Life Among the Subecon: the Pon Farr and Koon Ut Kal If Ee Rituals

Robert N. Horn*

Robert T. Jerome

Kristina Terkun

Department of Economics
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA 22807

Version: March 2007

Final version can be found in: Review of Radical Political Economics, Vol. 40: No. 2, 2007

Abstract:

Since the publication of Axel Leijonhufvud’s classic “Life Among the Econ,” anthropological interest in the species Econ has waned. Unfortunately, one of the omissions from his analysis was a study of life among the tribes to which the unsuccessful grads were exiled. This paper looks at the ritual of expulsion from the perspective of the outcast tribes (subecon) into which the new outcasts seek asylum. The ritual of accepting these new subecon into a new tribe spurs a long and mysterious process in which the basic tenet of the econ- rationality is replaced with what can only be likened to the pon-farr and koon-ut- kal-if-ee of the Vulcan mating ritual.


Key Words: economics departments, recruiting, the econ, Star Trek

Authors’ note: For their most useful comments on this paper, we thank Ehsan Ahmed and J Barkley Rosser, James Madison University and Hazel Gunn, Alan Day Haight, Michael Keaney and Richard Cornwall, reviewers for the Review of Radical Political Economics.
Life Among the Subecon: the Pon Farr and Koon Ut Kal If Ee Rituals

Introduction

Traditional economics is grounded in rationality. Consumers, firms, and markets are assumed to be rational and efficient. According to The Economist, economists have typically described the thought processes of homo sapiens as more like that of Star Trek’s Mr. Spock—strictly logical, centered on a clearly defined goal and free from the unsteady influences of emotion or irrationality. (The Economist, Dec 1999). No wonder Star Trek has been a favorite of many economists since a common bond exists between the econ faithful and Mr. Spock, the ever rational Vulcan who advises but rarely advocates. Mr. Spock and academic economists rarely depart from rational behavior, but when they do, life as we know it can irrevocably change and rarely for the better.

Mr. Spock’s most celebrated departure from rational behavior coincided with the onset of “pon farr” and “koon ut kal if ee.” Pon farr (the “blood fever”) is the Vulcan mating ritual while koon ut kal if ee refers to combat among potential suitors if the mating ritual does not go uncontested. During this time Vulcans undergo emerging and unchecked emotions which defy rational behavior and could, if not tamed, result in death and destruction. According to Dr. McCoy of the Enterprise, it is “the price they pay for having no emotion the rest of the time.” (Sturgeon, 1967)

Pon farr and koon ut kal if ee are phenomena that periodically attack economists, particularly those at less prestigious colleges and universities. The malady may strike annually, every few years or very infrequently depending upon how often a department has the opportunity to recruit new faculty. Like Mr. Spock and other Vulcans, neither are the
*Econ* immune to similar bouts of *pon farr* and *koon ut kal if ee*. The result is a complete loss of rational behavior, the breakdown of tribal customs, and practices and mores that can only be described as “economists in heat.” Anyone who has observed or participated in this ritual will recognize that faculty recruiting is as much a form of asexual reproduction as were Mr. Spock’s infrequent returns to his home planet in search of a respite from “the blood fever”.

This essay on economist misbehavior is indebted to Axel Leijonhufvud’s insightful analysis of academic economists “Life Among the Econ” (Leijonhufvud, 1973). Although over thirty years have passed since its publication, Leijonhufvud’s article remains the definitive work for understanding life within this strange and secretive society. Leijonhufvud’s work described life among what should be called the *upperecon*, those toiling away in the academic institutions where research and reproduction (R&R) dominate. This study focuses on the *subecon*: those *grads* the tribal elders expel due to their failure to continually produce worthy *modls*. What are the conditions and adaptations made by these wretched outcasts as they eke out an existence in the purgatory of an environment where teaching, not R&R, is of paramount importance? As described by Leijonhufvud,

> The young *Econ*, or “*grad*,” is not admitted to adulthood until he has made a “*modl*” exhibiting a degree of workmanship acceptable to the elders of the “*dept*” in which he serves his apprenticeship…the young adult must continue to demonstrate his ability at manufacturing these artifacts.. If he fails to do so, he is turned out of the “*dept*” to perish in the wilderness (Leijonhufvud, 1973; 329-330)

Our focus is that “wilderness.”

