

EQUALITY, INEQUALITY, AND EXCHANGE
 COMMENTS ON *A PAPUAN PLUTOCRACY:
 RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND*

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In hindsight, once an anthropologist has published a successful ethnography, it often looks as if they have been extremely lucky in their choice of a society to study. How fortunate for Margaret Mead, for example, that she happened upon a group of Pacific Islanders who handled adolescence in an almost perfectly inverse way to North Americans. And the gods must have been smiling on Evans-Pritchard when they put him down among the Nuer, who turned out to be the most elegantly politically ordered stateless society on earth. And someone must have been looking out for Roy Rappaport too, when they led this budding ecological anthropologist to the Maring, a group of people whose elaborate pig killing rituals just happened to keep their populations in perfect homeostatic balance with their surrounding environment. Great anthropologists almost always seem to get just what they need by way of ethnographic circumstances to help them push forward the theoretical line they want to develop.

I mention that good ethnographies appear after the fact to be based on good fortune because John Liep looks for all the world like one of those lucky types for whom this generalization holds true. Interested in economy and exchange, he found his way to Rossel Island, where people happen to operate what from some angles has to be seen as the most complex currency system in the world, one that turns on 34 different, ranked kinds of currency tokens, not counting state money, and that features a welter of more or less unusual ways of moving those currencies around between people in transactions that shape marriages, funerals, and almost all of the other most important social institutions of Rossel Island life. As Liep (p. xviii)¹ puts matters, the complexity of the Rossel Island currency system makes it “an anthropological freak”—the kind of one-off limit case in the range of global variation that so often provides the materials for ethnographic success stories. What better basis than fieldwork among the Rossel Islanders could there be, then, for making pointed interventions into disciplinary debates about the nature of exchange?

Of course, anyone who has actually carried out ethnography knows that ethnographers don't really get lucky in their fieldsites, rather, they very much have to make their own luck by shaping what they find wherever they land into arguments the discipline can come to care about. It took a Margaret Mead to see the critical potential in differences between Samoan and North American ways of handling adolescence, just as it took scholars with the genius of Evans-Pritchard and Rappaport to make the Nuer and the Maring seem like they offered important answers to such pressing anthropological questions. Liep too, I would argue, made this kind of good luck for himself. Ever since the 1920s, when Wallace Armstrong had published several works on Rossel currencies on the basis of his very short-term fieldwork on the island, anthropologists had known that the case was out there. But before Liep went in 1971, no aspiring or seasoned fieldworker seemed to see the potential in going back to Rossel for major research, or at least not enough potential to make up for the downsides: the impossibly difficult language, the fact that unlike many of their neighbors, the Rossel islanders did not *kula*, etc. So as easy as it all looks in hindsight, we have to give

Liep great credit for making his own luck in Rossel, luck that has led to the work I will discuss here: *A Papuan Plutocracy: Ranked Exchange on Rossel Island*.

As the title at least implies, this is a book woven of two main threads. The dominant one, and the strongest, is announced in the subtitle: “Ranked Exchange on Rossel Island”. This thread consists in a detailed account of the ranked currencies in use on Rossel Island and the nature of the exchanges into which they enter. This part of the book is beautifully done. In light of its publication, the anthropological record as regards what is possible by way of human creativity in developing currency systems has changed in such a way that it will never quite be the same. I have no quibble with this account and will do no more with it here than provide a brief and appreciative summary.

The second thread is woven around the first, and although it provides the book with its main title—“A Papuan Plutocracy”—it is more of a consistent background theme in the book than its major focus. This thread takes up the role of leaders in Rossel Island society, examining how their power is both grounded in, and decisively shapes, the system of ranked exchange. Though developed in a less sustained way than the discussion of the exchange system itself, this theme is crucial for the book as a whole, for it carries the load of what Liep presents as a major critique of anthropological theories of exchange more generally—a critique aimed at correcting Malinowski, Mauss and all those who have followed them in developing models of what anthropologists have come to call gift economies or systems of gift exchange. If Liep’s broader argument about the nature of reciprocity and ‘gift economies’ is correct, it would fundamentally alter how anthropologists think about gift exchange. Since the stakes of this second aspect of Liep’s work are so high, it is the one I will want to wrestle with more carefully in what follows.

