



## Pleas for Fieldwork

**DOI:**

[doi/full/10.1108/S0743-41542018000036B007](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0743-41542018000036B007)

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Serra, G. (2018). Pleas for Fieldwork: Polly Hill on Observation and Induction, 1966-1982. In *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* (B ed., Vol. 36, pp. 93-108). (Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology). <https://doi.org/doi/full/10.1108/S0743-41542018000036B007>

**Published in:**

Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology

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# **Pleas for Fieldwork: Polly Hill on Observation and Induction, 1966-1982**

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**Accepted version**

**Published in *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, vol. 36B (2018)**

**Marcel Boumans and Hsiang-Ke Chiao (eds.) ‘Symposium on Mary Morgan: Curiosity, Imagination, and Surprise’, pp. 93-108**

## **ABSTRACT**

The article reconstructs the methodological trajectory of Polly Hill. Crossing the boundaries between economics and anthropology, Hill’s work was simultaneously an epistemic challenge to development economics, and a testimony to the complexity and richness of economic life in what she called the ‘rural tropical world’. Drawing inspiration from the processes that Mary Morgan referred to as ‘seeking parts, looking for wholes’, the paper explores the evolving relationship between observational practice and conceptual categories in Hill’s work on West Africa and India. It is argued that fieldwork, the central element in Hill’s methodological reflection, served two main functions. Firstly, it acted as the cornerstone of her views on observation and induction, framing her understanding of the relationship between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’. Secondly, Hill used fieldwork as a narrative trope to articulate her hopeful vision for an integration of economics and anthropology, and later express her feelings of distance and alienation from the ways in which these disciplines were actually practised.

**Keywords:** Polly Hill, fieldwork, economic anthropology, development economics, observation, induction

**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank the participants and organizers of the conference ‘Curiosity, Imagination and Surprise’ (Utrecht, September 2017), two anonymous referees, and Mary Morgan for comments on an earlier version of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies. The archival trip to consult the Polly Hill papers at the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies (Northwestern University) was generously supported by the Department of History of the University of Sussex, while the assistance of the librarians of the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks are due to Gareth Austin, Vinita Damodaran, Robert Dimand, Michael Lipton, Felix Meier zu Selhausen and Alexander Moradi.

## **Pleas for fieldwork: Polly Hill on observation and induction, 1966-1982**

*'The most winning characteristic of the rather harsh Cetian temperament was curiosity, inopportune and inexhaustible curiosity [...]*

*No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex'.*

**U. K. Le Guin, *The Word for World is Forest***

### **Introduction: seeking parts, looking for wholes<sup>1</sup>**

Primarily known to historians of economics as the niece of John Maynard Keynes and the co-editor of his correspondence with Lydia Lopokova (Hill and Keynes 1989), Polly Hill (1914-2005) carved spaces of intersection between economics and anthropology to analyse agriculture, migration, trade and poverty in West Africa. Yet, in spite of the significant impact that Hill has had on economic anthropology and African economic history, her work has largely escaped historical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Hill's position as an academic outsider (she never held a permanent academic job) who did not have 'disciples', combined with her uncompromising and confrontational stance, are perhaps to blame for this state of affairs. Rather than simply reducing Hill to a 'deflator of theories' (Manning 1971, 56), it is shown that her work presented a critical interrogation of the relationship between observational practices and conceptual categories, and a more general attempt to build a defence of inductive approaches.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis is guided by some concerns that found expression in Mary Morgan's work. In contrast with the relative neglect of Sub-Saharan Africa by historians and philosophers of economics, Morgan found in Nigeria and Zambia apt contexts in which to dissect the ways in which facts 'travel' (Morgan 2008) and the making of economic observation and measurement (Morgan 2009; 2011). Morgan's discussion of the experiences of Phyllis Deane in Zambia, and of Wolfgang Stolper, Alan R. Prest and Ian G. Stewart in Nigeria raises two sets of interrelated problems. The first pertains to the nature of economic

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, the following convention is adopted for the referencing of archival correspondence: correspondents' names, date (dd/mm/yy), Polly Hill papers (PH), box number, folder number.

<sup>2</sup> The most significant exceptions are Gregory's (1989) entry in the Palgrave dictionary of economics, Austin's preface (1997) to a new edition of Hill (1963), Keith Hart's obituary (2005), and Dimand and Saffu's biographical piece (2017).

