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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.

Robbins raises a valid and relevant problem. He admits that the shell money system is indisputably hierarchical in design, but that I ‘stand too much on the side of ranked exchange itself’ as seen through the eyes of the big men on Rossel. He deftly points out that I in fact report several instances of instituted reciprocity and symmetry in exchange. This is the case in the exchange relationship between affines (after the large and unilateral bridewealth), in the preference for patrilineal marriage, in affinal mortuary payments and in delayed reciprocal pig-feasting. Finally, reciprocity and generosity exists in everyday exchanges in the domestic domain. So there seems no doubt that at certain levels reciprocal symmetry is “deliberately aimed at” on Rossel as I say myself (p. 11). In fact, in an earlier paper (Liep 1989) mentioned by Robbins I argued that these strategies of reciprocity counteract a structure of hierarchy and thus equality of rank between Rossel *descent groups*. It is for that reason, therefore, I abstained in my book from talking about hierarchy on Rossel, but used the term inequality, not to confuse the system with true hierarchies in ranked societies elsewhere. In my paper (1989) I was concerned to show how symmetry could be seen to contain what I called the “spectre of hierarchy” lurking in the Massim. I also noted, however, that while symmetry may maintain equality at one level this does not prevent inequality at another. Here I mentioned the relation between elder and younger. In this book, my focus is on aspects of inequality as they are inherent in the exchange system, in terms of big man monopoly of high-ranking shells and practices negating reciprocity to the full.

Robbins argues that there is a tension between hierarchical and egalitarian values in Rossel Island social life: a more “rounded picture of Rossel life would be one that put the tension between reciprocity/equality and hierarchy at its centre, rather than focussing only on one side of the tension” (this issue: ). This is a good point. In the book I formulate it as a contradiction between ‘norm’ and ‘practice’: there are moral injunctions of reciprocity and generosity, but in practice they are often evaded (p. 310). In an exchange on ‘gaming the *kula*’ on ASANET last year I used the terms ‘norm’ and ‘reality’. Several participants confirmed the frequency of cheating in the *kula*. Ryan Schram (a researcher at the University of Helsinki whose Ph.D. thesis was supervised by Robbins at the University of California San Diego) objected, however, to my contrast between norm and reality: the latter is not more real because it involves observed events or actions. He argued that asserting a norm in the breach is itself a part of *kula* practice, a very concrete action. Reciprocity and rational self-interest co-exist as values in Milne Bay [Massim] societies, he said. I am inclined to agree with this objection. There *is* a contradiction in Rossel exchange, a paradox that Gregory also notes here, but rather than being between norm and practice it is between two conflicting norms and two practices. Reciprocity is not only argued verbally, it is also practiced. The examples mentioned above attest to this, and big men who take the lead in all ceremonial exchanges take part in these reciprocal practices. On the other hand, ordinary village people, who often enough invoke reciprocity, may also at times appreciate a cunning trick. So when Robbins argues that there is a tension between equality and hierarchy [inequality] at the centre of Rossel life and that this could have been brought more to the fore in my analysis, he is right. When he attempts to outline a solution to the problem, however, I cannot follow him.

He states correctly that “the ceremonial economy is central to Rossel Island sociality” and its currency transactions “shape marriages, funerals, and almost all the other most important social institutions of Rossel Island life” (this issue: 74). But in the last part of his

essay he, nevertheless, attempts to sever the ranked exchange of shell money from the very same institutions it mediates. Here, he takes inspiration from Simon Harrison's (1985) argument that, in the Sepik society of Avatip, an elaborate hierarchy involving gender relations is in existence, but restricted to the men's house and initiation institution. In domestic life, outside this male ritual sphere, secular equality between men and women reigns. The first step in Robbins' ligatory technique is to dismiss as "mostly impressionistic" (this issue: 79) the dimensions of big man power I report in Chapter Four, especially the ritual and occult knowledge which make them respected and sometimes feared. The second step is that he depicts ceremonial exchange on Rossel as "an enormous shell game" promulgated by the big men, but "there is little power hidden underneath the shells". Ceremonial exchange, he suggests, only "touches marriages, mortuary payments, pig feasts". These institutions "cut themselves loose from it by going on to realize values of reciprocity and symmetry that are its antithesis". (this issue: 79) This will not do. A classification should 'carve at the joint' as Plato said. But Robbins hacks away where there is no joint (at least metaphorically): at the backbone of Rossel society. Ceremonial exchange on Rossel Island is not, as the Avatip male cult, an institution barred to women and the uninitiated and apart from the rest of social life. It is at the heart of social reproduction, the prestige economy of pig feasts and the acquisition of status properties such as houses and canoes. Big men make themselves indispensable in the organisation of these ritual exchanges which are so complex that only they may direct them. They also exert the power to ban modern money from bridewealth and mortuary payments. Shell money finance is not some fantasy game floating above the institutions it permeates.

