

different ways of perceiving the world, but as different ways of imagining what life ought to be like—as moral projects, one might say. This was so from the approaches most theorists were starting from that it seemed utterly irrelevant.

In any case, all this perhaps provides an explanation for both the continued clarity of the term “value,” and the lack of a concrete theory behind it. Anthropology didn’t really resolve the dilemmas of the early ‘80s. For the part, it just skipped over them. The discipline moved on to other issues concerning the politics of ethnographic fieldwork, memory, the body, nationalism, and so forth. Structuralism faded out of prominence, then gradually came to seem ridiculous; theories that concentrated on power (Bourdieu) or practice (Bourdieu) largely replaced it; there was (and is) a general feeling that the debate was over. Hence, the tendency to act as if such theory does, in fact, exist.

As we will see in the next chapter, though, most of the new theories that have been made the old arguments irrelevant are, at least in many of their aspects, little more than retooled versions of the same old thing. Nor do I think that ignoring the problem is necessarily the best way to make it irrelevant.

Chapter 2

Current Directions In Exchange Theory

So far, I’ve described how the term “value” held out the promise of resolving some of the outstanding theoretical problems in anthropology, notably the clash between functionalism and economism, which took its clearest and most virulent form in the arguments between Formalists and Substantivists in the 1960s. I’ve also suggested that, common wisdom to the contrary, these issues are not really all that dead. At the same time that Duménil’s school has been leading an explicit effort to revive something along the lines of Polanyi’s substantivism, many post-structuralists—usually much less explicitly—have ended up reproducing most of the same assumptions about the world as economic Formalism. A brief survey of the current state of exchange theories should help make clear how much the same old dilemmas keep spinning endlessly around.

In this chapter, then, I’m going to take that history up to the present, and provide at least a brief summary of the main existing theories of value. I’ll start with a brief account of the rise of Marxism and critical theory, then consider the return of economizing models (my main examples will be Pierre Bourdieu and Arjun Appadurai), and, after a glance at the work of Margaret Weiner, a more detailed consideration of an alternative approach, which I’ll call Neo-Maussian, which has come to its most brilliant fruition in the works of Marilyn Strathern, but which in many ways is simply a revival of the Saussurean approach.

the Marxist moment and its aftermath

If in the 1960s the most spectacular arguments were between Formalists and Substantivists, by the ‘70s, the great debate was between Structuralists and

Marxists. Since both sides introduced some radically different perspectives into anthropology, it is perhaps not all that surprising that both sides assumed older debates were simply irrelevant.

For most of this century, there was no such thing as Marxist anthropology. This was because if one wanted to be an orthodox Marxist, one had to stick to the evolutionary scheme developed by Morgan and Engels in the middle of the nineteenth century, which held that all societies must pass through a fixed series of stages: from primitive matriarchy to patriarchy, slavery, feudalism, and so on, in strict order of succession. Since it soon became apparent that this was not true, anthropologists with Marxist sympathies were left with the choice of either violating the party line, or writing nonsense. Most avoided introducing Marxist theory into their work at all (usually a good idea anyway in pre-war Western universities, where Marxists were often persecuted). The real break only came in the 1960s, when Louis Althusser, in France, developed—and even more important, managed to legitimize—a more flexible set of terms, centering on the idea of a “mode of production.” Marxist anthropology suddenly became possible.¹ The groundwork was laid by French anthropologists like Claude Meillassoux and Maurice Godelier, but their ideas soon spread to England and America as well. The most important thing Marxist approaches introduced was a focus on production. From a Marxist perspective, both Formalists and Substantivists had entirely missed the point, because all their debates had been about distribution and exchange. To understand a society, they argued, one must first of all understand how it continues to exist—or, as they put it, “reproduces” itself—by endless creative activity.

This was quite different from functionalism. Functionalists begin with a notion of “society,” then ask how that society manages to hold itself together. Marxists start by asking how what we call “society” is continually being re-created through various sorts of productive action, and how a society's most basic forms of exploitation and inequality are thus rooted in the social relations through which people do so. This has obvious advantages. The problem with the whole “mode of production” approach, though, was that it was developed to analyze societies with a state: that is, in which there is a ruling class that maintains an apparatus of coercion to extract a surplus from the people who do most of the productive work. Most of the real triumphs of the MoP approach—I am thinking, for example, of Perry Anderson's magisterial “Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism” (1974a) and “Lineages of the Absolutist State” (1974b)—deal with outlining the history of different modes of production, many of which can coexist in a given society; the way in which the dominant one provides the basis for a ruling class whose interests are protected by the state; the way that modes of production contain fundamental contradictions that will, at least in most cases, ulti-

mately drive them to turn into something else. Once one turns to societies without a state, it's not clear how any of these concepts are to be applied.

One thing Marxism did introduce was a series of powerful analytical terms—exploitation, fetishism, appropriation, reproduction . . .—that everyone agreed Marx himself had used brilliantly in his analysis of Capitalism, but that no one was quite sure how to apply outside it. Different scholars would use these terms in very different ways and then would often end up quarreling, quoting canonical texts at each other, arguing over what Marx had “really meant” in them. This tendency (and the specialized jargon itself) quickly gave Marxism a somewhat hermetic quality that played a large part in limiting its appeal to outsiders. After a fairly brief spurt of interest in the '70s, Marxism in anthropology—at least in the English-speaking world²—soon found its place mainly as a technique for understanding capitalism itself and the different ways in which indigenous people have come into relation with it.

All this might make it seem that Marxism has not had an enormous impact on anthropology. But this is true only in the most superficial, institutional sense. In a deeper one, its influence was overwhelming. This is because Marxism in many ways became the inspiration for a whole series of new approaches—I'll refer to them, for shorthand purposes, as “critical theory”—that beginning in the 1960s transformed most anthropologists' ideas about what their discipline was ultimately about. For most of this century, anthropology has been determinedly relativistic. Since the time of Boas, it had become almost an item of faith that moral judgments had no place in it: since cultural standards were ultimately arbitrary, who were we to apply Western standards to people who did not share them? Marxism was obviously nothing if not critical; but it also took those very Western cultural standards as the ground of everything it wished to criticize. It had been developed as a technique for exposing the workings of a system of inequality and injustice within the analyst's own society, so as to contribute to the dissolution of that society, and the creation of a radically different one. If a Marxist criticized non-Western social orders, it was not because it was different from his or her own, but largely to the degree it was *similar*.³ So too with the other critical approaches that emerged at the same time: the most important being feminism, whose impact on anthropology and on intellectual life in general is likely to be even more enduring than Marxism itself. So too with other disciplines like semiotics and cultural studies. All were part of a broad left turn in academic life that probably peaked in the late '70s (just before politics everywhere started veering to the right), but that permanently altered the basic terms of intellectual debate, ensuring that most academics now think of themselves as political radicals, even if as time has gone on it has reduced many to producing what seem like ever more fervent position papers for a broader political movement that does not, in fact, exist.