<sup>3</sup> The expression comes from a review of Hill (1970), but the notion that she was better at showing empirically that other scholars were wrong, rather than proposing alternative theoretical frameworks, recurred also in the reception of her later works.

observation in the developing world. Starting from the premise that economists tend to conflate observation and statistical measurement (Morgan 2011, 303; Maas and Morgan 2012, 1), Morgan treated national income accounting as a conceptual template within which it is possible to aggregate economic observations, and reconfigure them into new representations and heuristic tools. The notion of ‘seeking parts, looking for wholes’ captures the complex process by which economists, through a series of relocations between the field and the office, constructed the first set of national income accounts in Zambia and Nigeria. This process simultaneously reveals the power of national income accounts to act as ordering structures to many bits of heterogeneous observations, and the arbitrary nature of their conceptual apparatus. The latter became apparent when economists travelled to the field, and faced a reality very different from that for which national income accounts were designed. While national income accountants saw the income, production and expenditures of specific classes of people as a ‘part’ of the ‘whole’ (the resulting representation of the size and composition of the national economy), in Hill’s work the concept of ‘national economy’ appears remote from the concrete experience of economic agents. Instead, she was interested in ‘zooming in’, onto the local activities and institutional arrangements that made up the texture of economic life in rural Africa. In spite of these significant differences, Morgan’s notion of ‘seeking parts, looking for wholes’ provides a flexible framework to analyse the mutually constitutive relationship between units of analysis, data collection strategies and conceptual categories. Looking for ‘wholes’ and ‘parts’ allows to detect continuities and changes in Hill’s understanding of correct observational practice, and explore her evolving views on what could be achieved through intensive data collection in the field.

The second aspect, not very prominent in Morgan’s analysis but crucial in mine, is the relationship between economics and anthropology. By extension, this relates to how specific ways of identifying and observing economic phenomena define the identity of academic and epistemic communities, and shape their interaction. Before the rise of development economics, Sub-Saharan Africa had been particularly important for the consolidation of social anthropology as a distinct discipline in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Goody 1995). This had both political and epistemic ramifications. If on the one hand it made the association between anthropology and colonialism stronger, it also led to the consolidation of a privileged epistemic status as the discipline that, almost by definitions, dealt with the specificities (however defined) of African social and economic life. It was indeed to the anthropologists that Phyllis Deane turned for help to prepare a survey that could help her

make sense of the ‘village economy’ in Zambia (Morgan 2011, 312). Similarly, W. Arthur Lewis claimed that the ‘economist who studies the non-market economy must abandon most of what he has learnt, and adopt the techniques of the anthropologist’ (Lewis 1962, viii).<sup>4</sup> While Lewis’ pronouncement and the case described by Morgan suggest a smooth interdisciplinary exchange, historically the relationship between economists and anthropologists has been much more tense and ambivalent. If in the 1960s the economic anthropologist George Dalton (1968, 180) noted that ‘of all the fields called social science, economics and anthropology are the least alike in their traditions, methods, contents’, in more recent times the anthropologist James Ferguson (1997) provocatively called development economics ‘anthropology’s evil twin’.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalence, and often plain difficulty, of this interaction dominates the scant historiography on economic anthropology (Lodewijks 1994; Hann and Hart 2016; Cook and Young 2016), a discipline that has consistently tried to build a bridge between these two disciplines and communities.

Both the articulation of Hill’s methodological positions, and her understanding of the relationship between economics and anthropology, were embodied in an evolving reflection about fieldwork. It is argued that this served a twofold heuristic function. Firstly, it acted as the cornerstone of Hill’s reflections on observation and induction, framing her understanding of the relationship between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’. Secondly, in a more reflexive fashion, Hill used fieldwork as a narrative trope to articulate her hopeful vision for an integration of economics and anthropology, and later express her feelings of distance and alienation from the ways in which these disciplines were actually practised.

### **‘A plea for indigenous economics’ (1966): seeking wholes, looking for parts**

Following an economics degree from Cambridge in 1936, some editorial work with Keynes at the *Economic Journal*, and a research position at the Fabian Society (1938-1939), Hill became a civil servant. This period of her life, which lasted until 1951, saw her employed at the Treasury, the Board of Trade and, finally, the Statistics Division of the Colonial Office, where one of their tasks was ‘to tell the colonies how to produce accurate figures’ (McFarlane 1996). Like the economists analysed by Morgan (2009; 2011), Hill had become

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Hill would have certainly included Lewis among those economists who should have learnt from anthropologists how to ‘observe’ African economies. Their disagreement started early on, when Hill (1953) produced a very critical review of Lewis (1953).

