4] According to Booth, market society is itself normatively embedded. In particular, labor and exchange now reflect the freedom, equality, and moral pluralism of modernity rather than, as in the past, the hierarchy and domination of the preliberal household. The transition to market society was not, as Polanyi claims, a fateful disembedding of economy and society but an historic "moral redrawing of the community and of the place of the economy within it" (Booth 1994, 661). This perspective distinguishes Booth as a critic of moral-economic political science. Although sharply critical of one (from his point of view, fundamental) feature of it (analysis predicated in part on the embeddedness distinction), Booth supports another by analytically linking the economy of a given time and society to the normative context within which that economy is situated. In Booth's case, however, the linkage is general rather than specific, at the level of economic systems writ large. As such, his quasimoral-economic argument cannot address the issue at the center of my social goods version: how and why moral economies (some even contrary to the spirit of the modern market society) emerge within commercialized market societies.

[5] Booth's effective critique of a sharp, Polanyian distinction between submerged and autonomous economies does not directly question traditional moral economists' related claim that economic incorporation of a pre- or nonmarket people often leads to collective action rooted in moral outrage. What needs reappraisal is whether resistance to economic incorporation is today the only or even most important foundation for a moral economy.

[6] Ramsay (1996, 135, n. 18) acknowledges Scott's influence, characterizing her own work on Maryland as an "independent collaboration."

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ables" (p. 107). A more finely tuned grasp of local policy is achieved, she writes, by paying "careful attention to the . . . social structures and cultural values that give security, predictability, character, and meaning to the life of a given community" (p. 22). In Somerset County social structures and relations were such that residents were reluctant to abandon or degrade them in the name of economic development.

Second, Ramsay's study is not of a pre- or nonmarket people. Local agriculture and fishing conformed to and operated within the larger market economy. Given modern modes of production, the politically significant moral economies of Princess Anne and Crisfield differ in origin, form, and to some degree content from those associated with the Asian, African, or South American corporate villages emphasized in the literature.[7]

Owens Valley, California

John Walton's (1992) study of the Owens Valley in California compliments Ramsay's examination of the social roots of local action, although in his research rebellion returns as the critical event. The tale is remarkable. At the turn of the century this rural valley just east of the Sierra Nevada range confronted the City of Los Angeles over access to valley water. In 1924, at least twenty years into the confrontation, the dispute turned violent when residents seized and bombed the city's water-related holdings and structures within the valley. Led by two bankers, the bombings were numerous, strategic, and popular. Local support frustrated efforts by Los Angeles to prosecute the perpetrators. One investigator for the city was convinced "no local grand jury would indict, and no court convict" the forty to sixty people he believed directly involved (Walton 1992, 169). Los Angeles got the water it wanted, but dynamiting, arson, and other acts of rebellion continued periodically into the 1970s, ending only when new environmental laws allowed valley residents to wage their resistance through the courts. Walton's explanation of this extraordinary affair combines elements from a number of schools of thought. At the center of his explanation, however, lies an account of moral economy different from and superior to that usually found in the discipline.

Walton takes to heart Thompson's statements about a popular consensus rooted in the past and capable of inspiring action. He agrees with Scott, Hahn, and others that operative conceptions of justice and injustice emerge from local history, from the concrete meanings, traditions, and mechanisms of daily life. The history of Owens Valley, from initial white settlement at least up to the moment of rebellion, was one of persistent difficulty, sacrifice, and isolation. Hardship was the unrelenting order of the day, and collective endeavor—in the form of an elaborate, if not always tolerant, string of voluntary organizations (civil society)—was the only abundant social resource. These frontier people were willing to endure hardship and sacrifice in the hope that prosperity would someday be theirs, as their pioneering heritage told them it would. This valley of expectant capitalists saw the opportunities and markets associated with mines, railroads, and reclamation as their commercial salvation. Unlike the communities in Burma and Vietnam studied by Scott, security lay in perfecting, not rejecting, the spirit of enterprise.