Before turning to Liep’s argument about politics and the shortcomings of anthropological work on the gift, let me provide a very quick sketch of the Rossel currency system that he describes so productively. Rossel Islanders are possessed of two distinct currencies made from sea shells. One kind of currency, called *ndap*, is made from Spondylus shells that have been ground and polished. The other, called *kê*, is made from the shells of the bivalve called *Chama imbricata*. *Ndap* shells are the most important and there exist twenty ranked categories of them, running from the ‘biggest’ at the top of the hierarchy to the ‘smallest’ at the low end. ‘Big’ and ‘small’ are the Rossel Islanders’ own descriptive terms for the scale on which the types of shells are arranged. It is important to recognize that these terms refer to something like a quality of value that inheres in shells of a given category, not to their size. At least in theory, no number of small shells can add up to one large one, the same way three third place finishes don’t add up to one first place one. The smaller shells are simply possessed of a different kind of value than the big ones, and this is why there are twenty different ranks. To bring some further analytic resolution to the hierarchy of *ndap* shells, Liep groups their twenty categories into three divisions he labels very high, high, and low. These groupings are based on how the shells are used in exchange. *Ndap* in the very high division are not used in exchange anymore and belong permanently to their owners. High division *ndap* make complex, temporary appearances in exchanges, but they are also their owners’ inalienable possessions and do not permanently change hands. Low division *ndap*, by contrast, do circulate in exchange and move between different owners.

After getting one’s mind around the complexity of the *ndap* series, one might be relieved to find that there are only fourteen ranked categories of *kê*, and that Liep groups them only

into high and low divisions. Only members of the single highest category of *kê* do not circulate in exchange, though people often try to retrieve other high ranking *kê* they have given in exchange through special kinds of claims they can make on their recipients to accept a lower ranking substitute for the *kê* they originally received.

As complex as the hierarchies of *ndap* and *kê* are in themselves, the outline I have provided thus far is quite simple by comparison with the level of detail needed to present a full-blown picture of the currency system in action. Rather than attempt to offer such a picture here, I want only to indicate a few of the features of the operation of the system that play important roles in Liep's account of how the system of ranked exchange is tied up with the system of political power on Rossel.

The first of these features is that it is primarily big men who own the *ndap* of the very high and high categories. This weight of this fact is increased greatly when one recognizes that shells of the high category must play some role "in all major ceremonial exchanges, such as bridewealth, pig feasts, house or canoe payments" (p. 179). The role they play in such exchanges is necessary, but it is also very brief. In each instance of one of these exchanges, a high ranking *ndap* shell is given to the person destined to receive the payment involved—the representative of the bride's family in bridewealth, the pig owner in the pig feast, and those who labored to build a house or canoe in house or canoe payments. Soon after the high ranking *ndap* is given, however, it is taken back and returned to the big man who owns it, only to be replaced with a number of low-ranking shells that constitute the final payment to the recipient. Because it is primarily big men who have high-ranking shells, and because anyone who wants or needs to engage in a ceremonial exchange is required to use one of these shells to initiate the payment process in this way, people require the help of big men to accomplish their goals. In return for meeting such needs, big men receive vegetable food, in some cases pork, and are also sometimes able to appropriate low ranking shells in exchange.