<sup>5</sup> Dalton’s claim, however, is based on a very narrow definition of what economics is, and how it evolved. For an account that identifies the roots of economic anthropology in classic debates in political economy, see Hann and Hart (2016).

accustomed to see African economies through ‘second-hand numbers’ before venturing into the field. This happened when the weekly *West Africa*, where Hill was employed as commercial editor between 1951 and 1953, sent her to Ghana as a correspondent. This experience proved to be life-changing:

I came to life for the first time since my childhood when I landed in the Gold Coast [as Ghana was called under colonial rule] in December 1952. Immediately on landing I felt I had come to a new planet and was freed from my difficult Cambridge background. My life was for ever changed. It was wonderful to arrive in a colony which was leading the way towards independence in Africa [...] It was an electric time (McFarlane 1996).

In 1954, Hill became a research fellow at the University College of the Gold Coast. In the Department of Economics, her involvement in the preparation of a series of surveys of cocoa cooperatives and farming communities in Southern Ghana (Hill 1957-1960) laid the foundation for her future work.<sup>6</sup> These early efforts resulted also in what she later called ‘a pathetic little book’ (McFarlane 1996), *The Gold Coast Cocoa Farmer: A Preliminary Survey* (Hill 1956). In spite of her partial repudiation, this volume contained the seed of an explicit reflection on the necessity of combining statistical surveys and ethnographic methods (Hill 1956, 2-7).<sup>7</sup> But further research made Hill realise that she had missed a crucial feature: the fact that many cocoa farmers were actually migrants. This insight provided the departure point for Hill’s most famous and influential work, *The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana: A Study in Rural Capitalism* (Hill 1963). The volume presented an impressive amount of new empirical information collected through surveys, interviews, and critical appraisals of already existing statistics, but mostly owed its influence to the way in which it allowed its main characters to occupy the centre stage. Rather than perpetuating a commonly held view of African farmers as homogenous peasants, or as passive victims of History waiting to be ‘modernised’, Hill gave voice and agency to a class of ‘rural entrepreneurs’. As effectively put by the economic anthropologist Keith Hart (2005): ‘It would be hard to exaggerate the contrast between her Ghanaian findings and the conventional thinking of development economists and administrators at the time and since’, contradicting ‘deep-seated convictions about western economic leadership and African backwardness’. Her work can also be seen as a significant contribution to economic history, explaining how, within a few decades, a group of ‘indigenous capitalists’ without assistance from the colonial state, turned

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<sup>6</sup> In 1963 she chose to relocate to the newly established Institute of African Studies.

<sup>7</sup> At this stage, Hill (1956, 5) found especially in the work of Audrey Richards (1954) an important source of inspiration.

a country that did not export any cocoa beans in 1892 into the world's largest exporter (Austin 1997, ix). Hill rightly defined the origins of the Ghanaian cocoa industry as 'one of the most fascinating specimen of "economic growth" the world has ever seen' (P. Hill to J. Robinson, 21/11/60, PH 20/2), although one that had largely escaped the notice of development economists.<sup>8</sup>

The methodological premises and goals that shaped her work on cocoa farmers found expression in 'A Plea for Indigenous Economics: The West African example' (Hill 1966).<sup>9</sup> This essay was simultaneously a critique of how development economists observed West Africa, and a call for a shared epistemic platform between economics and anthropology. These concerns were set against the background of Hill's own changing disciplinary identity:

For a long time I have now tried to sit in the middle of the fast-flowing river between economics and anthropology, but naturally I have been carried down-stream and thrown onto the further (anthropological) bank (P. Hill to J. Robinson, 21/11/60, PH 20/2).

Hill saw herself as someone who was 'trying to build some sort of link between economics and anthropology', but was also worried about the fact that the gap between the two disciplines was 'widening, instead of narrowing' (P. Hill to H. Kimble, 18/02/62, PH 20/4). Development economists were caught in the paradox of either seeing economic activities in the developing world as too simple, and thus unworthy of detailed investigation at the grass roots, or as too complex, and thus permanently relegated to the 'exotic' domain of the anthropologists (Hill 1966, 14-16). If the expression 'indigenous economics' circumscribed the subject matter to 'the *basic fabric* of existent economic life' (Hill 1966, 10, emphasis in the original), the label 'field economist' (see also Hill 1956, 2) captured Hill's perception of her ambivalent disciplinary identity, and stressed the importance of relocating to the field the primary locus of economic observation.<sup>10</sup> But what did it mean to observe 'in the field'? The notion of fieldwork is compatible with different forms of observation: not only ethnographic study and participant observation, but also collection of statistical data at the micro-level (Udry 2003). Although the complementarity of these different ways of observing partly accounted for the distinctive character of development economics in the

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<sup>8</sup> Although it had already appeared in print, in 1967 *Migrant Cocoa Farmers* was accepted as Hill's PhD thesis. Hill was thus awarded a doctorate in Social Anthropology, but under the supervision of the economist Joan Robinson.

