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

• TON OTTO •

This is a book that captures the reader's attention from the start, not only because of its beautiful lay-out and illustrations and the exotic phenomena that it describes, but also thanks to the author's academic assiduousness that transpires through its pages. It is the culmination of more than 35 years of dedicated study of a curious and complex system of monetary exchange that exists on Rossel Island, an eastern outlier of the Louisiade Archipelago, far to the east of the mainland of Papua New Guinea. In Part I 'The Setting', the book provides an overall ethnography of the Island, which forms the background for its focus on ranked exchange in Part II. Rossel Islanders have developed a system of monetary exchange which is unique in the world because of its complexity. Two distinct shell currencies (*ndap* and *kê*) each comprise as many as twenty ranked categories of shells that play different roles in various exchange practices. It is a prime achievement of this book to describe these practices in detail and to develop an original set of theoretical concepts to be able to do this. Thus the shells can variously be used to make a deposit, provide a security, constitute a replacement, solicit a gift, offer a pledge, or return a (reduced) substitution (see p. 298 ff.). Ranked exchange is of course not limited to Rossel Island, but the unique complexity of the Rossel system derives from the combination of three features: the extraordinary number of categories in the rank order; the feature of 'licensing', which involves the use of inalienable shells in initiating exchanges (making a deposit that is later returned); and the

mobilisation of high-ranking shells as pledges along a chain of serial incremental transfers. I find John Liep's description of ranked exchange on Rossel an impressive ethnographic and analytic achievement and believe that it will be a touchstone for future work on monetary exchange.

In the following I will suggest some limitations in Liep's theoretical rendering of his ethnography, which have to do with his overall theoretical position, a relative neglect of the time dimension in exchange, and a lack of interest in the possibilities of newer theory on Melanesian exchange and personhood. I describe these limitations not to diminish the outstanding importance of this book, but to highlight the areas where in my view further theoretical and analytical work could be beneficial and could cast new light on the phenomena described. I give my views with due respect for Liep's inspiring and imposing accomplishments, well knowing that it is always easier to find areas that are underdeveloped in a book than to prove an author wrong on the arguments and analyses he has chosen to pursue.

*A middle range practice theory and social inequality*

Liep's theoretical ambition and achievement does not stop with his new classification of ranked monetary exchange on Rossel Island. He wishes to understand this complex system in its wider social, political, cultural as well as historical context. He chooses to view exchange as a processual field of practices, executed by agents who do not rigidly observe fixed rules but who act with regard to conventional guidelines that allow for ad hoc improvisation. The actors make their choices on the basis of cultural values and in the context of power relations, which give some agents greater scope for making decisions than others. In contrast to structuralist approaches, Liep does not want to understand the exchange system as a holistic model of society seen as a singular unit, but rather as a decentralised field of local exchange events and practices, changing over time. He calls his approach 'a kind of middle range practice theory', which leaves room both for individual action and for structural constraints of power and culture.

In line with this Liep also develops a cultural-historical hypothesis about the origin of the system which comprises both the introduction of Austronesian matrilineal organisation and ranking, and the local elaboration of internal exchange through a combination of invention and island integration. In the more recent history since pacification he discerns a process of pecuniary schismogenesis. This involves two opposing tendencies: a trend to commoditize indigenous forms of wealth and social reproduction and a trend to protect these indigenous forms by erecting or strengthening boundaries against the encroachment of commoditization (following Appadurai 1986, Liep calls this process 'enclaving'). These two tendencies are the result of political negotiations and conflicts between local agents, in which Rossel 'big men' have been able to keep Western money away from those exchanges that are most closely concerned with the control of people and the reproduction of their relationships. In these fields traditional shell money still rules supreme and provides the basis of the power of a group of older men. This explains Liep's choice of the title of the book: *A Papuan Plutocracy*.

I have a lot of sympathy for Liep's theoretical contextualisation of the Rossel Island exchange system and its historical origin and find his hypotheses very plausible. In particular

I applaud the way in which he depicts shell money as “more than a means of payment and medium of prestige; it is an instrument of dominance” (p. 343). I also like his analysis of the historical processes of ‘interference’ and how this has resulted in the ‘enclaving’ of key exchanges of shell money. He sketches a history which is more than the reproduction and transformation of impersonal systems, since he gives place to the actions of human actors who are guided by their interests and constrained by their positions in systems of power relations. The following comments therefore in no way aim to criticize this theoretical positioning in a radical way, but have to be understood as suggestions that may or may not complement it.