According to Walton (pp. 90–103), the moral economy of Owens Valley reflected its unique situation and history. It combined a vibrant but as yet unrealized commitment to commercial enterprise with a propensity for civic organization and collective endeavor. The combination proved explosive when hopes for prosperity were repeatedly raised and dashed. Mining companies and railroads flirted with the valley but never established ongoing economic ventures, leaving it as destitute as ever. Reclamation was the last and best hope and proved the greatest disappointment. Chosen by the newly formed Reclamation Service as an ideal site for fulfilling the promise of the 1902 Reclamation Act, which was designed to promote western settlement, small-scale family farming, and democracy through irrigation of arid lands (no more than 320 acres of irrigated land per couple), the valley finally seemed poised for transformation. Abundant irrigation water, residents noted, would lead to an agricultural bonanza, population growth, a cash economy, and economic security.

Moral outrage was swift and pronounced when the residents learned that Los Angeles had cheated them (through fraud in some cases, intimidation in others) by obtaining title to key parcels and all-important water rights (pp. 154–6). Even worse, the city had used its influence with state and federal officials to convince President Theodore Roosevelt, ironically a prominent advocate for the Reclamation Act and its ideals, to support a change in the project: Rather than use the water for farming in the Owens Valley, export it to Los Angeles to subsidize the city's already phenomenal growth. Certain they were the victims of a massive injustice (the "Rape of the Owens Valley"), residents drew on their civic traditions and rebelled (pp. xviii, 168–82, 292, 312).

The studies by Ramsay and Walton support the argument that the prevailing conception of moral economy in political science is unduly narrow. Given its emphasis on the distinction between premarket and market societies, the prevailing conception of moral economy in political science cannot explain the nonrebellious moral economies of market-structured communities in Maryland, which had achieved a degree of economic development but were reluctant to develop further, even in the face of economic decline. Given its emphasis on resistance to commercial incorporation,

[7] The power of the prevailing conception of moral economy in political science is in part terminological, as is evident in Ramsay's study. Drawing on Scott's (1976) language, Ramsay refers to Princess Anne and Crisfield as subsistence communities, an awkward choice at best. Scott's communities are precapitalist and peasant; Ramsay's are not, even though they have a risk-minimizing, communal ethic that is "based upon trust . . . and mutual obligation" and is dedicated to preserving "a particular moral order" (Ramsey 1996, 120). Moral economy must be conceived in such a way as to account more accurately for the broadly similar norms and reciprocities that emanate from sharply different social and economic circumstances.

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the prevailing conception of moral economy cannot explain the moral indignation and rebellion of a nonmarket valley in California desperate for commercial incorporation. These and related cases require an altogether different approach to the issue of a moral economy. Thompson's notion of communal legitimacy offers a promising alternative.

As employed by Thompson, legitimacy is recognition by a community that a given state of affairs conforms to known and accepted rules and principles. Well-known and long accepted rules and principles are the ground, Thompson argues, for consensus and collective action. Moral economists loosely share this view but too often couch legitimacy in the diffuse language of shared universes or traditional norms and obligations, restating in effect Max Weber's famous but generic reference to the legitimacy of the "eternal yesterday" (Gerth and Mills 1958, 78). What is even more problematic, legitimacy is complex; no one set of legitimizing rules or principles prevails in or across all cases. Depending on circumstances, market rules and principles may well give way to political, religious, or still other principles. Consequently, phrases such as "shared moral universe" (Scott 1976, 167) and "shared way of life" (Ramsay 1996, 8) too often suppress rather than reveal the various sources of communal legitimacy available at any one time; they inhibit a clearer understanding of why communities choose one set of legitimizing rules and principles over another.[8]

Basing moral-economic political analysis on social goods is a much more effective alternative. Given their nature and properties, described below, social goods harbor the principles communities canvass when judging whether specific developments are legitimate.