<sup>9</sup> It was also reprinted with minor changes as the first essay in Hill (1970, 3-17).

<sup>10</sup> Allegedly, it was only reluctantly, and upon insistence of the Cambridge anthropologist Meyer Fortes, that she started calling herself an 'economic anthropologist' – even though she felt that 'anthropological economist' was more appropriate (P. Hill to R. Firth, 31/10/65, PH 20/6). Hill considered M. Fortes and J. Robinson her 'great teachers' in anthropology and economics respectively (as indicated in the dedication of Hill 1986).

1950s and 1960s (Ingham 1999), Hill also felt that her background hindered her capacity to apply the methods that she considered appropriate:

As an economist, I find this type of work much more difficult than an anthropologist would. I have a) to discard everything I know b) to collect vast quantities of field notes, to realise that at stage b) I had largely missed the point, so that much of my material, as distinct from the experience of collecting it, is useless d) rather in despair, to formulate some generalisations which (if one is lucky) stand up to the test of subsequent fieldwork somewhat better than one had expected (P. Hill to S. Mitz, 09/09/62, PH 22/190).<sup>11</sup>

The ‘wholes’ that were at the centre of Hill’s research emerged from what she called the ‘compartmentalism of economic life’ (Hill 1966, 16). By this, she meant that in West Africa the equivalents of well-known economic concepts and variables acquired such distinctive forms that the conventional economist ‘does not know where to look to find evidence of their existence’ (Hill 1966, 16). This, simultaneously an epistemic problem and a practical issue, led Hill to conclude that the ontological complexity, diversity and, ultimately, fragmentation, of indigenous life could only be fruitfully studied ‘in terms of individual industries, occupations, sectors, etc.’ (Hill 1966, 16).<sup>12</sup> For the construction of statistical material on the different ‘parts’ or elements (patterns of land ownership, institutional arrangements, income distribution, etc.) that through their interaction imposed a specific form on the ‘wholes’, the economist ‘should discard his traditional procedures of collecting most of his material through field assistants, using questionnaires, in favour of a method, learned from anthropologists, which mainly relies on questioning and observing individuals while they are at work’ (Hill 1966, 16). Hill thought that questionnaires could not be used as the only form of inquiry ‘for the simple reason that it is impossible to draw up a satisfactory form until after the research has been completed’ (Hill 1966, 17). By this, she meant that a questionnaire already crystallised a vision of what were the important variables, and their functional relationships. Through this act of ‘pre-ordering’, questionnaires severely limited the capacity of the encounter with the field to suggest the ‘right’ research questions. On the other hand, the contours of Hill’s ‘wholes’ had to be made visible to be analytically treatable. While Hill advised economists to incorporate anthropological methods, she also claimed that social anthropologists ‘must understand the necessity of isolating economic factors’ and

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<sup>11</sup> This letter captures the idea, which became more explicit in later writings, of fieldwork as the main source for hypotheses, and as the ultimate test of their validity.

<sup>12</sup> Ethnicity was also mentioned as an important variable that shaped the compartmentalization of economic life (Hill 1966, 16).

‘adopt an economic point of view’ (Hill 1966, 17), thus maintaining that there was a distinct ‘economic sphere’ that could be meaningfully separated from other realms (political, religious, cultural, etc.).

But Hill’s ‘plea for indigenous economics’ was not merely expressing a methodological ideal: it also offered a reflection on the political implications of different ways of observing the developing world. Indeed the ‘indigenous’ or ‘field’ economist, with her fine-grained portraits of indigenous capitalists and localised economic communities, was the antithesis of the development economist as planner and social engineer (Morgan 2003; Boettke and Horwitz 2005) who, with the tools of macroeconomics and econometrics, aimed at ‘modernization’, industrialization and increased GDP per capita.<sup>13</sup> The authoritarian nature of developmentalism in 1960s West Africa (Mkandawire 2001) stood in a complicated relationship with indigenous capitalists (Iliffe 1983, chapter 4). At the time of Hill’s fieldwork in Ghana, this was particularly strained. The socialist government led by Kwame Nkrumah identified in the cocoa farming community, centred in the Asante region, a source of surplus for the financing of national development, and a political enemy opposed to the ‘modernization’ of the country (Allman 1993, Rathbone 2000).<sup>14</sup> In private correspondence, Hill was very critical of Nkrumah’s government, and of its eagerness to employ economists like Nicholas Kaldor, who served as tax advisor in 1961 without any understanding of the local context and history:<sup>15</sup>

There are the forward-looking politicians and the crazy economic policologists (a word I did not coin myself) like Kaldor [...] whose very purpose is to look back as little as possible, so as to be free to move forward. There are many fields of thought in which it has become definitely colonialist to look back at all (P. Hill to H. Kimble, 18/02/62, PH 20/4).