Beyond the need for an inalienable, high ranking shell to appear in a given exchange, people involved in ceremonial exchange generally have to put together what Liep calls 'scaled payments' made of specified numbers of shells of varying ranks in order to present payments of the appropriate form. As I understand it, to make these payments, people need to amass numbers and kinds of shells that most people cannot put together using only those they have in their own collections. They thus need to solicit some of these shells from others in their networks, and often they turn to big men for help with this task. As importantly, to gather shells from others they need to engage in a number of more or less exotic 'financial procedures' that mark exchange on Rossel. Of these, let me mention just three, two of which are central to Liep's arguments about power and exchange. The first two are the ones involving the use of a 'security' and of a 'pledge'. When eliciting a high-ranking *ndap* or *kê* to present in an exchange, sometimes a person will leave the person who provides it with a security shell or shells of greater value than that borrowed (though of greater value, these shells will not be of the right kind to use in the exchange that is being prepared). Since such high-ranking shells are not given irrevocably in exchange, they will be returned and the security reclaimed. At other times, however, the person who asks for a shell will not give a security, but will only offer a 'pledge'. A pledge is a lower ranking shell that owner of the higher-ranking shell keeps to prove his claim on the loaned shell he expects to get back. The rub in this arrangement is that the person making the loan does

not always receive his shell back. Borrowers who feel they can get away with it often forgo making the return, leaving the lender only with the smaller pledge shell. As Liep puts it, in such cases “credit and honouring debts are subject to the balance of power between participants” (p. 309). Put otherwise, big men often manage to come out ahead in transactions in which they have given a pledge because they are able to avoid making the appropriate return.

The third financial procedure I want to mention here is ‘substitution’. Substitution is what happens when one takes back an inalienable, high-ranking *ndap* from a recipient and gives in return some smaller shells. With high ranking *ndap*, it is expected from the outset that this reduced substitution will take place—it is written into the rules of ceremonial exchange on Rossel that a high ranking *ndap* must both appear to be given in ceremonial exchange and then be taken back to be replaced with a substitute payment. Young people may resent the extent to which this rule allows big men to hold on to the most valuable shells, but at least its operation is not a surprise. For all but the very highest rank of *kê* shells, by contrast, the rules in play are different. Alienation of most *kê* shells is possible and people have the right to hope they will be able to keep the *kê* they have been given. This is particularly the case for a person who has held a pig feast and been given *kê* as payment for pork. Yet even in the case of *kê* that can be permanently given, months or even years later their original owners can ask to have them back for some specified purpose related to making another exchange. When the original owner takes back his *kê*, he generally replaces it with the pledge of the *kê*. In this kind of substitution, Liep again sees the play of power—for the stronger a person is, the more likely he is to be able to ask for such returns successfully and to resist requests that he return *kê* he himself has received. As Liep puts it, “Exchange on Rossel takes place in a social field where gifts, obligations, debts and credits are subject to the alignments of power between the parties. Recipients must accept the reduction if they are not able to muster the power to withstand it” (p. 317). Big men again tend to come out the winners in this kind of transaction—leaving younger and less powerful people to resent a situation they appear unable to prevent.

Thus far we have seen that the ceremonial economy is central to Rossel Island sociality—it permeates important areas of social life such as marriage, pig exchange, death payments, and payments for the labor that goes into making houses and canoes. Furthermore, the ceremonial economy is a ranked economy, with a few shells possessed of value far beyond that of others. Since big men tend to control these shells, they also dominate the economy in which the shells move. Taken together, these facts lead Liep to declare Rossel a plutocracy, a society ruled by its wealthiest citizens.

This is an unusual claim for an anthropologist to make about a Melanesian society. Melanesians are generally represented as more or less egalitarian, or at least as egalitarian in some important respects, and as marked by constantly shifting political fields in which power relations are fluid and even the most successful leaders achieve their power only through constant work and are always as apt to lose as to augment it. There is little room, in this classic Melanesian view of political life, for people to attain stable hierarchical rank and to govern society with the kind of commanding hand that a notion like plutocracy suggests.

