

Keith Hart 1943–2025: Manchester Man in World Society

Chris Hann

<https://doi.org/10.46585/cargo.2025.2.185>

Keith Hart was a Cambridge-trained social anthropologist who had considerable influence on the discipline in Britain and elsewhere for more than half a century. Born and raised in Manchester, the city which exemplified industrial transformation and the market ideology which grew with it, Keith was proud of these roots. But in the course of a productive career on both sides of the Atlantic, he transcended academic anthropology (including its fieldwork methodology) to develop a humanist philosophy of history that was truly cosmopolitan. Keith was enthusiastic about the digital technologies that were transforming capitalism itself in the late twentieth century. An excellent stylist, no anthropologist was more active in the new social media. Keith's long rumbustious life, from cocky hellraiser in Cambridge to internet recluse who connected with the entire world via his laptop, is retold in his extraordinary 'auto-ethnography' (Hart 2022). This weaves intimate personal detail together with the most diverse materials from popular culture and his principal sources of inspiration in European intellectual history.

Numerous famous anthropologists have built their careers on their first field research, often undertaken within the constraints of a doctoral degree. Unusually, Keith never published his ethnography, judging his data from a slum in Accra in the mid-1960s to be too sensitive. He lived with migrants whose home communities in the north were well known in the literature through the publications of Meyer Fortes, his head of department at Cambridge. The day-to-day challenges of the fieldwork were frequently evoked in later Hart papers. The most influential of these was Hart 1973, which led directly to the concept of the 'informal economy' (also 'informal sector') and legendary status for its author in the emerging field of development studies. Job offers and consultancies piled up. However, when a series of affiliations in North America ended in fiasco, personal and professional,

Keith returned to Cambridge in 1983 to resurrect his career. We were appointed together as Assistant Lecturers in 1984, the year that Ernest Gellner took over from Jack Goody as William Wyse professor.

Keith's first monograph addressed West Africa as an underdeveloped region (Hart 1982). Adapted from a report he prepared for USAID, its arguments were the antithesis of the 'bottom up' implications of his pioneering work on the informal sector. Some diagnosed a definitive conversion to Marxism at this point. Keith was indeed infatuated for a few years, but in the 1982 book he preferred the mercantilist political economy of Sir James Steuart to both Adam Smith and Karl Marx. By the time he came to assess 'the contribution of Marxism to economic anthropology' (Hart 1983), his initial enthusiasm had waned. He appreciated *Capital* (Volume 1), but he remained too steeped in the values of Manchester liberalism (and the conservatism of the British lower middle classes) to join the neo-Marxists. Keith also admired Weber and Durkheim, while recommending Engels for his ethnographic descriptions of the condition of the Manchester working classes – and Lenin for his revolutionary acumen.

While never repudiating the trademark concept he launched in 1973, Keith (a classics scholar before he switched to anthropology) grew tired of interacting with economists and found no intellectual satisfaction in the world of 'development'. He therefore expanded his interests to intellectual and world history. A two-year secondment in Jamaica and personal acquaintance with C. L. R. James in London led him to see the Caribbean as a crucible in the formation of modern capitalism – the vital hinge between Northwest Europe, Africa, and the Americas. (Eastern Europe and Asia were never really on his radar.) Keith's theorisation of money in his Malinowski Lecture of 1986 (the 'two sides of the coin', i.e. both the political community and economic exchange) was later extended into a treatise that analysed money as central (together with language) to our communication as humans (Hart 2000). Individual human beings could seize the emancipatory potential of the internet to create new forms of currency and thereby undermine states and bureaucratic domination in general. These were the years in which Keith cultivated a huge following (at least by academic standards) on Facebook and Twitter. He initiated the Open Anthropology Cooperative, while continuing to lecture, write new papers, and contribute editorials to *Anthropology Today*.