Now, Marx himself did develop a theory of value. In *Capital*, and elsewhere, he argued that the value of commodities is derived from the human labor that went into producing them, but that this fact tends to be forgotten when the object is bought and sold on the market, so that it seems that its value somehow arises naturally from the qualities of the object itself. This is of course a very famous argument that has generated a vast literature. But there were few explicit attempts to see how it might be applied to noncapitalist systems, or if indeed it could be.⁴

Common wisdom has it that where '60s debates were mainly about exchange and '70s ones about production; in the '80s the focus shifted to consumption. This is not entirely untrue. While the interest in the cultural meanings of consumption goes back at least to the work of Baudrillard (1968, 1972, 1976), there has since the '80s been a blossoming of theory that presents consumption as a form of creative self-expression. Its most insistent advocate is the British anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987, 1995). Actually, Sahlins' work on commodities stands at the beginnings of the same tradition, and insofar as such people deal with "value" as an issue they do so largely in the same sense of a Saussurean code. But this same period has also seen the emergence of at least two approaches to exchange, both, in their own ways, rising in reaction to Marxism. One—the one that generally accompanies the "creative consumption" literature—is a kind of curious revival of economic formalism, though now, with pretensions to science largely stripped away. The other—which I've labeled "Neo-Maussian"—is perhaps more interesting.

But first things first.

I: the return of economic man

This is hardly the place to launch into a history of poststructuralism, but there are a few points that I should probably have to cover in order to ensure that what follows makes any sort of sense. It's actually rather difficult to pick out any single theme uniting the works of the various authors (Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard . . .) normally brought together under this rubric. But if there is one, it is the urge to shatter totalities, whatever these may be, whether "society," "symbolic order," "language," "the psyche," or anything else. Instead, Poststructuralism tends to see reality as a heterogeneous multiplicity of "fields," "machines," "discourses," "language games," or any of a dozen other cross-cutting planes, plateaus, and what-have-you, which—and this is crucial—do not form any sort of overarching structure or hierarchy. Rather than contexts encompassing one another, as in Durmont, one has a mosaic of broken surfaces, and on each surface, a completely different game played by a different set of rules. Moreover, post-

structuralists usually insist that one cannot even talk about individuals moving back and forth between these surfaces; rather, the players (or "subjects") are constructs of the game itself; effects of discourse, and our sense that we have a consistent self, largely an illusion. Ultimately, language speaks us. Where previous debates asked whether one should begin with society or the individual, here both society and the individual shatter into fragments. We seem to have left such debates as Formalism versus Substantivism altogether in the dust. But here appearances turn out to be a bit deceptive.

Within each plane, or game, or field, the picture usually looks strikingly familiar. There are a bunch of individual players (or, occasionally, collective ones) competing with or otherwise attempting to dominate or impose their will on the others.

There's no room here to go case by case, but it might be useful to start with an example from Pierre Bourdieu. This is for two reasons. First, because Bourdieu is the theorist considered to have gone the furthest in actually reconciling structuralism and theories of human action. His notion of habitus, of symbolic systems that can be absorbed and endlessly reproduced without the actor ever being aware she is doing so, is justly famous. Second, because his approach to economic action is so explicitly formalist.

Consider his reinterpretation of Mauss' essay on the gift. On the first page of this essay, Mauss defines gifts as "prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested" (1927:1). Just as in our own society, there is often a pretense of pure generosity when one first gives a gift, though in reality the receiver is expected to return something of equal or greater value later on. Hence a gift can often be a challenge, and the recipient, profoundly humiliated if he cannot produce a suitably generous response. Nonetheless, Mauss' ultimate point is that the "interest" involved need have nothing to do with making a profit—or even scoring a moral victory—at anyone's expense. Gifts act as a way of creating social relations. They create alliances and obligations between individuals or groups who might otherwise have nothing to do with one another. Functionalists (Polanyi himself, among others) immediately swept up this notion because it corresponded so perfectly to their assumptions. Exchange was first and foremost a way of achieving social integration. For some, it became the very glue that held society together.⁵ If anything, this held even more for Structuralists: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949) extended the argument further by suggesting that the institution of marriage, in any society, should be considered the exchange of women between groups of men, which again functioned to create a network of alliances.

Bourdieu, in his ethnographic study of the Kabyle of Algeria (1977), manages to take a radically different turn on the gift by returning to the pretense of generosity. Often, he notes, all that makes gift exchange different

from simple barter is the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift. It's this delay that makes it possible to pretend each is simply an act of generosity, of denying any element of self-interested calculation. This sort of subterfuge, he suggests, is typical of traditional societies, which unlike ours do not recognize an explicit field of economic activity.

A rational contract would telescope into an instant a transaction which gift exchange disguises, by stretching it out in time; and because of this, gift exchange is, if not the only mode of commodity circulation practiced, at least the only mode to be fully recognized, in societies which, because they deny 'the true soil of their own life,' as Lukacs puts it, have an economy in itself and not for itself. Everything takes place as if the essence of the "archaic" economy lay in the fact that economic activity cannot explicitly acknowledge the economic ends in relation to which it is objectively oriented: the "idolatriy of nature" which makes it impossible to think of nature as a raw material or, consequently, to see human activity as *labour*; i.e., as man's struggle against nature, tends, together with the systematic emphasis on the symbolic aspect of the activities and relations of production, to prevent the economy from being grasped as an economy, i.e., as a system governed by the laws of interested calculation, competition, or exploitation (Bourdieu 1977:171-72).

Notice what is happening here. Bourdieu starts with an argument reminiscent of Karl Polanyi. In traditional societies like the Kabyle, the economy is not a sphere unto itself; rather, it is embedded in social relations.⁶ But where Polanyi's "economy" was just a society's way of providing itself with food and other necessities, Bourdieu's definition is strictly Formalist: it is a matter of self-interested calculation, making rational decisions about the allocation of scarce resources with the aim of getting as much as possible for oneself. In real, "objective" terms, he argues, economizing—or something very much like it—is always going on. It's just that where there is no market, everyone goes to enormous lengths to disguise this fact. This endless labor of camouflage is such a burden—often it takes up as much time as that invested in economic activity itself—that it tends to dissolve away immediately as soon as a market economy is introduced, whereon the hidden reality of calculated self-interest is openly revealed.