These harsh remarks about Kaldor interrogate the temporalities and the political implications associated with economics and anthropology. While development economists were seen as torch-bearers of progress and state building in the postcolonial era, anthropology

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<sup>13</sup> To these tools, Hill counterposed ‘the Beatrice Webb tradition of qualitative field observation and experiment’ (Hill 1966, 12).

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between Nkrumah’s government and the work of economists and statisticians, see Serra (2015).

<sup>15</sup> The eruption of strikes and riots in the summer of 1961 was seen by many as the direct consequence of Kaldor’s scheme of forced savings. For a recent appraisal of Kaldor’s work as policy adviser to the developing world, see King (2009, chapter 6).

seemed irremediably compromised by its colonial past.<sup>16</sup> If, as famously put by Tanzania's first president Julius Nyerere, Africans 'must run while others walk', what was the role of the 'indigenous economist' in the postcolonial world? Hill's answer was disheartening:

The indigenous economist is bound to remain a laughing stock, with governments and main-stream economists alike. As he is not primarily interested in modernization, he will appear to be an intellectual, if not a political, conservative – and perhaps it is impossible to study existing institutions unless, with a part of one's mind, one wishes to preserve them (Hill 1966, 20).

It is not surprising that, within the economics community, Hill's emphasis on local agencies and grass-roots research was initially well received by people like Peter Bauer (P. Hill to J. Robinson, 12/01/61, PH 20/3) and Theodore Schultz (T.W. Schultz to P. Hill, 25/09/64, PH 20/4) who, in spite of significant methodological differences, shared a critical attitude towards top-down policies and state planning.<sup>17</sup> Schultz, in particular was included by Hill, alongside the economic anthropologist Harold Schneider, in her small 'imagined community' of 'true' field economists (P. Hill to H. Schneider, 02/11/64, PH 20/5). But, precisely because the number of people that Hill thought were following a 'correct' observational practice was so small, the authentic field/indigenous economist remained 'a voice in the wilderness' (H. Schneider to P. Hill, 27/10/64, PH 20/5).

### **'A plea for inductive methods' (1982): observing wholes, classifying modes**

After she resigned from the University of Ghana in 1964, Hill obtained a non-stipendiary position as Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and managed to sponsor her fieldwork through a series of research grants. The appointment to a Smuts Readership in Commonwealth Studies (also at Cambridge) ended in 1979, leaving her without a permanent academic job (Dimand and Saffu 2017, 862). Meanwhile, since the mid-1960s her primary focus shifted from Ghana to Northern Nigeria. The two main studies resulting from this (Hill 1972; 1977) displayed a significant change in what constituted 'wholes' and 'parts', and their

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<sup>16</sup> However, recent research has led to a much more complex appreciation of the multiple ways in which the work of anthropologists supported, but also subverted, the conceptual categories and political practice of colonial regimes. Schumaker (2001) is a striking example.

<sup>17</sup> To these one could add Wolfgang Stolper, one of the main characters of Morgan's African case studies. Hill defined him 'a man of my heart' (P. Hill to M. Fortes, 04/04/62, PH 22/183). Although he was the main designer of Nigeria's first postcolonial development plan (Morgan 2008), Stolper shared with Hill a distrust for 'one size fits all' solutions to development problems and, like Hill, started from the necessity of acknowledging how little was known about African economies. This applied in particular to the statistical basis on which plans were designed and policies implemented (Stolper 1965). Furthermore, as director of the Centre for Research in Economic Development at the University of Michigan, Stolper represented an important source of institutional and financial support for Hill's later work in Northern Nigeria.

implications for Hill's observational practice. Rather than with classes of economic agents, or individual industries (Hill 1966), she became concerned with observing single rural villages.<sup>18</sup> The treatment of the village as a 'whole' had important implications for the way in which Hill approached the task of data collection, and the conceptual apparatus used. Although Hill had seen much value in collecting statistical data and stories about individuals and farming units since her early work on cocoa farmers, in her Nigerian village studies this practice was intimately connected with the goal of providing a holistic and relational understanding of 'poverty':

Nor can the workings of an economy as a whole be analysed in terms of the economic behavior of the dangerous statistical artefact, the average or representative farmer. It is the complementary relationship between richer and poorer farmers, who have different roles and ambitions, which requires examination (Hill 1972, 59).