In Cambridge Keith co-launched (with Anna Grimshaw) and edited the *Prickly Pear* pamphlet series. He was an innovative director of the African Studies Centre and he won a university prize for his lecturing. Cambridge is not the kind of place that tenured staff move away from, but Keith eventually followed my example. Affiliations in Aberdeen (a sinecure arranged by his economist friend John Bryden), London (Goldsmiths and the LSE), and Pretoria disguised the fact that

he spent the last three decades of his life domiciled in Paris, with his second wife, Sophie Chevalier, and his laptop for company. Marcel Mauss became an obsession in this period. He reinterpreted *The Gift* (Mauss 2016) in the light of Mauss's political writings of the 1920s, which had been overlooked in Anglophone scholarship until David Graeber came along. Keith linked up with the MAUSS community initiated by Alain Caillé and worked closely with Jean-Louis Laville in developing new visions of the 'human economy' (Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010). This produced concrete results in the work of excellent students recruited to the Human Economy Program, which Keith directed with John Sharp at the University of Pretoria from 2011.¹

In economic anthropology, in part due to the American years, his range was huge: from the domestication of animals and plants in prehistory to community currencies in the era of the internet. We agreed that Mauss and Karl Polanyi were the two seminal figures for modern economic anthropology; personal factors tipped the balance towards Mauss in his case and Polanyi in mine. In June 2006 we co-organised a conference on *Anthropological Approaches to 'the Economy'* at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. This generated an eclectic conference volume (Hann and Hart 2009) and also an introductory textbook that has sold well over the years (Hann and Hart 2011). I learned a great deal during this cooperation, just as I had when playing the role of younger brother in Cambridge in the 1980s.

Interaction with David Graeber in the new century provided fresh stimulus. The brash American wrote big books and had the outreach and international impact that his senior also craved. But Keith was generous in his support, even when they disagreed.² Both deplored the current state of the world. Graeber responded as an anarchist. Keith would not disavow what he interpreted as the democratic-liberal-cosmopolitan ideals of the European Enlightenment (notably the trio of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant).

The concept of national capitalism was a major contribution of his later years

¹ See the Berghahn series *The Human Economy*, edited by Keith: <https://www.berghahn-books.com/series/human-economy>.

² See Hart 2012 for indications of how Graeber pushed him to clarify his own positions. They had many affinities. Both were academically precocious and won scholarships to accelerate their progress in the educational treadmill. In their brilliant writings, both saw anthropology as a vehicle with which to celebrate the human spirit. Both inspired fierce loyalties. At the same time, neither shied away from ruffling feathers in his immediate environment (see below). I think the main difference stemmed from the fact that David's parents were left-wing political activists while Keith's immediate family was characterised by the aspirational values of the lower middle-classes.

and an integral part of a broader historical vision (Hart 2024). Having abandoned the competitive markets of industrial society for a financialised capitalism that rewarded only rent seekers, our globalised monopolistic bureaucratic world resembles that of ‘agrarian civilisation’, characterised by precapitalist scales of social inequality. This analysis is becoming ever more persuasive in the second presidency of Donald Trump.

In his personal life, Keith was successful in accumulating property, sometimes through gambling as well as prudent investments and real estate transactions. He could be abrasive, opinionated, and egotistical; but at the same time he was good company and generous with his time as well as his advice. When my young family was moving house in Cambridge using self-help methods (we had no money to pay professionals), Keith was the friend who came around to help lift the washing machine and large items of furniture. He was fortunate to find love and stability with Sophie Chevalier, a professor of anthropology at Université de Picardie Jules Verne. Together with his two daughters, born on the same day twenty-eight years apart, Sophie was his anchor in the last three decades of his life.

Keith Hart was both a hard-nosed empiricist and a romantic idealist, a field-worker and a theoretician, an outstanding editor and a mentor to several generations of students, including many who only knew him online. Though he could read and converse in several languages, Keith taught and wrote exclusively in English. His spoken English was very different from that of most Cambridge undergraduates. The Manchester accent with the hint of an American drawl (which weakened in later years) combined to great effect in public performances everywhere. Research seminars were always an opportunity for inimitable chutzpah. But the irrepressible, irascible Mancunian was not an easy colleague. Beyond prickliness and banter, he had a short fuse. Depending on his mood, he could be downright rude to everyone, from nervous undergraduates to his friends and peers, including his head of department. Ernest Gellner was deeply bruised by Keith’s aggression. No one found him easy, not even Jack Goody, who was responsible for welcoming him back to Cambridge. But Keith repaid that trust with unflinching loyalty and worked with his former supervisor in preparing several Goody publications for the press.³

³ He performed a comparable service for his Michigan friend Roy (‘Skip’) Rappaport, whose posthumous magnum opus on ritual and religion would not have been published without Keith’s editing (Rappaport 1999).