What one has, then, in a traditional society, is one that is dominated by an overt morality which can never really be put into practice: people are aware of the existence of self-interested calculation, they uniformly disapprove of it in principle, yet it is nonetheless the basis of everything they do. The result is a sort of across-the-board principle of Sartrean bad faith.⁷

Bourdieu ends up rehearsing all the usual economizing arguments. When people act in ways that seem economically irrational, this is only because the values they are maximizing are not material. "Practice never ceases to con-

form to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness by departing from the logic of interested calculation (in the narrow sense) and playing for stakes that are non-material and not easily quantified" (1977:177) Therefore we must

extend economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation—which may be 'fair words' or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, complements or attention, challenges or insults, honour or honours, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc. (1977:178).⁸

In Kabyle society, though, these ultimately boil down to two forms of "capital," as Bourdieu calls it: economic capital (land, domestic animals . . .) and "symbolic capital" (family honor and prestige). In a society without a self-regulating market, it's the latter that's more generally useful, because one can use honor to get wealth much more easily than the other way around.

On some level, what Bourdieu is saying is undeniably true. There is no area of human life, anywhere, where one cannot find self-interested calculation. But neither is there anywhere one cannot find kindness or adherence to idealistic principles; the point is why one, and not the other, is posed as "objective" reality. This is where Bourdieu is at his most poststructuralist. Every field of human endeavor, he argues, is defined by a set of competitive strategies. If it is customary to give gifts, then gift-giving will be part of those strategies. Therefore, the motives of the giver are unimportant. You might be a kind and decent person motivated only by the desire to help a friend, but objectively that doesn't matter, because in the overall structure of the situation, gifts are always part of a game of dominance, an attempt to accumulate symbolic capital and gain an advantage over the other party; this is how everyone else will perceive your actions, and this will be their real meaning. (To suggest otherwise would be to fall into the trap of "subjectivism.") Note how closely this position echoes that of economics. There, too, the assumption is that "objective" or "scientific" analysis means trying to cut through to the level on which you can say people are being selfish, and that when one has discovered this, one's job is done.

Now, it's one thing to find this attitude among conservative economists; quite another to find it at the heart of critical theory. Even more in Pierre Bourdieu, a social theorist who has, more than any I can think of, dedicated himself to exposing structures of privilege and exploitation even within the academic world (at no little personal cost). No one could doubt his own integrity and good intentions. Why, then, his insistence on discounting the importance of integrity and good intentions in human affairs?

I suspect it emerges from a flaw in the very project of critical theory. When Marxism, semiotics and the rest burst on the academic scene in the 1960s and '70s, they were seen above all as ways to probe beneath the surface of reality. The idea was always to unmask the hidden structures of power, dominance, and exploitation that lay below even the most mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life. Certainly such things are there to be found. But if this is *all* one is looking for, one soon ends up with a rather jaundiced picture of social reality. The overall effect of reading through this literature is remarkably bleak: one is left with the almost Gnostic feeling of a fallen world, in which every aspect of human life is threaded with violence and domination.⁹ Critical theory thus ended up sabotaging his own best intentions, making power and domination so fundamental to the very nature of social reality that it became impossible to imagine a world without it. Because if one can't, then criticism rather loses its point. Before long, one had figures like Foucault or Baudrillard arguing that resistance is futile (or at least, that organized political resistance is futile), that power is simply the basic constituent of everything, and often enough, that there is no way out of a totalizing system, and that we should just learn to accept it with a certain ironic detachment. And if everything is equally corrupt, then pretty much anything could be open for redemption.¹⁰ Why not, say, those creative and slightly offbeat forms of mass consumption favored by upper-middle class academics?

Of course, I am describing intellectual trends now as if they existed in a vacuum. In reality, the story is probably more one of the dissolution of the vast social movements in the '60s (except for feminism), the political rout of the left beginning in the early '80s, and the global rise of neoliberal ideologies. Not that this existed in isolation from intellectual trends either—one might well argue that the rise of neoliberalism (essentially, the exact thing Polanyi was arguing against fifty years ago) has been made possible by the failure of the left to come up with plausible alternatives—but this would take the argument way beyond the scope of this book. For now, suffice it to say that post-structuralism opened up yet another space into which the maximizing individual could crawl. ~~W~~

Finally, now, we can return to value.

Appadurai's "politics of value"

If there is one essay that has the most influence on the way anthropologists nowadays talk about value, it is certainly Arjun Appadurai's "Commodities and the Politics of Value" (1986), the introduction to a volume called *The Social Life of Things*. Phrases from this essay—"regimes of value," "tournaments of value," "the politics of value" itself—have been cited and repeated

endlessly ever since. This makes it all the more important to ask exactly what sort of value Appadurai was talking about. The essay is well worth a second look.

Appadurai begins by talking about the term "commodity," which Marx, among others, applied to objects produced in order to be sold on a commercial market. This emphasis on production, he notes, arises from Marx's belief that value arises from human labor; the problem with this formulation, though, is that it makes commodities essentially a capitalist phenomena, typical of some societies and not others. Anthropologists would do better, he suggests, to forget Marx's approach entirely and look instead to those developed by Georg Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money* (1907).

Value, according to Simmel, is not rooted in human labor, nor does its existence depend on any larger social system. It arises from exchange. Hence, it is purely an effect of individual desire. The value of an object is the degree to which a buyer wants it. It is measured by how much that person is willing to give up in order to get it.

Like Marx, Simmel was thinking mainly of how things work in a market economy. But Appadurai insists that, unlike Marx's, his model can be easily be applied even where formal markets don't exist. In every society, there is at least some form of exchange. Therefore there's no reason to think of "commodification" as a purely capitalist phenomena. Any object becomes a commodity when one thinks of it primarily as something one could acquire in exchange for something else, or that one would be willing to give up in order to get something one desires more.

This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things. It also means breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on the total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption (1986:13).

Now, it must be admitted that this approach does have its advantages. These are the usual advantages of a formalist approach. It allows the analyst to skip past the problem of social totalities, structures of meaning, and the like and focus on individual actors and their motivations. Alternatively, as Appadurai suggested, we could look at the history of an individual object: to follow its "life history" as it moves back and forth between different "regimes of value" (1986:5, 14–15). This latter was one of the most bold and exciting proposals in the essay, and it has been endlessly cited ever since, as has the phrase "regimes of value" itself. The latter is certainly evocative. But given Appadurai's endorsement of Simmel, it is hard to see what he could actually mean by it.

What does it mean to say an object passes back and forth between "regimes of value?" Could we be talking about the way the same object—say, a rocking chair—might be sold as merchandise in a retail outlet, then gradually acquire sentimental value as a family heirloom, and then, after many years, end up for sale once again? Apparently not. If "value" is simply the measure of someone else's desire to acquire the chair, "sentimental value" is ruled out. It's true that, in a companion essay, Igor Kopytoff (1986, cf. Bloch and Parry 1989:12–16) does argue that there are two sorts of value: objects can be valued either as commodities, which can be compared to other objects, or as "unique" objects that cannot. This would seem to include unique heirlooms, but it's hard to see how a "regime" of value could arise out of a system that does not allow comparison of any kind. What, then? Perhaps one might be talking about different *kinds* of exchange: say, the chair might be at one point given as a gift, at another, sold at auction? No again, because Appadurai argues it is wrong to make any strict distinction between gifts and other sorts of commodity. Here, he refers to Bourdieu's analysis, noting that what anthropologists have referred to as "gift exchange" is not simply generosity but, like commodity exchange, a matter of self-interested calculation (1986:12; c.f. also Carrier 1990, 1991).