SOCIAL GOODS

Goods are objects and qualities whose possession or consumption confers some kind of benefit and satisfies human needs and wants. For many, goods are unquestionably material and commercial in nature. Everyday illustrations include foreign and domestic goods, durable and nondurable goods, basic and luxury goods. Contemporary philosophers agree that goods satisfy human needs and wants but acknowledge and often emphasize their less material and noncommercial forms. Examples from contemporary work include primary and secondary goods (Rawls 1971), goods of excellence and goods of effectiveness (MacIntyre 1988), additive and nonsubtractive generic goods (Gewirth 1978, 1982), and mutual and convergent goods (Taylor 1989). These deliberately abstract categories feature such goods as opportunities, powers, rights, security, community, and well-being, that is, goods "for which it is the task of a theory of justice to provide distributive principles" (Swift 1995, 224).

The concept of social goods developed below clearly falls into the latter category and draws crucially on Walzer (1983, 6–10). The following version, however, differs in certain respects. Whereas Walzer uses social goods as his foundation for developing a theory of justice that champions pluralism and complex equality, my concept addresses the narrower issue of collective action that emanates from communal perceptions of legitimacy. This reorientation brings into even sharper relief the central role of social goods on the identities, obligations, and relationships of both persons and a people. In other words, a collective action orientation features the goods-based senses of self and community Walzer's general theory of justice clearly incorporates but need not always emphasize in the same way (see below). By analyzing social goods as grounds for collective action I extend Walzer's concept, revealing in turn both the nested nature of social goods and the basis for my theory of moral economy.

In Walzer's justice-based application as well as my own, the notion of social goods is first and foremost a statement about the universal nature of all human goods. Even goods considered pure commodities are social, for they consist of shared understandings about the beneficial characteristics attributed to a given object. Any identification of an object as a good unavoidably draws on culturally constructed and culturally transmitted ideas about human needs, wants, and benefits. "Goods don't just appear in the hands of distributive agents who do with them as they like"; goods first "come into people's minds" (Walzer 1983, 6–7). Like the meaning of words, the value and meaningfulness of goods are socially determined. In Walzer's theory of justice, the principles of shared understandings and socially determined value are central: "All distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings of the goods at stake" (p. 9). More precisely, when we understand the social meaning of a given good, "we understand how, by whom, and for what reasons it ought to be distributed" (p. 9).[9] Although central, these principles do not exhaust Walzer's theory. Significantly, his account also includes constitutive and communal senses of social goods, and when these are analyzed explicitly from the perspective of collective action, they speak directly to the issue of sources for communal perceptions of legitimacy.

Constitutive social goods establish and symbolize important senses of self. They reflect a manner of individual and collective identification that is characteristic of human beings (Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Humans acquire "concrete identities" through the ways in which they "conceive and create, and then possess and employ social goods"

[8] Walton makes a similar point: "The fact that repertoires [of politically significant collective action] are associated with culture does not tell us *where standards of justice come from*, how they affect the state and the economy, or whether culture is a causal force or simply a setting" (1992, 325, emphasis added).

[9] No one principle of distribution holds in all cases. Some goods are justly distributed according to principles of merit, others according to principles of exchange or need, and so on. As a general rule, however, "*no social good x should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good y merely because they possess y and without regard to the meaning of x*" (Walzer 1983, 20, emphasis in original). In effect, each social good is its own sphere of justice. My concept of moral economy is consistent with and supportive of Walzer's general theory of justice.

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(Walzer 1983, 8). People inevitably take stock of themselves and interpret the identities of others largely in terms of social goods. Moreover, patterned use, display, and exchange of social goods place people in specific social, economic, and even political relations. Among the Nuer of Africa, for instance, cattle connect people to one another in vital ways, not just as herdsman, buyer, or seller. Cattle structure the status, capacities, and obligations of individuals. Owned by families, cattle reflect and reproduce the all-important "network of kinship ties" (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 17). Nuer allocate cattle accordingly, and their movement from one *kraal* to another is "equivalent to lines in a genealogical chart" (p. 18). Couples finalize the union of marriage through ritualistic slaughter of cattle, and their legal status as a married couple is in part "defined by cattle rights and obligations" (p. 17). Cattle are not simply beasts of burden or sources for food, psychologically and sociologically they are an integral part of what it means to be a Nuer. They are social goods in ways compatible with but deeper than that conveyed by the notion of shared understandings alone; cattle are the foundation for important processes, roles, identities, and relationships without which it would be very difficult to speak of Nuer society and culture.