In the first place Liep criticises an implicit assumption that is deeply rooted in the traditional anthropological understanding of reciprocity, as this is developed by Malinowski, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins and Gregory. This implicit assumption is that the actors involved in reciprocal exchange are equal and start from symmetrical positions. Liep joins those critics who see this underlying assumption as a reflection of Western economic ideology and who state that reciprocal exchange relations more often than not start from unequal positions (Dumont 1977, 1986; Weiner 1992). Liep’s ethnography of Rossel shows convincingly that, just as in the West, people do not have equal starting positions. Some have inherited important shells, or have been able to get crucial knowledge about genealogies and family histories, or knowledge about magical spells and sacred places (p. 129 ff.). In addition, there are the key differentiating dimensions of gender and age. Liep argues that senior men as a group are most influential but also that there are differences among these older men which give some a more leading position than others. We have already mentioned the possession of shells and knowledge, but in addition there are also personal characteristics such as the capacity to maintain a high level of activity and initiative and also, more negatively, the capacity to be cunning and use tricks (pp. 310, 318). I agree with all this, but my impression is that Liep emphasises inequality as a starting position, and thus de-emphasises inequality as a result of exchanges. In my own ethnographic study of another society in Papua New Guinea, I have come across cases of little men who became big men, perhaps against all odds, because they were motivated to maintain a high level of activity and initiative and because they were able to acquire the necessary knowledge and cunning through a process of trial and error. Thus if the picture of exchange sketched by Liep needs some adjustment, it is to highlight that exchange, true enough, always happens in a field of power relations, but that it also can effect these power relations. This is so because reciprocal exchange is an open system that not only reproduces inequality but also can generate new inequalities.

My second comment is perhaps more fundamental, as it concerns the premises of Liep’s theoretical position. With Weiner (1992) he criticises classical exchange theory for having assimilated implicit notions about exchange derived from Western market ideology. As already mentioned, this concerned primarily the premise that exchange partners enter transactions from symmetrical positions as equal individuals. In reaction Liep has emphasised the inequality that characterises real world exchange transactions. Even though this is an appropriate critique of Western economic ideology and its implicit individualism, Liep’s position can nevertheless still be criticised for remaining within this larger Western tradition. His choice of practice theory is a case in point, because this theoretical perspective has unmistakable roots in Marxism and Western economic thinking (Jenkins 1992). Other

indications are his focus on shell exchanges as “financial procedures” (see below), his reference to a Rossel “labour theory of value” (p. 231), and his use of related theoretical concepts such as “class” (p. 343). My critique is not that these concepts are inadequate because they derive from a Western context, but rather that they perhaps do not provide a full picture of these non-Western phenomena. Whereas Liep gives a quite persuasive depiction of how wealthy old men as a group have been able to maintain a dominant position through their control of shell exchange ‘as an instrument of dominance’, I still feel that too much weight is given to the actions of individuals consciously pursuing their own interest. Even though these interests have been present and may have been consciously pursued, such a historical-middle-range-practice theory cannot explain how these plutocrats succeeded in persuading the rest of society to accept the hierarchical values that are at the basis of the ranked exchange system. To sketch a fuller picture we have to know why shells have received so much respect, why they were believed to become empowered by the spirit of cannibal victims (p. 312), what their relation is to social value and personal worth, etc. In short we need a theoretical perspective that places monetary exchange in a wider context of personhood and agency, something that has already been pursued by representatives of what has become known as New Melanesian Ethnography (see below).

I completely agree with Liep that “theories are not scripts for reality but instruments with which to explore it” (p. 5). I endorse his theoretical efforts because they undeniably cast light on the complex exchange procedures he describes, including their relation to inequality and their hypothetical origin. What I suggest here is that there may be a complementary way of looking at these phenomena that departs in a more radical way from Western economic premises. Such a radical departure services the aim of anthropology which Liep mentions on the last page of his wonderful book: that anthropology as a social science must be a critical science. Such critical stance may be found in a practice-theoretical perspective—as Liep opts for—but it should, in my view, also include the most radical examination possible of the premises of our theoretical models.