Actually, Appadurai takes the argument much further than Bourdieu ever did. The classic distinction between commodities and gifts is that while commodity exchange is concerned with establishing equivalencies between the value of objects, "gifts" are primarily about relations between people. Bourdieu, despite one reference to gift-giving as a "mode of commodity circulation," never really contradicts this. When he writes about the exchange of gifts between Algerian peasants, he treats it not primarily as a way of acquiring things but as a way of accumulating "symbolic capital": of establishing one's honor, or generosity, or of putting a rival to shame. Appadurai, on the other hand, ends up writing as if all exchanges are simply about *things* and have nothing to do with making, maintaining, or severing social relationships.¹¹ Insofar as goods affect relations between people—insofar as society and culture come in at all—he is left only with the domain of consumption: and indeed much of the essay is concerned with how consuming of goods involves sending and receiving social messages. Hence, Appadurai's "politics of value" largely comes down to the story of how various elites try to control and limit exchange and consumption, while others (almost always popular forces) try to expand it, and with the social struggles that result. "Regimes of value," in turn, are the outcome of such struggles: the degree to which these elites have succeeded in channeling the free flow of exchange, or, alternately, to which existing cultural standards limit the possibilities of what can be exchanged for what.

The rejection of Marx, the emphasis on self-interested strategies, the glorification of consumption as creative self-expression—all this was entirely in

keeping with the intellectual trends of the mid '80s. But it also serves as an object lesson about why, when one catches a wave, one might do well to think about where it is ultimately heading. Because the end result is anthropology as it might have been written by Milton Friedman. As James Ferguson (1988) has pointed out, there is a reason why Simmel is the darling of modern-day free market Neoliberals. Appadurai leaves one with an image of commerce (self-interested, acquisitive calculation) as a universal human urge, almost a libidinal, democratic force, always trying to subvert the powers of the state, aristocratic hierarchies, or cultural elites whose role always seems to be to try to inhibit, channel, or control it.¹² It all rather makes one wish one still had Karl Polanyi (1944) around to remind us how much state power has created the very terms of what is now considered normal commercial life.

One could, of course, argue that all this is beside the point. The real importance of Appadurai's essay was the liberating effect it had on other scholars (Thomas 1991:28): providing a charter, as it were, to examine how objects can move back and forth between different cultural worlds and thus to ask a whole new series of questions about colonialism, tourism, collecting, trade, and so on. There is certainly something to this. Many—perhaps most—of the anthropologists who have borrowed Appadurai's terminology drop the blatantly economic elements anyway: when someone like Brad Weiss (1996) refers to "regimes of value," he obviously means something very different than Appadurai himself. In this way, Appadurai clearly has done us all a service. But theory does make a difference. Let me take one example. Both Appadurai's essay and Kopytoff's emphasize the possibility of writing the "social biography of a thing"; but both also define their terms in such a way that it becomes impossible to consider that an object's biography could *itself* contribute to its value.¹³ The result is a purely methodological suggestion, and while there's undoubtedly a certain charm to the fantasy that one could reconstruct, say, the entire history of a well-traveled cassette or handgun or pair of tweezers, it would be a little like producing a list of everyone who's ever sat on a certain park bench: in the end, you have to wonder what was supposed to be the point.

This is worth considering, because the other major new approach to value of material objects that came out around the same time—Annette Weiner's writings on "inalienable possessions" (1985, 1992, 1994)—takes exactly the opposite direction.

parenthetical note: Annette Weiner on inalienable objects

The term "inalienable" is derived from Mauss' essay on the gift: in it, Mauss suggested that gifts are in a certain sense "inalienable" (*immeuble*), because even after they have been given away, they are still felt in some sense to belong

to the giver. If nothing else, they continue to carry with them something of his or her personality. What, Weiner asks, would a theory of value look like if it were to take this phenomenon as its starting point?

It would certainly look very different from the one found in Appadurai and Kopytoff. Heirlooms, for instance, would not be valuable just because (as Kopytoff would have it) they are "unique," but rather, because of their specific histories. Recognizing this in turn could help resolve some of the more confusing aspects of Kopytoff's essay: for example, the way he suggests that in many traditional societies, varieties of goods are ranked by their "degree of singularity," rather as if some objects could be more unique than others. Really, what one is talking is the object's capacity to accumulate a history: hence, in our society at least, there are artifacts that are truly unique (the Hope diamond, Monet's water lilies, the Brooklyn Bridge), and then, just below them in value, a class of "collector's items" (ancient Greek coins, Miro prints, first-edition Silver Surfer comic books). These are not quite unique, but they have a rarity that derives from their historical origins; what's more, when they circulate, they almost invariably accumulate a further history in the form of a pedigree of former owners—which then in turn tends to further enhance their value. In any society, one should probably be able to map out at least a rough continuum of types of objects, ranked according to their capacity to accumulate history: from the crown jewels at the top, to, at the bottom, such things as a gallon of motor oil, or two eggs over easy.

Weiner notes that in many of the societies discussed by Mauss (the Maori, the Kwakiutl, the Trobriand Islanders), the most famous heirlooms do indeed have their own names and "biographies," which includes their origins, past owners, people who had tried or succeeded to win or recover them. It would seem, then, that circulation can actually enhance an object's value. But by fixing on the notion of "inalienability" Weiner ends up pulling things in exactly the opposite direction. If an object's identity is permanently attached to that of one, original owner, circulation cannot do this (see Weiner 1976:180–83).

Hence, the main thrust of *Inalienable Possessions* is to propose the existence of something Weiner calls "transcendent" or "absolute" value. Weiner is thinking most of all of ancient treasures, here, which are often also badges of office that not only establish a holder's name and position but ground it in the doings of gods or ancestors from the beginnings of the world. The objects that most embody transcendent value—say, Australian tjuringas, the crown jewels of England—no one would ever give away. Still, they can be lost, stolen, forgotten, or destroyed. Preserving them is thus an achievement, the maintenance of an image of eternity (1992:8–12). Their value, then, is measured in the fear of loss. In many societies, there is a complex game of strategies going on in which others are constantly trying to get hold of the

heirlooms that ultimately guarantee another's historical identity and thus the authentication of their claims to status and authority. In other words, everyone is actually trying to ensure their most valuable heirlooms *do not* circulate. This might seem about as far as one can go from Simmel's position, that value is a product of exchange. But in many ways, we are simply dealing with a mirror image. Rather than value being the measure of how much one would like to acquire something one does not possess, in Weiner, it becomes the measure of how little one would wish to give up the things one does. Objects of transcendent value are simply the very last things one would be willing to part with.¹⁴

So far, then, it's hard to see how we have made a whole lot of progress since the '60s. Weiner's work points in all sorts of interesting directions, but she often seems trapped between creating a mere mirror-image of economism, or alternately (as in her notion of "reproduction": Weiner 1978, 1980, 1982) swinging towards something much more like Dumont's position. Between formalism and substantivism, then, there still does not seem to be much middle ground.