Liep acknowledges that his image of a group of leading men possessed of stable rank above their fellows and able to bend the social system to their own ends is not a standard

Melanesian one. It is, in fact, in light of the anomalous status of the Rossel system as he reads it, that Liep offers a very provocative historical argument to account for how Rossel Island society came to have its hierarchical structure. His argument is that Rossel Island society was deeply influenced by the Austronesian settlers who came to the region several thousand years ago from South China or Taiwan. These settlers brought with them full-blown hierarchical social systems quite different from those possessed by the autochthonous Papuans they encountered, whose societies looked much more like the stereotypical Melanesian ones I described above. The Rossel Islanders speak a Papuan language, rather than one of the Austronesian languages spoken by their nearest neighbors. But they otherwise show some distinctly Austronesian features, such as matrilineal clanship. Liep's argument, then, is that their contact with their Austronesian neighbors bequeathed to Rossel Islanders a hierarchical social system that most likely replaced an originally more Papuan one. As has been the case throughout Austronesian speaking Melanesia for reasons that need not detain us here, since its establishment, the Rossel Island hierarchical system has been devolving over time, until we now see mostly only faint echoes of its original hierarchy. But what is left of that system of rank shows up in the power of Rossel Island big men, and it is rooted in a hierarchical currency system that we can imagine would have some time in the past mirrored an even more obviously hierarchical social order.

Liep's historical hypotheses are bold ones. In making them, he resourcefully draws on recent archaeological and linguistic work on the Austronesian settlement of the Pacific. Although these hypotheses are impossible to prove with certainty, Liep's argument as a whole is plausible and is articulated with a level of clarity that will allow it to serve as the origin-point for future debate (which I take to be the primary measure of success for such speculative reconstructions). I thus bring up this historical argument not to criticize it, but to point out the extent to which it informs Liep's entire ethnography. On the basis of it, Liep has no difficulty seeing the main story of Rossel Island society as turning on the fact that it is in significant respects a hierarchical one that affords its few leaders enough of a fund of power that they can exercise real control over social life.

And this is where my own voice comes in. For it is on the basis of this general picture of Rossel Island social life that Liep launches his broad critique of key aspects of anthropological exchange theory, and these critiques, and the extent to which the Rossel Island data supports them, are the matters I want to pursue through some questions here.

Let me quickly review Liep's criticisms of exchange theory. In the first criticism he follows Weiner (1992) in suggesting that the standard Maussian view of exchange does not take into account the finding that some things are defined precisely by the fact that they are not to be given, but are rather to be kept as inalienable possessions that anchor the identity and social standing of those who keep them. On this model, the keeping of things turns out to be as important to the construction of social life as the exchange of them. High-ranking *ndap* and the highest ranking *ké*—objects that are never really given away in exchange—make this point with great clarity. I therefore have no critical bone to pick with Liep's basic point here. But I have to say I have always wondered at the extent to which the point about the existence of things that are not given is really so foreign to Mauss, for it was Mauss himself in his work on sacrifice, written before that on the gift, who defined sacrifice as a kind of exchange in which someone "gives up something of himself but does not give himself" in his totality (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 100), indicating that it is possible

to think about keeping, even under the rubric of exchange. Still, the new emphasis on what is kept opened up by Weiner's work has been of undoubted importance and Liep shows again how useful such an emphasis can be.

But Liep also has two other problems with Maussian exchange theory, and these are destined to be more controversial. The first, and most important, takes the form of a rejection of the principle of reciprocity. On Liep's reading (which is here again similar to one of Weiner's), both Malinowski and Mauss were unduly influenced by the market economy in asserting that people felt an obligation to give back a return for what they were given, and to have that return be roughly equivalent in value to what they had received (pp. 6–8). The Rossel case, he asserts, gives the lie to the putative universality of this principle, since on Rossel big men and those who hope to attain this status regularly aim to give less than they receive, or to engineer, as in the case of pledges, not to follow through on reciprocal obligations at all. And contrary to the expectations of standard exchange theory, not only do big men behave in such non-reciprocal ways, but they do so with no loss of status. Liep's second critical concern beyond that of inalienability is with what he takes to be an anthropological assumption that in gift economies there exists "a general disposition of actors towards generosity". Again, Rossel big men with their keeping-while-giving and constant scheming to come out ahead do not seem to fit the bill, leading Liep to reject generosity as a universal feature of these kinds of systems of exchange (p. 323).