### *Exchange and time*

Liep explains that his interest in the Rossel Island monetary system arose because it was seen as one of the unsolved mysteries of economic anthropology at the time he chose a project for his Ph.D. research. Wallace Edwin Armstrong (1928) was the first to study Rossel Island society in 1921 and had been fascinated by the complexity of its money exchanges, which existed as a number of ranked values that could not be compared according to a common ratio. He tried to make sense of this system by seeing time as the unit that could link the various value categories, if one understood the difference between them as compound interest on loans. Liep (1995) and others (Dalton 1965; Douglas 1967) have amply pointed out that this model of ‘primitive capitalism’, in which all strived to make a profit by lending shell money, could not fit the empirical data, even those collected and described by Armstrong himself. Although I fully agree with this, I find that the rejection of Armstrong’s idea about time (as interest) perhaps has led to a general lack of appreciation of the central role of time in processes of exchange on Rossel.

Let me unpack the different elements in this argument. First, I would like to focus on time as a central dimension of exchange practices that allows for creating inequality. Pierre Bourdieu's well-known critique of the structural explanation of reciprocal gift exchange points exactly to the neglect of time and timing (Bourdieu 1977: 4–9, 1990: 98–111, 2000: 206–245). Returning a gift (too) early, or (too) late, or not at all, are possibilities with very different significance and potential outcome, depending on the balance of power between the protagonists. Thus delaying a counter prestation can be a strategic action to confirm or enhance one's superior status. Liep's own material confirms that gifts (or 'loans') are not automatically and not always returned. This concerns especially shells given as a pledge for another one of higher value. The giver of the higher-valued shell needs to argue that he needs this shell again for another exchange in order to get it back, and he still risks a refusal, even though the norm is that the pledge can be exchanged at will (pp. 306–307). A stronger man can hang on to the higher-valued shell longer and this both confirms his status and gives him more room for manoeuvring in other exchanges. This enhanced capacity to enter exchange is essential and is to a large extent based on the power to delay and thus control other people's time.

A Dobuan big man explained this in no uncertain words to Reo Fortune (1932: 215):

Suppose I, Kisian of Tewara, go [north] to the Trobriands and secure an armshell called Monitor Lizard. Then I go [south] to Sanaroa and in four different places secure four different shell necklaces, promising each man who gives me a shell necklace, Monitor Lizard in return, later. I, Kisian do not have to be very specific in my promise. It will be conveyed by implication and assumption for the most part. Later, when four men appear in my home at Tewara each expecting Monitor Lizard, only one will get it. The other three are not defrauded permanently, however. They are furious, it is true, and their exchange is blocked for a year. Next year. When I, Kisian, go again to the Trobriands I shall represent that I have four necklaces at home waiting for those who will give me four armshells. I obtain more armshells than I did previously, and pay my debts a year late (...) I have become a great man by enlarging my exchanges at the expense of blocking [the exchanges of others] for a year. I cannot afford to block their exchanges for too long, or my exchanges will never be trusted by anyone again. I am honest in the final issue.

The central message of this citation is that Kisian gains status—becomes a 'great man'—by manipulating the time and thus exchange possibilities of others. Dobu lies in the same region as Rossel, but similar processes of time manipulation have been observed elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, for example by Mervin Meggitt in Enga in the PNG Highlands. Meggitt (1974: 190) mentions that big men retain resources for themselves by delaying compensation to weak members of their group of followers. Thus the delay of return prestations is the very mechanism that creates value for the person who is able to enforce such a delay, as he can use his shells (or other resources) for entering new exchanges and thus for enhancing his position. In this way the value of particular shells or prestations is not completely fixed but depends on the capacities of the exchangers to manipulate time to their advantage. This is, of course, not the same as interest on loan, in the way Armstrong saw it, but on the other hand it shows a clear connection between delay in return and value creation—which lies at the basis of the concept of interest (in addition to the concept of the risk of no return). The difference with interest is that the one who delays the return is also the one who gains, not the one receiving the return.