II: Strathern's neo-Maussian approach

There is one major theoretical alternative, if one so far largely limited to Melanesia. I'll call it "Neo-Maussian," since its genealogy can be traced from Mauss through the work of Christopher Gregory (1980, 1982) to that of Marilyn Strathern (1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1987, 1988, 1992). Strathern's work is also considered the theoretical culmination of what is often referred to as the "New Melanesian Ethnography."¹⁵ No one could possibly deny its brilliance. Some of her key notions, like that of the "partible person," have already had a great deal of influence even outside Melanesia, in fact, even outside anthropology. Perhaps the main thing that has limited her work's appeal is that most of it is written in an incredibly difficult language, largely of her own invention—one which seems to have an endless capacity to slip away almost as soon as a reader thinks she's grasped it. It can be very frustrating to read.

I'll begin with Mauss. The main question asked in his "Essay on the Gift" is: what is it about giving a gift that makes the recipient feel compelled to return a counter-gift of roughly equal value? His answer—which actually harks back to Emerson (1844)—is that a gift is always seen to contain something of the giver. Hence, Mauss notes, objects given as gifts often take on human qualities. Actually, his descriptions of "gift economies" like those of the Northwest Coast emphasize the way in which everything—not only as gifts but houses, canoes, masks and serving dishes—was treated as if it had its own personality, likes and dislikes, intentions and desires. In a book called

Gifts and Commodities (1982), Christopher Gregory—an economic anthropologist working in Papua New Guinea—suggests this is a general tendency. Gift economies tend to personify objects. Commodity economies, like our own, do the opposite: they tend to treat human beings, or at least, aspects of human beings, like objects. The most obvious example is human labor: in modern economies we talk of “goods and services” as if human activity itself were something analogous to an object, which can be bought or sold in the same way as cheese, or tire-irons.

Gregory lays out a tidy set of oppositions. Gifts are transactions that are meant to create or effect “qualitative” relations between persons; they take place within a preexisting web of personal relations; therefore, even the objects involved have a tendency to take on the qualities of people. Commodity exchange, on the other hand, is meant to establish a “quantitative” equivalence of value between objects; it should ideally be done quite impersonally; therefore, there is a tendency to treat even the human beings involved like things. Giving someone a gift usually puts that person in your debt; hence, success in gift exchange becomes a matter of giving away as much wealth as possible, so as to gain a social advantage. In a commodity system, it’s the things that are important; therefore, people try to accumulate as much wealth as they can.

Obviously, a system as tidy as this has got to be a bit of an abstraction. No pure gift, or pure commodity, economy actually exists. Actually, Gregory himself was suggesting nothing of the sort: as he has noted recently (1998) he created the distinction in order to understand how contemporary Papuans move back and forth between one and the other. Nonetheless, such abstractions can be useful. Most of all, they can be used as the basis of making further generalizations. If the logic of a ‘gift economy’ really is so different from our own, for instance, might it not also imply a different conception of the very nature of human beings or social relations? This is the direction Strathern takes Gregory’s ideas, combining them with observations culled from her own experience among the Melpa-speaking inhabitants of Mount Hagen, in Papua New Guinea. The result is a kind of grand comparison of “Melanesian” and “Western” social theories.

Strathern has come into a great deal of criticism for “essentializing” difference. I don’t think such criticisms are entirely fair, because Strathern never claims that all Melanesians think one way, or all Westerners another. Rather, it seems to me her work is meant as a kind of thought experiment. Western social theory is founded on certain everyday common sense, one that assumes that the most important thing about people is that they are all unique individuals. Theory therefore also tends to start with individuals and tries to understand how they form relations with one another (thus producing something we call “society”). People in Mount Hagen did not share these as-

sumptions. With no concept of either “society” or unique individuals, they assumed the relationships came first. What, then, would a social theory be like that was founded on Melpa common sense? It’s at this point she brings in Gregory’s distinction between gift economies and commodity economies, and the other ethnographers elsewhere in Melanesia who might be said to have contributed to the groundwork of such a theory.¹⁶

Marxian critique, Maussian rejoinder

What Strathern is probably most famous for, however, is her ongoing dialogue with critical—and especially feminist—theory. Her best known book, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), consists largely of a series of rejoinders to feminist, or feminist-inspired, analyses of one or another aspect of Melanesian society. Now, considering this is a part of the world notorious for extreme inequality of the sexes, this makes reading the book a rather surrealistic experience: Strathern is an avowed feminist, but she spends the book systematically knocking down almost every argument ever made that might justify the notion that Melanesian women are oppressed. It is not, actually, that Strathern means to deny that Melanesian men dominate women (she does in fact, acknowledge they do).¹⁷ Rather, she wants to expose the cultural assumptions underlying the ways most such arguments are framed. Consider, for example, her reply to Lizette Josephides’ analysis of Melanesian exchange systems (Strathern 1988:144–59).

Josephides provides what has actually become the classic Marxist critique of the Maussian tradition (1982, see also 1983, 1985, Bloch 1991:172). It runs like this: by focusing on “the gift,” the moment when objects change hands, one is looking only at the moment the society itself places under its spotlight: the moment when two important men (it almost always seems to be men) confront one another in dramatic public acts of generosity or display. But spotlights do not only draw attention to some things, by doing so, they also draw attention away from others. Should one not also ask what is being left in the shadows here? Most obviously, someone must have made these things; there is a whole cycle of production and assembly of goods that has to go on before the exchange takes place (and usually another cycle afterwards.) Rather than be seduced by the spotlight, we should investigate its operation.

Josephides (1985) takes the example of Melpa pigs. Melpa political and ceremonial life centers on dramatic rituals, called *moka*, in which clans assemble to give gifts to one another. There are lavish feasts, dances, speeches, and gorgeous costumes. Huge heaps of food are piled up and presented to repay previous gifts of food. Important men give each other pigs, which are the most important gift of all. Hageners raise pigs especially to be exchanged; at any moment, a family will probably have a number in their yard, most of

Josephides moka is to limit but of moka. Pigs are the most important gift of all. Hageners raise pigs especially to be exchanged; at any moment, a family will probably have a number in their yard, most of

them considered as the product of one or another of these exchanges. But who does the gardening, and who actually raises these pigs? Mainly women. Married couples cooperate to raise pigs; the wife contributes the largest share of labor; nonetheless, only the husbands can exchange them in public, thus acquiring a "name." Only men can translate pigs into fame and political reputation. The whole process, Josephides suggests, can be thought of as a kind of fetishization, because it ends up making it seem as if the pigs are produced by acts of exchange rather than by the human labor that went into tending them, fattening them, and growing crops with which to do so—just as someone like Simmel would say that the value of commodities comes from the fact that someone is willing to buy them rather than from the thought and energy that went into producing something a buyer *would* desire to buy.