In some ways, life among the *subecon* (sometimes referred to as “exiled *econ*”) is similar to life among the *upperecon*. Both have had similar training at one time during
their careers and face similar day-to-day challenges including teaching classes, attending
department and college functions and trying to publish articles in economics and related
journals. A significant difference, however, is that there are few grads in the subecon
tribes and some have none at all. The absence of grads seems to stem from a self-selection
process in which the grads, rightfully, opt to locate in the depts of the upperecon. Prior to
their acceptance as grads of the upperecon, these individuals have lived with the subecon
tribes for four or more years, having started their journeys as “undergrads,” wandering
young in search of leadership and guidance.¹

**Day-to-day life**

After expulsion from a dept of upperecon, outcast grads or young adults may take
up residence in a tribe of subecons. The daily life of adult subecon is peaceful and
unexciting. Some have adapted well to the plethora-of-time, paucity-of-income
environment and seem to extract a pleasant, if non-descript existence. Others, of course,
adapt less well and occasionally pretend to be members of the upperecon while claiming to
have been unjustly expelled through no fault of their own. Citing tales of their past heroics,
they rant that this wrong will be righted soon and they expect to be welcomed back to the
upperecon.² This reunion never occurs.

Most of the adult subecons spend a large portion of their day studying the writings
of the Math-Econs, the “priests” of the upperecon (Leijonhufvud, 1973: 333). While these

¹ The original home of the undergrad is unknown, they just keep showing up at the annual tribal
“orientation” meetings. They are assumed to come from a wide array of other, unknown civilizations as they
differ widely among themselves with respect to intelligence, consciousness, morality, and many other socio-
cultural parameters.

² This behavior is also known as “conspicuous exhaustion.” Haight (1997)
tomes are written in the secret tongue of the Math-Econ, occasionally some subecon adults receive revelation and a sense of achievement. Unfortunately, this revelation typically occurs the day after the high priests have adopted the use of a new, more obscure tongue and re-scribed all of the sacred writings, so the revelation is no longer meaningful, and the cycle begins again.

Much of the rest of the day is spent tending to the orphan undergrads. Care for these children is typical of that in most cultures. Adults tell endless stories, teach the mythical lore of the clan, provide training in the life skills necessary for survival, and work to satisfy the endless personal needs of the children. For their part, the undergrads ignore these efforts as much as possible.

Rarely do subecons get to interact meaningfully with upperecons, save perhaps the annual “tribal midwinter councils” for all Econs (Leijonhufvud, 1973: 328). Here too, the subecons are often relegated to the back of the conference rooms, due to the ever present plastic tattoo which identifies tribe and status. Movement from the ranks of subecon to the rank of upperecon is very infrequent. Moreover upperecons who fail to maintain tribal rules may well find themselves permanently exiled to the subecons.

The most important migration from upperecon to subecon occurs with the annual expulsion of unworthy grads from the upperecon. These unfortunate individuals, now considered adults only among the subecon, try to find a tribe within which to live. While the upperecon views this ritual as routine and necessary to preserve the integrity of the clan, it causes a major upheaval for the subecon and deserves some special attention.

This ritual is known as “fac recruit” and is as much a form of asexual (to most) reproduction as was Mr. Spock’s aforementioned infrequent returns to his home planet in
search of a respite from “the blood fever.” The *fac recruit* is comprised of four separate but related sub-rituals: (1) the recruiting committee and the interviews, (2) the on-site visit, (3) the discussion and offer, and (4) post-acceptance indoctrination. While each of these sub-rituals deserves attention, our interest is in the third sub-ritual; the *dept* high council meeting and strategy for action, known as “*meet strat*.”

The *meet strat* is unique in anthropological analysis. It is one of those odd phenomena in which, according to Leijonhufvud, “we expect aberration, disorientation and a general loss of spiritual values” (Leijonhufvud, 1973: 336). There are, of course, all of the analytically ripe behaviors observed in other *meets*. There are factions based on totem indoctrination, factions based on forgotten history, and factions based on personal issues. All of this infighting confirms “the ‘travelers’ reports …on the *Econ* as a ‘quarrelsome race’ who ‘talk ill of their fellow behind his back.'”(Leijonhufvud, 1973: 328) Less important and often missing entirely, are factions based on the applicant *Econ*’s qualifications although occasionally they are discussed as a veil for other faction delineation. Whatever the underlying bases, these factions appear to be well defined and immutable. Moving from one faction to another results in a loss of credibility and trustworthiness and seldom occurs by anyone other than an “*econ*-up-for-tenure.”

---

3 Care must be taken not to confuse this process with “meat mart”, which is obviously part of the first sub-ritual.

4 The macro and the micro totems and non-communication between the followers are discussed in Leijonhufvud, 1973: 330-332.

