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This book began life as a position paper for a conference we convened in June 2006 on the state of economic anthropology, with a particular focus on the contemporary relevance of the ideas of Karl Polanyi. When we came to prepare the proceedings for publication (Hann and Hart 2009), our paper was clearly too long to fit into that volume. In the meantime it has continued to grow. Completion has been delayed not only by competing commitments (the usual academic excuses) but by the impact of the latest, most serious crisis of the world economy, which has diverted some of our energies and inspired us to give the subject of money even greater prominence in the text than it already had. This financial crisis and its social consequences may have taken most of the world by surprise; including the economists, but it should not have been a surprise to economic historians or anthropologists, who have long been familiar with notions like 'creative destruction' and 'unequal development'. The latest crisis has not led us to change the rationale and structure of this book, which combines a history of economic anthropology with a perspective on world history; but it convincingly demonstrates why this is more than a matter of antiquarian scholarship.

Nor is this a partisan polemic. Our account of the history and present state of economic anthropology is offered as a contribution to understanding economic life, a field in which many scholars – not only economists and anthropologists but