Strathern objects. To make such an argument one is already assuming that a person has some kind of rights in whatever they produce. We assume that, but does everyone? If you examine talk of "rights" in our own society, she observes, you quickly discover a whole series of assumptions about private property. We assume that society is made up of individuals, and most of our conceptions of human rights are based on the idea that individuals own themselves. Hence, they have the right to prevent others from intruding on their bodies, their houses, or their minds (cf. MacPherson 1962). Marxists simply go further by arguing that this includes their powers of creativity, and therefore, that individuals have a right to the products of "their" labor. Now, this argument might be useful, Strathern admits, as an outside perspective, as grounds to declare Hagen society fundamentally unjust: but certainly we cannot go on to say that exchange serves as a way of disguising this reality unless we have some reason to believe Hageners would have reason to see it in the first place.

Thus far the argument is straightforward enough. Strathern continues:

A vocabulary, which turns on the deprivation of 'rights', must entail premises about a specific form of property. To assert rights against others implies a type of legal ownership. Does the right to determine the *value* of one's product belong naturally to the producer? (1988:142, emphasis mine)

The first two sentences are remarkable enough—apparently, there are *no* rights that do not go back to property. But the third is crucial. We're not just talking about the right of ownership—the right to determine who has access to one's product. We are also talking about the right to determine its meaning or importance. And of course, the moment an anthropologist uses a term like "natural," we all know where the argument is heading. It is we who assume the producer should always have this right. We are wrong to believe that this is universal.

The Marxist notion of alienation, she writes, assumes that work

has a value in the first instance for the self . . . It is the person's own appropriation of his or her activity that gives it value, in so far as the person is a microcosm of the 'social' process by which exogenous appropriation by others, by 'the system,' also gives it value (1988:142–43).

This is a difficult passage, and it turns on a rather particular use of the term "appropriation." But it is decipherable. Ordinary Western common sense takes it for granted that objects—like individuals—already exist in nature (that the ultimate constituents of the world, as Gilbert Ryle used to put it, are "blokes and things.") Human action is therefore thought to consist mainly of taking those objects and "appropriating" them socially—that is, ascribing meaning to them by placing them within some larger system of categories. By "the system," Strathern seems to have in mind some sort of Saussurean code, or alternately, a system of private property, which similarly divides things up. It is this meaning that Strathern seems to be referring to when she speaks of value. "Value," then, is the meaning or importance society ascribes to an object. Marxists imply that individuals who produce objects should have the right to determine their meaning. In Mount Hagen, she objects, people do not see things in this way, since they do not see objects as having been produced by individuals. They see them as the outcome of relationships.

Here we come to the core of Strathern's argument. Like Dumont, she views Western ideology as defined above all by its individualism: We assume every individual has a kind of central, unique core that makes them who they are. Call it a self, a soul, a personality—whatever you call it, the assumption is always that no two are exactly the same, and this is what is really important about a person. It's thus we can talk about creativity as "self-expression," of "finding oneself," or of contexts in which one is more "oneself" than others. It follows that other people's perceptions of us are likely to be superficial and limited. Most people do not know who we really are. But what if one did not make this set of assumptions? Melanesians, according to Strathern, either do not recognize such a unique core, or if they do, do not attach much importance to it.¹⁸ Therefore they assume that we are, before we are anything else, what we are perceived to be by others. One might object that this would mean we are many different things, since different people are likely to have very different impressions of us, or see us differently in different contexts. But that is precisely what Strathern is arguing. Her most famous concept, in fact, is the "partible" or "multiple" person. People have all sorts of potential identities, which most of the time exist only as a set of hidden possibilities. What happens in any given social situation is that another person fixes on one of

these and thus "makes it visible." One looks at a man, say, as a representative of his clan, or as one's sister's husband, or as the owner of a pig. Other possibilities, for the moment, remain invisible.

It is at this point that a theory of value comes in: because Strathern uses the phrase "making visible" and "giving value" more or less interchangeably.¹⁹ So here too, value is simply meaning: giving value to something is a matter of defining it by placing in some broader set of conceptual categories. The difference is that it would never occur to a Melanesian that anyone would have the right to define herself, or the products of her own labor—value always exists in the eyes of someone else. But there's slightly more to it than that. Value actually has two components. Because when someone fixes on one of those "hidden possibilities" in someone else, thus making them visible, what they are bringing out is always itself seen as the product of some social relationship that existed in the past. Given the starting assumption (that persons are brought into being only through social relations) it only makes sense that this should be so. Hence a man might be seen as the product of the sexual relationship between his father and mother, or, perhaps, the exchange relation (i.e., bridewealth payments) between their mother and father's clan. Or, if he is identified as the owner of a pig, that pig is seen as being derived from the marriage relation between the man and his wife, who raised it, or else the exchange relation between that man and some other man, who gave it to him. Thus people and objects are all seen to have "multiple authors," or, in the Melpa idiom, "sources" or "origins."

At this point one can finally understand Melpa concepts of exchange. Mauss of course had insisted that in giving a gift one is giving a portion of one's self. Quite so here: the pig can indeed embody one aspect of its owner's identity. However, we are also used to thinking of the giver as the active party. Hageners—and indeed, Melanesians in general, Strathern argues—do not see it that way. Instead, they see exchange largely as a matter of extraction. Actually this is perfectly consistent with what already been set out: that one's possessions take on value (i.e., meaning) only in another person's eyes. In exchange, that other person defines the object not only as the product of past social relations, but also as something "detachable" from them. Again, take the example of a pig. If I convince the pig's owner to give that pig to me, its value is (a) that of its "origin," the social relations that brought it into being, and (b) the fact that I can "detach" it from that person, which means that pig will now embody a new social relation, between that owner and myself.²⁰ If I manage to convince the owner to give me his pig, I thus displace the value of one relationship onto the other. And the object now comes to embody my own ability to do this, my power to create new relationships.

If all this is true, we are in a very different world than that assumed by Marxist ideas of alienation. For a Marxist, labor is, or should be, a matter of

self-expression: the ideal is that of a fine craftsman, or even more, an artist, whose work is both an expression of her inner being, and a contribution to society as a whole. Melanesians see work as an expression of one's commitment to a specific relationship. Wives, like husbands, help raise pigs to show their commitment to their marriage.²¹ The pig is an embodiment of that relation until it leaves the domestic sphere and enters the public sphere of male ceremonial exchange, where its value shifts, and it comes to embody the importance of relations between men. Actually, since the ultimate effect is so similar (and since Strathern admits that the notion of the exploitation of female labor might be legitimate as an outside perspective), one might well wonder what all the fuss was supposed to be about. The Marxist could simply say, "All right, so the mystification runs even deeper than I thought," and the Maussian would then have to either concede the point, or argue that no Melanesian could ever, under any circumstances, imagine a world in which they would be able to choose freely who or what they worked for.

toward a synthesis?