5 These individuals will do almost anything in any given situation; consequently they are excluded from behavioral analysis.
However, similar behaviors may appear across factional lines during the economic *pon farr* and *koon ut kal if ee*.

**From Pon Farr to Koon Ut Kal If Ee**

The *meet strat* is called by the local chief and marks the transition from the *pon farr* to the *koon ut kal if ee* – from ritual to the blood letting. As the indigenous *subecons* enter the meeting room, members of the same faction seek out seats next to each other and contiguous to members of non-rival factions. A brief description of some of the more common factions would include:

“*recoms*” Recruiting committee members who traveled to the tribal mid-winter council to interview prospective replacements. They select the top candidates which are then presented to the others. *Recoms* develop a parent-like attachment to their chosen ones and start to simmer if anyone questions their choices. Often the candidates come from the same *upperecon* tribe that exiled the *recom* years earlier. This behavior is an attempt to reattach oneself to the *upperecon*, but more often reaffirms the *upperecon*’s original decision.

“*cows*” The insipid coven of whiners. Cows are first to complain about the day and time of the meeting, the established procedures or lack thereof, other *sub-econ*’s desire to express themselves, their health, their family, etc.

“*nowits*” The equally insipid know-it-alls. Nowits are often among the elders of the tribe and can only recall events that happened over a decade ago. Nowits sentences almost always begin “when I was…”, “in my experience…” or “I can assure you…”
“donuts”  Do nothings have been in exile so long they have all but abandoned any serious attempts at doing things econ (res econ non facit). In spite of the long term schism between these individuals and the econ world, they are unrestrained from assessing, evaluating and criticizing the modls of others, especially new exiles from the upperecons.  

“proacts”  The proactive faction forms the cheerleading squad for whichever faction appears to be in the lead. These subecon form a weak willed group that usually tries to exacerbate the blood letting of others. The proacts are sometimes regarded as the only group that actually knows what it is trying to do. This knowledge and their skills were likely honed while they were “econ-up-for-tenure”. 

The strat meet itself is a cacophony of competing factors vying for attention. There is no phenomenon in anthropological research that approximates this unique combination of irrelevant examples, convenient memories, and illogical modls…..all presented simultaneously in a frenzy of shouting, gesturing and acrobatics. Factions clearly prefer the use of volume to substance, speaking at length to impose their sentiments on anyone who might be listening. Since there is little order, it is difficult to capture the general principles of the meeting. While almost any subject apparently is appropriate, two topics in particular seem to have a unique effect on the demeanor of the ritual: the grad’s qualifications as an  

---


7 They should not be confused with “prosacts”, those econ receiving medication who are often fortunate enough to sleep through entire meetings.
Econ and the specific ancestry of an individual clan member. Either of these subjects tends to subdue the pandemonium momentarily, but neither is often mentioned.

Once a majority of the tribe agrees on a new member, the all important offer is extended. The recipient is typically given a week or two to decide to attach herself to this tribe or to wait for another offer more to her liking. During this wait period, the subecons create models of the probability of acceptance, which vary minute by minute often changing with the weather. To some an acceptance represents the climax of the process; no matter what their original views were, they seize the chance to return to the day to day life described above. Others seek pleasure in delayed climax, hoping the candidate refuses the offer and to return to the pon farr. Eventually the two increasingly desperate sides meld.

As Mr. Spock recovers from the koon ut kal if ee, he remarks, “after a time, you may find having is not so pleasing a thing after all as wanting. It is not logical -- but it is often true.” (Sturgeon, 1967) Such is often the experience among the subecons – especially when they learn that new members often earn as much or more than those who have been around a while and begin scholarly pursuits the elders have long ago forgotten. As the new members begin their journey they begin to take on many of the characteristics of their forefathers or foremothers. This process serves to replenish and provide continuity to the species subecon. In due time another elder will depart the tribe and the hiring ritual will begin anew. As the new member(s) of the tribe rush into the fac recruit meeting and seek chairs next to their kindred spirits the assimilation process approaches completion. The inevitable infighting commences and they experience the blood fever (pon farr) and prepare for combat (koon ut kal if ee). Life among the subecon goes on.
References


Irrationality: rethinking thinking. 1999, December 16 *The Economist*


Robert Horn is a professor of economics at James Madison University. His research interests include the economic and social costs of unemployment and international political economy. He received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of New Hampshire.

Robert Jerome is an associate professor of economics at James Madison University. His research interests include comparative economic systems and the impact of religious institutions in modern economies. He received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Virginia.

Kristina Terkun is an assistant professor of economics at James Madison University. Her research interests include franchise theory and industrial organization. She received her Ph.D. in economics from Clemson University.