The value of these identity-orienting, role-shaping goods extends beyond their purely material or commercial properties. Insofar as constitutive social goods structure the status and obligations of persons, their value includes the meaningfulness of the relationships and the senses of self generated. Under certain circumstances, this identity-related value overrides their narrower commodity value. Choices in these instances may well reflect rationales other than the strictly economic. Equally important, at least from the perspective of a theory of moral economy, deeply valued identities and relationships are latent but easily triggered sources for assessing the legitimacy of both proposed and emerging developments.

Consider rice in Japan. It is, of course, a food, yet it is much more. According to Ohnuki-Tierney (1993, 102), rice is the critical metaphor by and through which Japanese "think about themselves in relation to other peoples." These reflections are in turn an equally critical part of their concept of "the collective self" (p. 102). It was in terms of short-grain rice (agri)culture that the Japanese recognized themselves as a people significantly different from the meat and wheat oriented West and, more important, the long-grain rice cultures of Asia, in particular China. Although Japan is no longer predominantly agricultural, a rice-based sense of self persists. Rice and rice paddies remain the defining symbols of Japan and its ancestral land. Compared to bamboo, sashimi, or many other Japanese foods and symbols, rice is sacred. Its harvest and consumption often are a matter of ritual and collective celebration, its whiteness is a symbol of Japanese purity and virtue. This significance reaches and affects the conduct of everyday life. Rice is the most common offering in the ancestral alcoves found in many Japanese homes, a gesture that preserves a sense of family continuity as well as conveys respect. The role of rice in reproducing and maintaining a sense of family extends to the meal itself:

> Whereas dishes are served on individual plates ahead of time in urban Japanese households today, rice alone remains the common food to be distributed by the woman of the house. Commensality within the household is symbolized by the act of distributing rice from a single container. . . . The collective self of the family—the most basic unit of Japanese society—is constructed through sharing rice during daily meals (p. 95).

Rice is a truly social good, and its longstanding and ongoing role in establishing a Japanese sense of collective self is at times a prominent factor in evaluating emerging developments. In the late 1980s, for example, when officials announced plans to import California rice (it was far more plentiful and much less expensive than the declining supplies of Japanese rice), the social value of rice prevailed over its value as a staple.[10] Although the Japanese import and consume other American food products, they vigorously opposed and ultimately defeated the proposal to import rice. Urban Japanese, women in particular, made the difference. Their opposition was broad and decisive but contrary to their interests as consumers. Even though California rice had been sown from short-grain stocks imported from Japan, the Japanese found it impure, "foreign," a corruption of the "last sacred realm," and a threat to Japanese identity and autonomy (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 111). In this instance, the seemingly irrational opposition to importation reflected a commitment to a deeper, more important value, unrelated to price.[11]

In addition to their influence on identity and status, select social goods are intrinsically communal in nature. These goods produce (or at least reproduce) the sensibilities and "special commitment to one another" (Walzer 1983, 62) that make associated people a community. Although relative to each community, intrinsically communal social goods are the foundation for truly common actions. Unlike other goods, they are not simply "convergent" in nature, a matter for me and (then) for you. Intrinsically communal social goods are mutual and indivisible, a matter for us (Taylor 1989, 166–9). The goods of security, welfare, and membership illustrate; in each case participation in a common life is, as Walzer (1983, 65) puts it, "simultaneously the prerequisite of provision and one of its products." Because these goods are mutual and indivisible, they link people as citizens, and as citizens people recognize joint responsibilities and pursue what are now unmis-

[10] Walzer distinguishes between the not always compatible moral and physical "necessities" of goods. Which set of necessities prevails depends on circumstances. Bread, Walzer (1983, 8) notes, is not just a food item; it is "the body of Christ, the symbol of the Sabbath, the means of hospitality, and so on." For the devout who view bread as symbolic of important religious values and relationships, it may well be something that, depending on circumstances, people should bake and destroy rather than sell or eat.