On the other hand, poverty and inequality were chosen as privileged entry points into the observation of village life because of their potential capacity to make relations between 'parts' (individuals and farming units) visible:

any method of fieldwork which leans so heavily on the study of economic behavior of individual farmers (*qua* individuals) must be based on a theme (or set of themes) relating the individuals to one another, differentiating their functions, enabling one to observe the working of the economy as a whole and so forth (Hill 1972, 4).

These quotes show how, once again, the 'wholes' that represented the object of study and the 'parts' that represented the units of analysis on which data were collected were mutually constitutive. In order to produce a 'meaningful' statistical classification that was somehow reflective of local perceptions and values, Hill asked three local informants to classify each farming unit in the village into one of four groups, distinguished by their perceived capacity to face a late or poor harvest (Hill 1972, 59). She then proceeded to collect a vast amount of data on all the farming units, and reconstruct the causes and consequences of poverty by correlating the statistical information she had collected with the identity of the farming units ranked by her informants. The resulting 'partly abstract, partly impressionistic, partly realist' picture (Hill 1972, 189), zooming back and forth between the village, Hausaland as a whole and individual life stories, discussed poverty and inequality in

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<sup>18</sup> These were Batagarawa in Hill (1972), and Dorayi in Hill (1977). But her characterization of Dorayi (Hill 1977), a group of dispersed settlements outside Kano city, as 'rural' appeared particularly controversial (see for example Shea 1978, 168-169).

Batagarawa as multidimensional and historically situated phenomena. From the point of view of family genealogies, for example, the people identified as ‘very poor’ represented a cross-section of the whole population (Hill 1972, 184), rather than a stable group sharing distinctive demographic or economic features, and a self-fulfilling history of destitution. In Hill (1977), the village study became the starting point for an unorthodox account of slavery in Hausaland’s economy. This resulted in the critical reception of her work by several key scholars of Northern Nigeria (Arnould 1979; Lovejoy 1979; Smith 1979), increasing her feeling of being misunderstood and marginalised by the academic community.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, new immigration restrictions imposed by the Nigerian government meant that she could no longer conduct fieldwork for more than three months (Hill 1982, xi).

A spurt of fieldwork in six villages in Karnataka (India) in 1976-1977 informed a further evolution of her methodological stance, in which the economic life of single villages (the ‘wholes’ of her work in Northern Nigeria) became ‘parts’, building blocks of a more ambitious attempt to classify types of rural development.<sup>20</sup> This goal resulted in a comparative study of poverty and agrarian structures in Northern Nigeria and Southern India (Hill 1982). By contrasting technologies, social organization, class stratification, agricultural organization between the two locations at the centre of her work in Northern Nigeria and six villages in Karnataka, the book identified both areas as examples of what she called ‘dry grain farming mode’. From a methodological point of view, the book was meant as ‘a practical demonstration of the possibilities of formulating, on the basis of detailed fieldwork, a set of coherent hypotheses relating to a specific type of rural under-development which has recently come into existence’ (Hill 1982, 1). The first chapter, ‘The need to engage in field experience’, was originally referred to as a ‘plea for inductive methods’ (Polly Hill to Michael Lipton, 28/08/79, PH 22/189). This suggested continuity with her 1966 article, while also capturing the emotional character of her disdain towards how social scientists failed to provide an adequate analysis of economic life.

Indeed, while Hill remained as distrustful as ever of economists’ capacity to observe ‘indigenous economies’, she had also observed a deterioration in the anthropologists’ capacity to do so. In her eyes, this was the direct consequence of the increasing influence of Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s. In the British context, this transformation primarily occurred through the enthusiastic reception of the work of French scholars like Claude

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<sup>19</sup> Hill’s feelings are well documented in the correspondence in PH 18/1 and PH 26/3.

<sup>20</sup> In that period, she also visited Sri Lanka (Dimand and Saffu 2017, 866).