One could challenge Liep's criticisms of the principles of reciprocity and generosity on the level of theory. It is arguable, for example, that the architects of exchange theory did not completely neglect hierarchy and the way it can be expressed in practices of returning something other than what is given—the tradition of analysis these pioneers founded at least went on to take account of such phenomena. And it is almost certain that no one who spoke of a propensity toward generosity in gift economies did so in the kind of naïve fashion Liep seems to imagine they did; rather than claiming that people living with such economies were simply open handed, in speaking of generosity anthropologists were making points about how in the logic of such systems it is impossible to make anything of oneself unless one is constantly giving things away. The goal of such theoretical critiques of Liep's arguments would be to preserve some version of exchange theory that did not reduce to Liep's own conclusion, one that holds that the most important thing we can say about exchange in places like Melanesia is that it "is played out in a social field of inequality, and that status and power differences are realized and negotiated in exchange processes" (p. 323). In a general sense, there is no doubting the truth of this, but if this is all there is, it is not clear that we have avoided reproducing a Western social ontology of struggle, violence and domination, nor that the market logic Liep sees as so perniciously influencing classical exchange theory has not infected his own vision even more profoundly.

But such theoretical debates are never settled, nor even properly launched, without recourse to excellent ethnographic materials, and with that in mind I would like to return to Liep's own superb ethnography and suggest that his model of exchange as all about power, advantage and hierarchy might not exhaust what can be said even about the Rossel case. That is to say, I want to try to analyze Rossel Island as much more 'traditionally' Melanesian in its 'political' and 'economic' structures than Liep claims it is, and then to consider what kinds of new questions such an analysis can pose about the currency system that makes Rossel such an anthropologically noteworthy place.

As a kind of shorthand expression of the idea that guides my rereading of the Rossel materials, I might start by saying that in many respects Liep's ethnography is written from the point of view of the system of ranked exchange itself, or at least from the point of view of that system as seen through the eyes of the big men who are its central actors. The shell money system itself is indisputably hierarchical in its design—if all we knew about Rossel was that it featured this overly-elaborated system of ranked currencies, we would have to conclude that it was probably a very hierarchical society indeed. If we added to our knowledge the way the big men engage the system by holding on to the biggest valuables even as they insist that everyone needs to use them to get anything done in the realm of ceremonial exchange, and by trying whenever they can to exploit the weaknesses of others by welching on returns and taking back previous gifts, our sense of a stratified social order would only increase. Liep's main arguments depend on foregrounding precisely these two features of Rossel Island society.

But there are plenty of hints in Liep's ethnography that a story told from the point of view of the shell money system itself and the big men's ideal view of it is not the only story one can tell about Rossel social life. There is, in fact, a much more 'egalitarian' side of things that complicates that story significantly. 'Egalitarian' is of course an essentially contested term. Or perhaps even this designation is too kind. Since the 1980s, the idea has largely settled in amongst anthropologists that all inequalities are real and have decisive effects on social life and that conversely all claims to equality are merely ideological and mostly honored in the breach. Thus the contest over egalitarianism has already come near to ending in favor of the abandonment of the term. Yet in spite of the strength of this tendency in contemporary anthropology, I think one can argue against abandoning the idea of an egalitarian society, and I have even done so elsewhere (Robbins 1994). But that is not what I want to do here. Instead, in the service of getting my argument aired, I want just to ask that for the sake of argument we agree to mean by egalitarian something like what it meant in an older, more innocent Melanesianist literature—a situation in which there is a strong emphasis on some kind of symmetry in exchange, and in which leadership is achieved, fluid and competitive.