[11] Reminiscent of Monroe, Ohnuki-Tierney (1993, 9) finds the economic assumptions of rational-choice theory "inappropriate." Rice, she concludes, "is not simply food to fill the stomach. Japanese attitudes and behaviors toward rice are not governed by economic rationale" (p. 29). Instead, they reflect the complex social psychology of rice as self.

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takably collective affairs. If, as Walzer argues, membership in human community is "the most important good" (p. 29) we distribute to one another, then intrinsically communal social goods are an additional and perhaps even more potent basis on which people judge legitimacy.

Social goods are not as singular or discrete as analysis must sometimes portray them. As with rice in Japan, social goods can and do harbor more than one kind of meaning and value, particularly if the good in question takes a commodity form. Like the nested pots in a backpacker's kit, multiple sets of meaning and value serve different purposes but rest within the confines of one another. Tobacco, for instance, has long been grown for its commercial value, and fortunes have been made from its cultivation. In 1849, Missouri planters produced more than 17 million pounds of it, surpassing even North Carolina. Planters sold their tobacco in the markets of St. Louis and New Orleans, but they did not regard it simply as a cash crop. For Missouri planters, much like their Kentucky and Virginia ancestors, tobacco was a social good; the rhythms and rituals of its cultivation were an important source for "collective identity" and "harmony" (Phillips 2000, 123). More than even profit, verdant fields of tobacco were a "shared sign" of community health and membership, as central to the collective sense of self (and unrelated to market price) as rice paddies for the Japanese.[12] Defying the logic of markets and profits, Missouri planters increased production only modestly when tobacco prices were at all time highs (other states tripled production) but doubled production when their tobacco-centered senses of self and community were assailed by a decade-long ruinous collapse in prices (pp. 123, 124). Similar to the rice example, tobacco illustrates important points for moral-economic political analysis. Beyond the fact that many goods are nested complexes of value that differ in kind as well as degree, the constitutive and communal properties of social goods often set the boundaries within which their other values operate. A social good's commodity status, then (should it have one), need not clash automatically or completely with that good's less commercial roles.

A focus on social goods facilitates analysis in still other ways. Multiple but nested values and meanings account for the diverse (but not always perfectly compatible) practices surrounding given goods. Nested values and diverse practices explain in turn the basis for conflict. Significantly, the conflict related to such complex social goods as rice and tobacco is not just about more favorable allocations or greater material gain; it involves what *kind* of value should prevail in particular, often changing situations. Nested sets of meaning and value also explain how, given even only slightly changed circumstances, previously accepted practices (such as commodity-like exchange) may come to generate perceptions of illegitimacy. In Japan, rice is in many respects a commodity, appropriately subject to the competitive pressures of commercial exchange, but only to a point. Beyond that point, when rice-based and quintessentially Japanese identities and relationships are compromised, rice's social value prevails. Likewise for tobacco in nineteenth-century Missouri (and elsewhere); it was an economically valuable commodity but was even more valuable as a medium for stable and fulfilling social relations.[13]

In some communities social goods are clustered as well as nested. Clustered social goods intensify felt impressions of belonging and membership, adding texture and weight to the notion of culturally distinct but shared ways of life. Linkages among clusters are such that, for those who enjoy them, affiliated goods may well stand or fall together. Among yeoman farmers and artisans in nineteenth-century Missouri, for instance, work, family life, religion, and politics were distinct but deeply intertwined social goods; each reflected and in turn sustained an economy in which production, consumption, and pricing were governed by local, self-sufficient communities based upon personal networks and face-to-face relations. Farmers and artisans understood all too well the implications of expanding railroads; impersonal, commercial society would alter not just the local economy but life as they knew it (Thelen 1986, 9–25).