Meillassoux (1972) and Maurice Godelier ([1973] 1977). Hill, however, employed the term ‘Marxist’ in a loose sense, to indicate two different (but partly overlapping) meanings. Firstly, she used ‘Marxism’ as a label for all that she considered a-critical dogmatism in the social sciences. Secondly, and in a more specific sense, she saw Marxism as a monolithic paradigm dominated by the imposition of rigid terminologies and theoretical structures to empirical evidence, resulting in a deterministic and a-historical view of economic change.<sup>21</sup> Through the enunciation of 17 ‘general postulates relative to methodology’ (Hill 1982, 2), her ‘plea for inductive methods’ meant to counteract the claim of Marxist anthropologist Maurice Bloch that ‘the problem of empiricism is not so much that is wrong, as that it is impossible’ (quoted in Hill 1982, 2). Unlike her previous methodological statements, Hill’s arguments were framed within a more explicit reflection on the role played by unconscious assumptions in shaping social scientists’ capacity to observe accurately the world. Specifically, Hill referred to the ‘therapeutic’ nature of fieldwork (Hill 1982, 3) which, unlike theoretical work, was more likely to challenge the pre-formulated assumptions of the researcher. In contrast, ‘by adopting a wholly theoretical framework, which, by definition, is supposed to oust unconscious postulates, theoreticians vainly hope to reduce their vulnerability (Hill 1982, 3).

Hill’s solution amounted to attach yet another meaning to the relationship between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’, by claiming that fieldwork reconfigured the relationship between the particular and the general, allowing to challenge the researcher’s unconscious assumptions and leading to the adoption of conceptual categories that were more grounded in the empirical specificities of the context analysed. It was only on this basis, claimed Hill, that surprising analogies, made invisible by other approaches, could be revealed, and used as a solid basis on which different phenomena could be grouped. Thus, the notion of ‘dry grain farming mode’ was meant as the starting point of a new classification of ‘the agrarian systems which exist in the tropical world’ (Hill 1982, xi), the number of which, in order to be analytically useful, ‘may be quite manageably small – say ten or twenty rather than a thousand’ (Hill 1982, xi).

Hill’s use of the expression ‘mode’ indicated her commitment to identify classes of phenomena that were alternative to those postulated by Marxist terminology, and were

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<sup>21</sup> This, however, appears like a simplification in light of the variety of ways in which ‘Marxist’ economic anthropology was written in those years. For a general discussion, see Bloch [1983] (2004).

‘discovered’ differently.<sup>22</sup> However, even a sympathetic and encouraging commentator like the economic anthropologist Keith Hart pointed out that

The selection of language is unfortunately crucial. Thus many will take from your use of the term ‘mode of production’ the intention to replicate in some way Marxist procedures. The method is, of course, Weberian (neo-Kantian) – an attempt to discover the rational connexions between observed features (K. Hart to P. Hill, 30/05/80, PH 22/185).

Hill replied that, while there were ‘plenty of people who [had told her] that dry grain agrarian mode will provoke the Marxists to a degree unimaginable’, ‘the Marxists have no right to appropriate [the use of the term] mode’ (P. Hill to K. Hart, 05/06/80, PH 22/185). Hill’s use of the term ‘mode’ was meant to suggest that the structural features of a system had to be seen in the field first, rather than assumed. Commenting on an early draft Michael Lipton, defined by Hill as ‘virtually the only economist who has any use for my work’ (Hill’s note in PH 22/189), suggested that Hill tended to be overly optimistic about the capacity of researchers to go to the field in a ‘blank slate’ state (M. Lipton to Hill, 23/10/79, PH 22/189). Borrowing Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) lexicon, Lipton suggested that, rather than appraising the comparative merits of inductive and deductive methods as abstract scientific ideals, it was necessary to see their relationship over time: ‘discovery proceeds through long periods of hypothetico-deductivism [sic], and shorter periods of inductivism/theoretical disruption/drastring innovation’ (M. Lipton to P. Hill, 23/10/79, PH 22/189). In the final version of the text, Hill acknowledged that induction and deduction should not to be considered in isolation, but rather as mutually enriching elements of the same method:

It is necessary, first to determine what are the principal forces in operation, and the laws in accordance with which they operate. Next comes the purely deductive stage, in which are inferred the consequences that will ensue from the operation of these forces under given conditions. Lastly, by a comparison of what has been inferred with what can be directly observed to occur, an opportunity is afforded for testing the correctness and practical adequacy of the two preceding steps, *and for the suggestion of necessary qualifications* (quoted in Hill 1982, 7, her italics).