Keith visited Jack Goody in a Cambridge nursing home not long before his passing (2015). He also had a deep personal attachment to Esther Newcomb Goody, reflected in his contribution to her posthumous festschrift (Hart 2025).

Keith enjoyed writing poetry and sometimes presented himself as a novelist *manqué*. He also dreamed of completing big academic books, like those of his mentors and several friends. That did not work out. But he knew how to engage readers (especially younger readers) and he could provide more food for thought in a few pages than other academics manage in hefty tomes. For those who still like to read books, the volumes he published in 2000 and 2022 are complementary (partly overlapping) cornucopias. They include fragments of his poetry as well as non-academic prose. Numerous essays deserve to be read by future generations.⁴ Despite health setbacks, in the months before his death the congenial wordsmith was still posting vigorously and hoping to complete two books: a biographical study of Mauss and a collection of his own Africa-related papers.

I shall always associate Keith Hart with the Cambridge social anthropology department of the 1980s, where he was one of a quartet of scholars striving to shift the discipline in the direction of long-term history (Jack Goody, Ernest Gellner, and Alan Macfarlane were the others). I shall miss him.

References

- Hann, Chris, and Keith Hart. 2011. *Economic Anthropology; History, Ethnography, Critique*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hann, Chris, and Keith Hart (eds) 2009. *Market and Society: The Great Transformation Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, Keith. 1973. Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11 (1): 61–89.
- Hart, Keith. 1982. *The Political Economy of West African Agriculture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, Keith. 1983. The Contribution of Marxism to Economic Anthropology. In Sutti Ortiz (ed.): *Economic Anthropology: Topics and Theories*: 105–144. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Hart, Keith. 1986. Heads or Tails? Two Sides of the Coin. *Man* 21 (3): 637–656.

⁴ Diverse materials, including many of the academic texts cited in this obituary but also non-academic writings, can be readily located at Keith Hart's pioneering website: <https://thememorybank.co.uk/keith/>

See also: <https://keithhart.academia.edu/>.

Additional recent materials can be found at: johnkeithhart.substack.com/p/an-anthropologist-in-the-world-revolution.

Keith Hart gave further insight into his family background and career in a rich interview with Alan Macfarlane in 2006: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zo_gyhkVz-0 (all sites accessed on 2/12/2025).

- Hart, Keith. 2000. *The Memory Bank: Money in an Unequal World*. London: Profile.
- Hart, Keith. 2006. Agrarian Civilization and World Society. In *Technology, Literacy and the Evolution of Society: Implications of the Work of Jack Goody*, edited by David R. Olson and Michael Cole: 29–48. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hart, Keith. 2012. In Rousseau's Footsteps: David Graeber and the Anthropology of Unequal Society. (review of David Graeber 2011. *Debt. The First 5000 Years*) Online: thememorybank.co.uk/in-rousseau-footsteps-david-graeber-and-the-anthropology-of-unequal-society-2/.
- Hart, Keith. 2022. *Self in the World. Connecting Life's Extremes*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Hart, Keith. 2024. The Rise and Fall of National Capitalism. *Economic Anthropology* 11 (1): 134–155.
- Hart, Keith. 2025. Afterword. In *Building Social Worlds. Thinking forwards with Esther Newcomb Goody*, edited by Barbara Bodenhorn, Alicia Fentiman and Mary Goody: 236–242. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Hart, Keith, Jean-Louis Laville, and Antonio David Cattani (eds). 2010. *The Human Economy. A Citizen's Guide*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Mauss, Marcel. 2016 [1925]. *The Gift*. [Expanded edition]. Chicago, IL: Hau Books.
- Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chris Hann

hann@eth.mpg.de

Emeritus Director, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
(Halle/Saale)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1836-6284>