Liep does not deny that there is a "norm" of reciprocity and symmetry in this classic sense on Rossel Island, he merely thinks the most important thing about this norm is that it is "frequently evaded" (p. 310). Yet he also provides plenty of evidence that balanced reciprocity is built into the very foundations of Rossel Island social organization in a way that makes it at least as fundamental to social life there as the system of ranked ceremonial exchange. We can see this for example in marriage payments. These begin with unilateral payments of bridewealth, perhaps suggesting that wife-givers rank above wife-takers. But over time mutual support and gifts between affines serve to balance out their exchange relationships and to reduce any sense of difference between the two sides. Reciprocity appears here to triumph over an initial hint of hierarchy. The claim that this triumph may be an important aspect of Rossel social life is further reinforced when we learn that marriage on Rossel is ideally patrilateral, leading 'sides' over time to trade-off taking the role of wife-givers and wife-takers and to stress the symmetry that holds between them. A similar kind of equivalent exchange is aimed for in mortuary payments, which also even out over time. And there is a strong tendency to exchange pig feasts, such that over time participants play both of the major roles involved in them and tend to give back roughly what they have

received. Finally, we can add that “reciprocity and generosity” is “not absent in everyday hospitality and exchanges of food and labor” (p. 10). Taking all this evidence together, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the ‘norm’ of reciprocity is part of the DNA of all of the most important institutional complexes that shape Rossel Island life except for that of the shell money system and its practices of ranked exchange.²

Liep presents all of this material and recognizes the kind of reading to which it might give rise, but in response to it he turns back to his historical argument about the ancient though devolving status of hierarchy on Rossel. From this point of view, the evidence of reciprocal, egalitarian values I have been discussing should not be seen as “a survival of an ‘original’ structure of restricted exchange, but [as] the result of how groups and leaders on Rossel have come to terms in a limited internal arena when the plug has been pulled, so to speak, on the prestigious connection with an Austronesian chiefly centre” (pp. 330–331). But the question of where these reciprocal, egalitarian features come from historically is not the only one we can pose to these materials, or even the most interesting. From my point of view, a more productive question would be how Rossel Islanders live with what I take to be quite an intense tension between the hierarchical and egalitarian values that mark their lives. I would also ask why the Rossel Islanders live with this tension, not in the sense of how historically they have come to have these two competing values, but rather in the sense of how their uneasy co-existence allows for possibilities that would not be available were Rossel Islanders to decide to forgo one of these values in favor of what would have to be in some respects a less conflicted existence.

I cannot fully answer these questions, and the real point of raising them is simply to suggest the possibility that a fully rounded picture of Rossel life would be one that put the tension between reciprocity or equality and hierarchy at its center, rather than focusing only on one side of the tension, as one perforce must do if one takes the hierarchical view afforded by standing on the side of the shell money system. It is worth noting that there do exist Melanesian ethnographies that dwell on the tension between reciprocity and hierarchy, and that they have been quite successful. From the same Massim area as the Rossel Islanders, we have Michael Young’s (1971, 1983) two important studies of the Kalauna of Goodenough Island—I would argue that both put this tension front and center. And from the mainland of Papua New Guinea, we now have the many works that have followed Simon Harrison’s (1985) pioneering account of the way the elaborately hierarchical picture of gender relations presented during the course of men’s initiation rituals among the Avatip co-exists with a robust tradition of “secular equality” in relations between men and women outside of ritual confines. Might there be some profit from considering what the Rossel case might add to this tradition of argument?

Let me move in that direction by way of concluding my remarks. One gets a strong sense from Liep’s ethnography that there is something decidedly circular about the power of Rossel Island big men. Big men can make exchanges go the way they want them to go because they are powerful, and we know they are powerful because of the way they are able to manipulate exchange. On my first reading of Liep’s book, I thought the appearance of this circle might represent a flaw in his ethnography. I worried that it might be a flaw in that it must be leaving out an account of some basis for the power of big men that is external to the institution of ranked exchange the big men so fully dominate. Unless this were the case, why would people put up with the big men’s dominance of ceremonial

exchange in the first place, or even with the ceremonial exchange system as a whole—a system in which they seem to find themselves constantly outwitted and frustrated. Unless the big men have some important power that they generate outside of the game of ceremonial exchange that could allow them to make its perpetual losers continue to play, why would those losers not walk away, leaving the big men with no power at all? There are hints in Liep's ethnography of other sources of the big men's power, particularly having to do with their control of sacred and important social historical knowledge. But the hints are mostly impressionistic, and I initially wanted a stronger account of the structural grounding of big men's power outside of the domain of ceremonial exchange.