However, from the larger context of the book, it is evident that fieldwork entered the first and the last stages of this process, thus describing a self-contained circular structure rather than

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<sup>22</sup> Her disdain towards the application of Marxist terminology to the developing world had already found a significant expression in her polemic against the applicability of the concept of ‘feudalism’ to precolonial Hausaland (Hill 1977, 3-10).

the evolutionary perspective suggested by Lipton (and Kuhn).<sup>23</sup> Hill's quest for a field-based alternative to Marxist terminology did not win over the anthropologists who reviewed her work. Barbara Harriss (1983) and Robert Launey (1984), for example, remained unconvinced of the analytical potential of Hill's alternative conceptualization, and were sceptical of the ambiguity characterising Hill's discussions of 'typicality' and inductive reasoning. These reviews were implicitly questioning the relationship between parts and wholes envisaged by Hill. A few years before, responding to Hill's (1978) appraisal of his economic history of West Africa (Hopkins 1973), the historian Anthony Hopkins claimed that

The explication of historical arguments surely requires a clear statement of the *relationship between the parts and the whole*. Yet Dr. Hill's account of the way in which case studies relate to generalisations is in part obscure and, where stated, is open to serious objection' (Hopkins 1978, 141, my emphasis).<sup>24</sup>

Although being unable to return to the field made her feel 'very miserable' (P. Hill to J. Middleton, 09/11/83, PH 21/9), Hill wrote a book with the provoking title *Development Economics on Trial: The Anthropological Case for Prosecution* (Hill 1986). In spite of the good sales of the book, Hill felt that her call for an incorporation of anthropological insights into economists' work, and for detailed fieldwork as the main source of theoretical inspiration had fallen on deaf ears (P Hill to R. Finnegan, 02/09/87, PH 21/10). The methodological battle seemed lost. It was time to leave her beloved 'rural tropical world' behind, and start looking at her immediate surroundings. The strings of works that resulted from this inward turn included, among others, the editorship of the correspondence between Keynes and Lopokova (Hill and Keynes 1989), an article on the Fen people of Eastern England (Hill 1992), and some literary works.

## Conclusions

The corpus of Hill's published works, correspondence and unpublished notes invokes an idea of social science that challenged disciplinary boundaries, and was dominated by the collection of different types of evidence in the field. In Hill's view, this is what ultimately made possible the discarding of commonly held myths, the formulation of new hypotheses,

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<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, this did not imply that 'universal laws' could be tested in the field. This is something that appears clearly, for example, in Hill's critique (Hill 1986, 21-24) of Christopher Bliss' and Nicholas Stern's *Palanpur* (1982), a fieldwork intensive study written by two leading development economists that concluded that the tenets of neoclassical economics did not apply to the economic behaviour of the villagers.

<sup>24</sup> However, Hopkins was discussing Hill's generalizations about Hausaland (the whole) on the basis of what she had observed in Batagarawa and Dorayi (the parts). On the 'typicality' of her field sites in the Hausaland context see Hill (1972, 4, 7-8) and Hill (1977, xii, 220).

and their testing. In spite of this apparent continuity, the ways in which this insight was expressed changed significantly over time. Their trajectory mirrored the evolution of what we have called, following Morgan, ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’. At different points of Hill’s career, the latter concept has been applied to identify specific classes of economic agents, the village economy, farming modes, and ‘the general’. What remained constant was the centrality of fieldwork as a tool to negotiate the boundaries of realms that had been respectively occupied by economists and anthropologists. If in her ‘plea for indigenous economics’ this implied the identification and delimitation of a shared epistemic space between economics and anthropology, in the ‘plea for inductive methods’ fieldwork had become the first step for comparison and theorising, and the starting point of a much more ambitious reflection on the nature of induction.

However, Hill’s discussion of fieldwork is also a window onto her perceptions and lived experience in academic communities. It is impossible to fully understand the sense of urgency in Hill’s writings (and the great deal of anguish and frustration pervading her unpublished correspondence), without reference to her personal quest for recognition and acceptance. Her struggle to find ways of generalising on the basis of her field material was partly a reaction to what she perceived as the economists’ indifference towards her work.<sup>25</sup> Anthropologists and historians, on the other hand, while typically appreciative of the statistical material that she had collected and aggregated, tended to remain sceptical of the validity of Hill’s conceptual and interpretative frameworks.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that the life and work of Polly Hill occupied the interstitial space between economics and anthropology. But whether it can be read as an allegory of the interdisciplinary vocation of economic anthropology, or as a tale of uncompromising individual loneliness, remains to be seen. Regardless, Hill’s deep-seated conviction that she was too much of an anthropologist to be taken seriously by the economists, and too much of an economist to be accepted by the anthropologists, can be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on why a systematic and productive exchange between these two disciplines has been so difficult, and to appraise the value of what might be lost as a consequence of this.

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<sup>25</sup> This is a theme that recurs consistently in correspondence throughout her life. Early examples of this attitude include P. Hill to J. Robinson, 21/11/60, PH 20/2; P. Hill to D. Rimmer, 15/03/65, PH 20/6.

<sup>26</sup> In contrast with the more positive reception of Hill (1963; 1970; 1972), this is especially true of Hill (1977) and Hill (1982).

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