Given their nature and meaningfulness, constitutive and intrinsically communal social goods are sources for shared notions of legitimacy. Roles, identities, and communities grounded in social goods contain within them the criteria for evaluating specific developments as appropriate or inappropriate, at least for those who recognize the goods in question as social goods. These meanings and related criteria are the foundation for a conception of moral economy based on social goods. A preliminary sketch, demonstration, and justification of this concept follows.

MORAL ECONOMY REDEFINED

Conceptually, moral economy remains a popular consensus rooted in the past and capable of inspiring action. With Thompson, it reflects a claim about the nature of and sources for communal notions of legitimacy. In this version of moral economy, however, the

[12] Tobacco culture fostered powerful and often insular conceptions of community. According to Waldrep (1993, 13–4), who did research in western Kentucky and Tennessee, "tobacco farmers developed unusually close ties with their neighbors. Even a small crop of tobacco required so much effort that [they] swapped off working on each other's farms. Women frequently joined their husbands and fathers in the fields. . . . Neighborhood women worked so closely together to clothe their families, sharing patterns and sewing techniques, that communities developed distinctive styles of dress and residents could immediately identify outsiders by their clothes. Only rarely did neighborhood girls marry outside the community." Breen (1984, 251, 261) speaks of an early American tobacco culture in which cultivation was simultaneously the basis for "social cohesion," a mechanism for forging a "public identity," and "emblematic" of the larger social order's past and future.

[13] Tobacco-based senses of self and community fueled the Black Patch War (1890–1915) in western Kentucky and Tennessee, a region famous for its dark tobacco and fierce hostility to outside interests bent on undermining local community control. See Waldrep 1993.

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popular consensus about what distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate practices resides in the nested meanings of specific constitutive and/or communal social goods. These meanings harbor implicit notions about legitimate practices as well as legitimate relations in and among affected groups and individuals.[14] A significant threat to or a sustained, deliberate deviation from accepted practices and relations prompts organized response, which can range from public criticism, legal challenges, and policy initiatives to more unconventional and violent forms of protest, including rebellion. Water in the arid American West is a particularly good illustration for two reasons.

First, water has long been associated with a number of generally desirable but frequently competing values. It is valued not only as a source of sustenance but also as an instrument of agriculture, object of beauty, industrial commodity, means of transportation, community good, fuel for urban development, clean and pure resource, and place for recreation and wildlife habitat (Wilkenson 1990). The West's persistent aridity (many areas receive less than 12 inches of precipitation a year) complicates decision making, because all water-related values cannot be realized equally. Moreover, realization of any one value may well preclude that of one or more others. Consequently, the just allocation of scarce water is a constant challenge, the fertile setting for a moral economy of a complex good.

Second, water is a constitutive and intrinsically communal social good. Westerners identify themselves and relate to others in terms of water, which plays much the same role as rice in Japan or tobacco in nineteenth-century Missouri. The most important forms of relation and identification derive from the fact that long-term community and polity in the arid American West are not possible without an ongoing ability to procure and allocate water. Figuratively if not literally "at the center of human communities" (Bates et al. 1993, 14), water is embedded in the very notion of collective existence. It relates community residents as citizens, impressing upon them in particular their "mutual dependency, common enterprise, and joint responsibility" (Sax 1990, 17).[15]

Founded in part on water, western communities and their residents recognize and frequently interact with one another in terms of shared or contested rivers, watersheds, and aquifers. Water rights and practices, diversion structures, and a variety of water-oriented districts, institutions, and organizations identify people in even more particular ways: water rights holder versus nonholders, junior versus senior appropriator, up- versus downstream community, lower versus upper basin state, and so on. The web of physical, legal, and administrative structures that capture and allocate water constitutes in effect a social and political matrix that individuals, communities, and states invariably take into account. In other words, water is a vital medium for social and political relations, a medium at the center of processes of community, even regional self-identification (Brown and Ingram 1987).