Our main interest here, however, is clearly with Strathern's notion of value. I've already said that it seems, in essence, Saussurean: the value of an object, or a person, is the meaning they take on by being assigned a place in some larger system of categories.

It's interesting that this is one of the few points where Strathern decisively breaks with Gregory. Gregory (1982:47–51) preferred to limit the term "value" to "exchange value," in the sense used by economists. Therefore, he concluded, in a gift economy one cannot talk about value at all. Objects of gift exchange are, instead, ranked. Among the Mae-Enga for example (Meggit 1971), there are six different ranks of objects. The most exalted category includes only two sorts of things: live pigs and cassowary birds. One can exchange a pig for a cassowary, or two pigs, or two cassowaries for each other; but one cannot exchange a pig or cassowary for objects of any other category. The next category includes pearl-shell pendants, plume headdresses, and stone axes, which again can only be exchanged for each other, and not for anything higher or lower—and so on, down to the lowest sphere, which consists of ordinary foodstuffs. Thus, while one could perhaps say in the abstract that pigs are worth more than axes, this is all one can say. To speak of value, one would have to be able to say how *much* more: to establish just how many axes it would take to reach the value of one pig; and in the absence of exchange, such comparisons simply do not take place.

Now, this clearly has a bearing on some of the issues discussed earlier in the chapter: particularly the way that objects can be arranged along a continuum from relatively durable, particular items to relative perishable and

that two entities are "like or unlike" in *some* way. They involve evaluation. That is, they are meant to establish whether one entity is better, or more important, or more desirable, than the other. Clearly, comparing "an entity and its source of origin" does not do this. One is not saying an entity is better than or preferable to its source of origin. One is simply observing that the two are similar in some ways and different in others.²³

As I have already observed, Strathern's definition of value is Saussurean: value is simply meaningful difference, a matter of placing something in a set of categories. In fact, the passage above bears a remarkable resemblance to Sahlin's invocation of Saussure cited in chapter 1. It also suffers from all the same problems: if one defines value simply as "difference," then the concept loses most of the explanatory power that has made it attractive to begin with. It is one thing to say that women at a market in Papua New Guinea are likely to see two lumps of apparently identical fish as different. It's quite another to say why, as a result, a given woman will want one and not the other. In order to understand *that*, one would have to realize that actors are not just "comparing" entities with their origins but comparing the origins of different entities to *each other*. And it is this process of comparing unique histories on which, as I have said, it is extremely difficult to get a theoretical handle.²⁴

All of this is not meant to discount Strathern's contribution. Mainly it is meant to illustrate why it can be so frustrating to try to apply it outside the rather specific (usually polemical) contexts for which it was developed. When reading her description of gift relations, for example, it's hard to resist looking for parallels in our own society. But hers is explicitly not meant to be the basis of a general theory of gifts. It's not even meant to be a general theory of gift economies, since Strathern never makes clear how we would disentangle one from the specifically Melanesian—or even specifically Melpa—elements in her account. An obvious example: her insistence that gift-exchange be seen as a process of extraction would hardly make sense in the Mediterranean tradition of "agonistic exchange" which Tom Beidelman (1988) examined in ancient Greece, or Pierre Bourdieu in contemporary Algeria.²⁵ There the point of giving gifts is often to crush and humiliate a political adversary with an act of generosity so lavish and so magnificent that it could never be reciprocated. Does this mean one would need a completely different theory for Mediterranean "gift economies"? What would it be like? It is precisely this sort of question which Strathern seems to resist, leaving it to others to determine her work's broader implications.

Munn: the value of actions

So far, then, it's hard to say whether exchange theory has advanced much or not since the 1960s. Or to be more precise, there have clearly been advances

generic ones, and therefore, by their capacity to retain a history. The kind of rank order Gregory is talking about is clearly a similar principle: indeed, one can normally expect that at the very least, whatever unique heirlooms a society has will be exchanged (if at all) in the most exalted sphere and that the most ephemeral products like staple foods will be at the bottom. And this is almost always what does seem to happen. But there is an intrinsic problem here. There is a difference between the capacity to convey history (which can at least be roughly assessed), and the actual history being conveyed. The latter does indeed tend to be unique, and therefore cannot be the basis for creating a system of value. Actually, this is why Gregory avoids using the term "value" at all when speaking of gift economies: "strictly speaking, like for like exchanges are impossible because, for example, a particular pig will be one day older and hence a different pig" (1982:50). Marilyn Strathern's notion of value seems intended to bring just such historical particulars back on board—she specifically points out that even when women in a New Guinea market are bartering lumps of fish for taro, two apparently identical barches of fish will not be considered the same because of their different origins (Strathern 1992a; Gewertz 1983). But in order to do so she has to redefine radically what she means by "value."

Where Gregory takes the most restricted definition of the term possible, Strathern does the opposite:

An initial definition is in order. As Gregory (1982) notes, the economic concept of value implies a comparison of entities, either as a ratio (the one expressed as a proportion of the other) or in terms of rank equivalence.²² Both like and unlike terms may be so compared. In addition, however, this part of the world (the Southwestern Pacific) is dominated by a third relation of comparison: between an entity and its source of origin. Value is thus constructed in the identity of a thing or person with various sets of social relations in which it is embedded, and its simultaneous detachability from them. Here lies much of the significance of gift exchange (1987:286).

Let me take the argument step by step. Value implies comparison. One can compare the value of two commodities in terms of their worth in money; here, one can establish proportions: i.e., five loaves of bread are worth the same as one steak-frites. Or, one can compare two valuables in Gregory's gift economies in terms of their rank. But Gregory's formula does not really explain the workings of gift economies. At least in Melanesia, she says, the critical comparison is "between an entity and its source of origin." Now, I do believe one should be as generous as possible in reading another scholar's work, but the closer one examines this passage, the less sense it makes. The first two sorts of "comparison" are not just meant to establish

in many areas; but it's specifically around the question of value that the same conundrums show up again and again. It is still, basically, a choice between the kind of value proposed by economists and a Saussurean notion of meaningful difference.

Other approaches, however, have been proposed. It might be useful to compare Strathern's perspective with that of another anthropologist of Melanesia: Nancy Munn (1977, 1983, 1986). Munn's work concerns the island of Gawa, in the Massim region off the southeastern coast of New Guinea, which, like the Trobriands (to which it is closely culturally related) is part of the famous kula chain. The chain itself is defined by the exchange of immensely valuable armshells and necklaces, forms of adornment that are rarely worn, but rather, exchanged as gifts between kula partners. Much of the drama of Trobriand life revolve around kula expeditions; important men and their followers descend on distant villages in other islands to woo choice heirlooms from their kula partners. Since an armshell can be exchanged only for a necklace, and vice versa, these heirlooms are constantly moving against each other, the armshells circling the islands in a clockwise direction, the necklaces counterclockwise.