My criticism of Liep is not that he denies the role of time, but that he does not acknowledge its central position in the creation of (unequal) value. It appears that Rossel Islanders do reflect on the relationship between time and value, like the Dobuan big man, for example when they describe the strategy of how to “let the pledge grow itself” by requesting a higher value in return (pp. 308–309). My suggestion is not to alter the very fine and comprehensive classification of ‘financial procedures’ that Liep has produced, but rather to try to extend his characterisation by systematically considering the role of time in the various transactions. As suggested above, an important aspect of the so-called pledges is that they are mechanisms for the extraction of value.

Time plays also a clear role in the value of the *ndap* shells of the very high division which have an individual name and history. The particular history of the exchanges these shells have been part of is the very core of their unique valuation (see Weiner 1992). Again time increases value in this example, not in the form of delayed exchange but in the form of conspicuous appearance at prestigious events. These highly valued shells (of the very high and high divisions) have now become the inalienable property of their owners. Their value is so high that they are not exchanged any more but some (those of the high division) enter exchange arrangements temporarily as ‘deposits’. They open and lend prestige to the exchange transaction through their presence, but they have to be returned to their owner after the original presentation. They are then replaced by a lower-valued substitute, the forthcoming of which is guaranteed by the original high value shell. It appears that we here have another kind of link between value and time than with the delayed return of pledges. These important shells have accumulated their value over a long period of time and this time-based value is now used by their big-man owners to enter exchanges without risking a loss. As the top-shells are necessary for certain types of exchange relations (such as initiating a brideprice payment or a pig feast) they can be seen as means to control the time of others, who depend on their presence. Their time-amassed value can initiate or stop exchanges that are crucial for the reproduction of society and thus constitute an important resource of power for their owners, who form, as Liep writes, “an influential class of wealthy people” (p. 343).

By keeping these time honoured shells in their possession, this class of owners manipulate time in such a way as to preserve existing hierarchies. This is in line with Annette Weiner’s (1992) thesis of ‘keeping-while-giving’. The top-shells freeze hierarchical identities at the same time as they facilitate the exchange of other valuables. They are tied to the persons of their owners. This close connection is illustrated by the practice of displaying a big man’s wealth on his body at the time of his death (pp. 323–325).

### *Exchange and personhood*

The last aspect I would like to discuss concerns whether a different theoretical perspective would shed new light on some of the phenomena described by John Liep. In particular I refer to the so-called New Melanesian Ethnography (NME) which is represented by authors like Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, Mark Mosko, Eric Hirsch and others. I find it surprising that Liep does not explore in some depth the potential of this theoretical perspective, as one of its main achievements is the reanalysis and re-conceptualisation of exchange relations in Melanesia. No doubt unduly simplifying, one could say that Strathern and others,

building on Gregory's theorisation of gifts and commodities, develop the idea that conceptions of personhood in Melanesia are closely linked to exchange practices and cannot be understood without them. This seems quite relevant for the practices described by Liep, as I will show, but he only explains in a footnote (n. 3, p. 8) why he refrains from using Strathern's influential *Gender of the Gift* (1988). The reason he provides is that Strathern, like Gregory, assumes that gifts are ontologically inalienable, something Liep thoroughly disagrees with. Leaving aside whether this reading of Strathern (and Gregory) is correct or not, it still surprises me that this reason would be sufficient to discard the whole approach, which could have provided an alternative understanding of a number of the practices described by Liep.

Before turning to my major example, the pig feast, I would like to quote a place where Liep actually comes quite close to describing a NME perspective on Rossel. This is where he discusses the reason for paying bridewealth as part of marriage exchanges. Rossel people explain this by referring to the hard work done by the bride's family to raise and feed her. "There is thus a notion that, by nurturing somebody through providing that person with food, one so to speak 'gets a share' in the person, so that this service may constitute a basis for a claim to a girl's bridewealth" (p. 231). Liep calls this a Rossel version of a 'labour theory of value' which, he suggests, may have been influenced by their experience of commodity production and paid labour in recent history! If Liep had taken the NME perspective more to heart, he would not need Western labour theory to explain this local representation of bridewealth payments, which makes a lot of sense if one accepts the premises of NME: persons are built up from the gifts and services provided to them and these elements constitute the relations of which they are part. Severing a girl from her family at marriage thus requires a rearrangement of the elements of her person that constitute her relations to her family, who have to be 'compensated' for their loss.