Water's status as a constitutive and intrinsically communal social good accounts for the fact that westerners conceive and cherish water in terms beyond those of mere economic utility. It is not simply a liquid with certain physical properties, a thing unto itself, a commodity whose value is realized only or essentially in economic exchange. Water symbolizes inherently desirable states of affairs achieved and experienced only in concert with others, in particular the mutual advantages of "schools, churches, and social life," of a civic and moral as well as economic progress (Mead 1903, 382; see also Hundley 1992; Pisani 1984; Sherow 1990).[16] Because of these deeply valued and clustered senses of community and self, water issues turn on far more than questions of how to allocate efficiently an increasingly scarce yet increasingly valuable resource. Also involved is the more difficult but important question of which water-related value should prevail and why in given situations. As in the examples of rice and tobacco, water-related senses of community and self, especially when threatened, establish the context for evaluation and action.

The deeply rooted and politically significant moral economy of water springs from its constitutive and intrinsically communal properties. Long valued for its role in creating and maintaining civically rewarding communities, water has a moral thrust that is fundamentally negative; in effect, water allocations in the end should not undermine achieved or expected community. Simply put, transfers and allocations that threaten or undermine the integrity of community are illegitimate. Subordinating the disposition of water to the integrity of community is legitimate because the autonomy, welfare, and identity of western communities are tied directly to water.[17]

The embedded and negative nature of water's moral economy affects how westerns invoke it. Because embedded, its longstanding meanings and understandings at times are taken for granted. Consequently, westerners invoke it sporadically, often in response to specific circumstances and with the objective of more firmly

[14] My idea is similar to Wuthnow's (1987) concept of a moral order: a concept "essentially about culture . . . an attribute of social relations" (p. 58). Moral orders "express boundaries," so that we may know "the place of things," and they include "implicit categories that define proper relations among individuals and groups" (p. 69).

[15] These intrinsically communal properties qualify water as a sphere of security and welfare, which Walzer (1983, 64) describes in part as "political community for the sake of provision, provision for the sake of community." The communal properties and effects of water in the arid West can be compared to those of education, sumptuary laws, relief, and ransom of captives in Walzer's analysis of medieval Jewish communities (pp. 71–4).

[16] Ingram and Oggins (1990, 5, 10) emphasize the noneconomic view of water. In a survey of leaders in Arizona, New Mexico, and western Texas whose communities stood to lose water through intensified water marketing (economically driven rural-to-urban transfers), the overwhelming majority characterized the loss as damaging to rural communities and not subject to compensation. According to one, when a community loses its water it "loses its present, its past, and its future."

[17] Bates et al. (1993, 182) refer to this as a principle of equity, rooted "in the shared, public nature of water." Equity dictates, they conclude, that water-related decisions involve and reflect "the whole community, not just those parts that were there first or that have money or power" (p. 178).

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securing the integrity of specific communities (including states).[18] These invocations pair acts of rediscovery with calls for change. In each instance westerners negotiate water's multiple uses and meanings in light of both new circumstances and water's fundamental moral imperative.