In Gawa or the Trobriands, there is very clearly a rank hierarchy of types of goods, and it does indeed correspond to an item's capacity to retain history: perishable and generic substances like food are at the bottom, and unique imperishable valuables at the top. Even among kula shells, there is an elaborate ranking system, with everyone trying to get their hands, at least temporarily, on the very most famous heirlooms, whose names are recognized by everyone in the kula ring. Previous analysts have tended to look at such phenomena in terms of "spheres of exchange," in which different sorts of valuable can circulate only among others of the same sort. This, however, implies one is looking for value primarily in objects. Munn instead refers to what others might label "spheres" as "levels of value," since for those who attain them, they mean ever greater degrees of control over, and ability to extend their influence in time and space, or, as she puts it, "intersubjective spacetime."

The basic Gawan value template is the act of giving food (1986:11-12, 49-73). If you eat too much, Gawans say, all you do is lie down and sleep; it means inaction and hence the contraction of one's control over space and time. Giving the same food to someone else, on the other hand, creates alliances and obligations. It thus implies extension of one's control over space and time. If that someone else hails from overseas, giving food creates alliances that one can then activate so as to act on increasingly higher levels of exchange, enabling one to exchange more durable valuables like shell ornaments or canoes, and by doing so exercising even greater control of intersubjective spacetime. The ultimate achievement is to attach one's name to a

famous heirloom kula shell (the most famous, remember, have their own unique names and histories) by passing it along the inter-island kula circle; the continual passing of which thus creates the most exalted level of all. Note that all this is not a matter of "entering into" higher spheres or even levels of exchange that already exist. It is these actions—of hospitality, travel, and exchange—that create the levels in the first place. And at their most basic this is all "levels"—indeed, all such abstract "structures"—are. They consist of human actions.

Where Strathern starts her analysis from a web of social relationships, then, Munn starts from a notion of activity. Value²⁶ emerges in action; it is the process by which a person's invisible "potency"—their capacity to act—is transformed into concrete, perceptible forms. If one gives another person food and receives a shell in return, it is not the value of the food that returns to one in the form of the shell, but rather the value of the act of giving it. The food is simply the medium. Value, then, is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves—though Munn also notes that it we are not talking about something that could occur in isolation: in kula exchange, at least (and by extension, in any social form of value), it can only happen through that importance being recognized by someone else. The highest level of control over space and time is concretized simply as "fame," that is, the fact that others, even others one has never met, consider one's name important, one's actions significant.

Munn's approach knits together a lot of the themes that have cropped up in this chapter, but it also introduces something radically new. Certainly, it breaks the gift/commodity dichotomy wide open. Rather than having to choose between the desirability of objects and the importance of human relations, one can now see both as refractions of the same thing. Commodities have to be produced (and yes, they also have to be moved around, exchanged, consumed . . .), social relations have to be created and maintained; all of this requires an investment of human time and energy, intelligence, concern. If one sees value as a matter of the relative distribution of *that*, then one has a common denominator. One invests one's energies in those things one considers most important, or most meaningful. One could even rework Annette Weiner's argument along the same lines: the value of objects of "transcendent value" would simply be an effect of all the efforts people have made to maintain, protect, and preserve them. Even if, from the point of view of the actors, the sequence seems as if it's precisely the other way around.

Framing things this way of course evokes the specter of Marx—the very one that most of the other authors covered in this chapter preferred to banish. We are clearly dealing with something along the lines of a labor theory of value. But only if we define "labor" much more broadly than almost anyone working in the Marxist tradition ever has. By limiting themselves to talk

of "work" or "labor"—notions that are by no means cultural universals—most Marxists do lay themselves open to the sort of critique Strathern levels against them. But certainly, creative action exists everywhere, and one would be justified in being highly suspicious of anyone who claims that a given society completely fails to recognize this fact. The problem is that if you define action this broadly, there's clearly no way to make any exact count of how much of it has been invested in any given object or relation.²⁷ Even the outside analyst can at best make an extremely rough estimate. Within the society in question, there are of course all sorts of ways of estimating value, but the one thing one can be sure of is that most of this history—sometimes all of it—will be effaced in people's eyes.

conclusions (why so little action?)

Munn's work, and particularly her theory of value, has been little taken up by other scholars;²⁸ understandably, perhaps, considering it points in such a radically different direction than does most existing scholarship.

I have been arguing over the course of this chapter that theories of value have (at least since the '60s) been swinging back between two equally unsatisfactory poles: on the one hand, a warmed-over economism that makes "value" simply the measure of individual desire; on the other, some variant of Saussurean "meaningful difference." Comparing them to Munn's approach makes it easier to see one feature both approaches have in common. In either case, what's being evaluated is essentially static. Economism tends to reify everything in sight, reducing complex social relations between people—understandings about property rights, honor or social standing—into objects that individual actors can then seek to acquire. To turn something into a thing is, normally, to stop it in motion; not surprising, then, that such approaches usually have little place for creativity or even, unless forced, production. Saussurean Structuralism on the other hand ascribes value not to things but to abstract categories—these categories together make up a larger code of meaning. But Saussure himself insisted quite explicitly that this code had to be treated as if it existed outside of action, change, and time. Linguistics, he argued, draws its material from particular acts of speech, but its actual object of study is not speech but language, the rules of grammar, codes of meaning, and so on that make speech comprehensible. While speech (*parole*) exists in time and is always changing, language (*langue*)—"the code"—has to be treated as "synchronic," as if it existed in a kind of transcendent moment outside it. Both approaches, then, end up having a difficult time accounting for ongoing processes of change and transformation. Economism tends to reduce all action to exchange; Saussureans have trouble dealing with action of any sort.

Starting from hidden, generative powers of action creates an entirely different problematic. Value becomes, as I've said, the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves: normally, as reflected in one or another socially recognized form. But it is not the forms themselves that are the source of value.

Compare, again, Strathern. Because of her Saussurean starting point, she sees value as a matter of "making visible": social relations take on value in the process of being recognized by someone else. According to Munn's approach, the value in question is ultimately the power to *create* social relations; the "making visible" is simply an act of recognition of a value that already exists in potentia. Hence where Strathern stresses visibility, Munn's language is all about "potencies," "transformative potential," human capacities that are ultimately generic and invisible. Rather than value being the process of public recognition itself, already suspended in social relations, it is the way people who *could* do almost anything (including, in the right circumstances, creating entirely new sorts of social relation) assess the importance of what they do, in fact, do, as they are doing it. This is necessarily a social process; but it is always rooted in generic human capacities. This leads in an entirely different direction than that assumed by almost any of the theories that we've considered up to now.

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