Liep chooses to maintain a more narrow monetary perspective on the shell exchanges he studied, based on more traditional economic anthropological theory and practice theory. This perspective has certainly led to major results, in particular his impressive classification of 'financial procedures' but it also leaves some puzzles unsolved. One of these puzzles concerns the pig feast, which is the most complex but also most frequent exchange on Rossel Island. The feast is in fact an exchange between a 'pig owner' and a 'pig eater', each with their own network of contributors and participants. In order to 'pay' for the pig, the group of the pig eater enters a series of incremental shell exchanges to produce a number of top ranking shells of the required value. These shells, plus a large number of low ranking ones, are given to the pig owner and his group. However, the pig owner can not be certain about the ownership of these shells, as they are not seen as straight payment for the meat received. "The meat doesn't really square the shells" Liep concludes and calls this surprising (p. 279). In particular the high ranking shells can be demanded back and substituted by lower ranking ones—or not be replaced at all—when the pig eaters need these shells for other exchange activities. Liep is perplexed: "This state of affairs thus presents a further puzzle. Why do men as the recipients of payments accept such erosion of their wealth? How can men who have agreed to participate in the assembly of a payment and eaten the pork handed over to them at the feast later default on their involvement and take back their contribution?" (p. 317) These are pressing questions indeed, but only, as I will argue, if one employs a strictly monetary perspective.

If one, alternatively, would see the pig feast not primarily as a matter of exchanging money for meat, but as a mutual acknowledgement and assertion of social relations and personhood, the whole thing appears to make more sense. In particular the aspect of making relations manifest or apparent is of utmost relevance here. Following Marilyn Strathern (1988: 274) and Alfred Gell's (1999: 37) rendering of her insights, one could argue that exchange is about making social relations visible. Normally, social relations are not visibly manifest, but during an orchestrated exchange event they are made to appear for the involved parties and also for others. Liep points himself to the importance of display for making the hierarchical relations visible: "The scaled payment constitutes a characteristic concrete representation of hierarchy or differentiation. When shells are lined up in order of rank, the precedence of both the contributors and the recipients of the various shell-ranks is displayed." (p. 298) Thus the material lay-out of the shell prestations is a representation of the relations involved in the particular exchange, making visible their relative value and importance. Taking part in a pig feast is thus not just a matter of getting pork for money. Rather it is a matter of being seen and acknowledged in public as a person. This display of agency and personal relations is the value that is realised through the feast and is probably the major motivation for the participants. Therefore it becomes more understandable that the shells can be reclaimed again to enter into new manifestations of personhood and agency.<sup>1</sup> In my view such a NME type of analysis would give a fuller and thus more adequate explanation of the pig feast and would suggest answers to the remaining puzzles that a monetary perspective cannot fully solve.

Having come to the end of my comments, I would like to underline how much pleasure and insight the reading of Liep's book has given me. It is a great book because of its detailed documentation of a very complex exchange system, its stringent and lucid analysis, and its inspiring contribution to anthropological theory.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Carrier and Carrier (1991: 162–185) give a very fine analysis of the importance of material displays of gifts as representations of social relationships. Their case is Ponam society in Manus, Papua New Guinea. Munn (1992) provides crucial insight into how the act of exchange itself creates value and her ethnographic case is Gawa, a society in the Massim, the same region of which Rossel Island is a part.

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## RESPONSE TO COMMENTS ON *A PAPUAN PLUTORCACY: RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND*

· JOHN LIEP ·

### *Reciprocity and the noble Indian: response to Joel Robbins*

While my general idea of ranked exchange has not overly occupied the reviewers, my critique of the principle of reciprocity and gift theory has been more provocative of intervention. These are central tenets of exchange theory and my argument, if it stands, would seriously destabilise cherished convictions. Some damage control could therefore be expected to be put into effect. One strategy would be to congratulate me for having successfully explored a unique society. If the Rossel Island situation were truly unique, 'an anthropological freak', conclusions drawn from it could then be argued to be more or less irrelevant generally.<sup>1</sup> Another strategy is to dam and contain the power play of shell money finance into a limited area and thereby diminish its scope. In the rest of social life there would be reciprocity and generosity as usual. Joel Robbins uses both ploys, but the former only in a small way. I shall concentrate on the latter.