Beyond public and often emotionally charged declarations of concern or injustice,[19] westerners invoke the moral economy of water through appeals for reform, new legislation, reinterpretation of existing laws, or more direct action, including violence (Babbitt 1988; Dunbar 1983; Pisani 1984; Sherow 1990; Walton 1992).[20] Results have been broadly and consistently regulatory. Many of these regulations, unlike those associated with other natural resources, shelter water from fully self-interested, privatized, or market-driven transactions, which qualifies water as an example of what Walzer calls a "blocked exchange."[21] The limits westerners have placed on the exchange, sale, appropriation, or transfer of water include granting it public ownership or public resource status; nonexport laws; public trust, welfare, or interest review of proposed transactions; beneficial use requirements (officially interpreted in some states as a prohibition on speculation in water for profit); and, since the Owens Valley affair, area-of-origin statutes, which include vesting irrigation and other water-related districts or associations with a veto over all out-of-watershed transfers (DuMars and Minnis 1989; Hoffman-Dooley 1996; MacDonnell 1990; MacDonnell and Howe 1986; Sax 1989; Tregarthen 1983).[22] Coupled with longstanding fears about water monopolies (Alston 1978), these limitations reflect deep concerns about water-related measures that would subject states or communities to external, arbitrary control and, consequently, compromise their identities as states and communities.[23] Rooted in the past and in water's status as a constitutive and intrinsically communal social good, the moral economy of water remains the basis for determining the legitimacy of a number of water-related activities.

A moral-economic political analysis based on social goods is justified for at least three reasons. First, this concept, unlike the prevailing view, is not limited by time or culture. Social goods and their attendant moral economies are characteristic of modern as well as premodern communities. Political science need not restrict moral-economic analysis to the clash of embedded versus autonomous economies, or, for that matter, to the phenomenon of rebellion. Second, social goods and moral economies are plural, not singular. Each moral economy is a separate although often nested sphere of action-inspiring legitimacy. Unlike the overriding economic utility of rational-choice theory or the undifferentiated webs-of-life of traditional moral economy, my revision honors the moral complexity of human communities, and it captures much more precisely the grounds for politically significant moral indignation. Third, the grounding in social goods minimizes the risk of under- or oversocialized conceptions of economic behavior. Because of the mutual, constitutive, and subjectively meaningful properties of specific social goods, moral economy is embedded in concrete, ongoing social relations, not in generalized, mechanical moralities or romanticized pasts. In sum, important kinds of political and economic activity reflect the inherently cultural properties of meaningful goods, and a moral-economic analysis based on social goods is especially well suited to explain them.

[18] This sporadic aspect supports Walzer's argument that the distributional autonomy of social goods is a critical principle, that the demand for autonomy is "more likely to make for occasional reformation and rebellion than for everyday enforcement" (Walzer 1983, 10).

[19] For example, residents across six counties in the San Luis Valley of Colorado recently responded to plans to sell the valley's groundwater to Denver and other large cities. They placed a notice in the *Denver Post*: "We, the undersigned citizens, are committed to preserving the water within Colorado's San Luis Valley for land and life. Private marketers are drawing up plans to take water from the Valley and sell to other parts of Colorado or other regions. *We are opposed to these plans.* . . . We are committed to fight efforts to take water from this beautiful place, the San Luis Valley. Help us to protect land and life" (Johnston et al. 1996, 5 B, emphasis in the original).

[20] Secretary of the Interior Babbitt, a former governor of Arizona, characterized unfettered, market-driven rural-to-urban transfers of water as "economic Darwinism" and recommended protective regulations and oversight. Otherwise, he predicted, "big cities will inexorably squeeze the water and the life out of small communities" (Babbitt 1988, 7).

[21] "Blocked exchanges set limits on the dominance of wealth" (Walzer 1983, 99). Due to their shared understandings, some goods (e.g., human beings, rights, criminal justice) properly fall outside the sphere of money altogether. Other goods (medical care, education, and, I argue, water in the arid American West) are partially blocked; market-like exchanges are permitted but only to the extent that the sphere of money does not jeopardize the core, noncommodity values associated with those goods.

[22] Area-of-origin statutes limit interbasin transfers to prevent environmental, political, and/or economic losses to the areas from which the water is transferred.

[23] Westerners' historical objections to water monopolies effectively illustrate Walzer's theory of social goods, dominance, and monopoly. Walzer (1983, 10–3) defines dominance and monopoly as the unjust conversion of one social good into another. In the end, he concludes, "dominance of goods makes for the domination of people" (p. 19), which is precisely what westerners fear about water monopolies.

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