On second reading, I have changed my mind about the nature of big men's power in Rossel. I'm now inclined to believe the circle of power that is both generated and demonstrated primarily in ceremonial exchange is a real circle in Rossel life. In effect, Rossel Island big men are promulgating, dare we say it, an enormous shell game—one in which there is little real power hidden underneath the shells except that which big men can derive by virtue of the fact that others are willing to play, and mostly to lose. The analogy with Harrison's argument about ritual hierarchy and secular equality in the Sepik thus becomes even stronger, for we now have a hierarchical institution—ceremonial exchange—that is certainly central to some men's model of social life, but that is in most respects cut off from the way life unfolds beyond its confines. In Rossel, ceremonial exchange touches marriages, mortuary payments, pig feasts, etc., but in the end all of those institutions cut themselves loose from it by going on to realize values of reciprocity and symmetry that are its antithesis, just as people in Avatip do not credit male hierarchical claims with much force when they are made outside the ritual domain.

In a classic piece, Pierre Clastres (1987) once made the argument that Amazonian Indian societies posited chiefs only to systematically exclude them from social life by forcing them to stand outside all of the important circuits of exchange of words, goods and people that constituted it: chiefs talked but no one listened or responded; they gave goods but got few back; and they took wives but did not reciprocate. Like Liep, Clastres made his argument in part to do away with common sense evolutionist arguments. For Liep, the evolutionist assumption that most rankles is that equality and reciprocity come first, and are social primitives, rather than following on the devolution of a hierarchical system. For Clastres, the questionable evolutionary claim is that egalitarian systems are destined to develop, if they develop at all, into hierarchical ones. For the Amazonians he studies, Clastres claims, this does not hold. These societies posit chiefs only to force them outside of society precisely in order to forestall the development of hierarchy—they allow for rank and power and then contain them in a bubble in which they can do little to shape social life. These societies are, as Clastres famously put it, societies against the state. One wonders if a similar argument might be viable in the Rossel case. There, people have allowed big men to sink enormous amounts of time and energy into a ceremonial exchange system that lets them live out in very vivid terms their fantasies of standing at the apex of an elaborately hierarchical social system. Meanwhile, while the big men are otherwise engaged, people are able to get on with living the rest of their lives in something like the largely reciprocal, egalitarian kinds of ways so many other Melanesians do.

My concluding argument is no doubt exaggerated, but I offer it by way of pushing the pendulum from Liep's hierarchical position over to the reciprocal side of the reciprocity/

hierarchy divide. I do so in the hopes that in the end it may settle somewhere back in the middle. Like all really important ethnographies—the ones that last—Liep has given us more than just what we need to follow his own very ingenious and important argument. He has given us enough material to explore the roads through Rossel social life he did not choose to take. By my lights, the highest compliment one can pay a really important, original and challenging ethnography like this is to revel in its surplus and try to read it in fresh ways. It is that kind of compliment I have tried to pay *A Papuan Plutocracy* here.

NOTES

¹ All page number references that do not supply a date are to Liep 2009.

² It is worth noting that Liep (1989) has told part of this egalitarian, reciprocal story himself, in an essay written, in the language I have adopted here, from the point of view of the system of mortuary exchange. It must also be noted, however, that even in this essay he does not see the egalitarian tendencies of mortuary exchange as undermining an account of Rossel Island life focused on big men's emphasis on achieving inequalities through other kinds of exchange, so this essay in no way contradicts the main argument of his book. I am grateful to Liep for directing me to this article.

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