At the end of the paper Robbins appeals to Pierre Clastres, whom I had thought consigned to oblivion. This was almost touching for me, for in the already mentioned essay of mine I did in fact briefly refer to Clastres' *Society against the State* (1977 [1974]).<sup>2</sup> In the late 1970s Clastres had been hot stuff for a short period in my department in Copenhagen. I referred to his thesis that acephalous societies are constituted to negate coercive hierarchy in connection with the levelling effect of reciprocity in Rossel Island mortuary exchanges. But advances in Amazonian archaeology and history, as well as anthropological critique, soon undermined his anarchist thesis of the powerless Amazonian chief and the society against the state.

Extensive archaeological research together with studies of early chronicles of the European conquest have established that in considerable areas of the Amazon region dense populations lived in large village societies connected in regional political confederacies with ritual centres, political centralisation and elite exchange of prestige goods (Castro 1996; Heckenberger and Neves 2009). A process of devolution did take place in this region (as it did for other reasons in island Melanesia). Contemporary Amazonian Indian societies are fugitive remnants of decimated populations after the upheaval of the conquest. As Descola writes in a critique of Clastres: "The present egalitarianism is not the fruit of a collective will, tenacious to oppose the emergence of coercive power, but in fact the effect of a profound deconstruction of the social tissue, sapped by demographic dismemberment, extreme pillaging, military violence and expulsion into inhospitable isolation" (1988, my translation). In fact Clastres had his theory readymade before he even went to South America for the first time in 1963. His essay on the philosophy of Indian chieftainship (incorporated as Chapter Two in *Society against the State*) was first published in *L'Homme* in 1962. The

Ache Guayaki, amongst whom he conducted his first fieldwork, had before the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century lived a relatively settled, agrarian existence in eastern Paraguay. They suffered attacks by professional slavers and, at the turn of the twentieth century, the advancing frontier forced them to retreat into more inaccessible forest areas. As the forests were clear cut by mining, timber and cattle companies, the Ache gave up and sought 'protection' on the farm of a former Indian hunter where they were resettled. They were now "wasted by tuberculosis, despair and depression" and when Clastres arrived they "had dwindled to around a hundred people, and their culture appeared to loom precariously close to the edge of annihilation" (Dean 1999). It would seem that his experiences amongst them would form a poor basis for pronouncing on the essence of Indian political philosophy, but Clastres did not see fit to moderate an already formed conclusion. He elaborated it in *Society against the State*. Dean accuses him of "ahistoricism, rhetorical romanticism, and museumification" (1999).

Robbins concludes that in the same way as Amazonian Indian societies, according to Clastres' 'classic' piece, have posited chiefs to stand outside society, the people on Rossel Island have allowed big men to live out their "fantasies" of power, playing their financial game while the rest of the population live their lives in equality (this issue: 79). I find his interpretation misleading. Robbins is enthralled with the romantic primitivism I dissociate myself from in my book (p. 9), but which was also close to my heart when I was younger. Alas, it is now many years since I bade Clastres *adieu*.

*Commendation and recrimination: response to Chris Gregory*

Gregory's critique is a collage of strong reactions: lavish praise, resentful polemics, inspired guesswork and grumpy policing of conceptual boundaries. One is consequently drawn in very different directions when making a response to it.

Any writer would be thrown into delight and gratitude reading Gregory's elevated praise in his introduction. I cannot but fully agree with his opinion here. His reception of my identification of the importance of the notion of 'sides' in Rossel exchange, something similar to what he has found in India, is also rewarding. I would, however, not myself characterize a Rossel side as 'ego-centric' in opposition to the 'socio-centric' clan. This is because a side is generated with point of departure in a (sub)clan group, not in an individual ego. It is no kindred. There are a number of other issues in my book which Gregory appreciates and follows up with interesting suggestions for further research. Most of them concern kinship problems, an area of special interest to him and one where he commands a much wider comparative knowledge than I do. Although I take some interest in kinship and possess a certain amount of data from Rossel I am not a specialist in this field and I cannot contribute much to these suggestions. Nevertheless, of my three critiques he is, as an economic anthropologist, the one closest to me in disciplinary interests and outlook. It is the more regrettable that most of my response must be taken up with polemics.

Gregory has taken offence of the words "Marxist dogma" and "absurd" in a brief critique of his book *Gifts and Commodities* (1982) in my introduction. This comes in a critical review of the history of exchange theory in relation to my research. After having criticized Malinowski's principle of reciprocity I proceed with a brief review of Mauss' theory of the

gift where expressions such as “brilliant and inspired” are followed by “confusing” and “seriously misleading”, the last with regard to the obligation to return gifts (p. 8). I don’t *show* by examples that ‘there is often no obligation to return a gift’, but I refer to Testart’s ‘devastating critique’ (1998). Then follows the passage where I criticise Gregory’s version of gift theory.

Mauss (...) left a legacy that (...) led on to the dogma of Marxist scholars, of whom Gregory (1982) is the most prominent. Gregory argues that the gift is ontologically inalienable because it carries the guarantee of its return. Here he has been followed by Marilyn Strathern in her influential book *The Gender of the Gift* (1988: 161). The phenomenon of inalienability is important, as we shall see, but to hold that all gifts are so by nature is absurd. This has been argued by several authors [I here refer to critiques by Thomas, Gell, Carrier and two papers of my own].<sup>3</sup> Clearly things are often transferred into the control of others without the original owner being in a position to exercise any claim to them. (p. 8–9)

I must provide a bit of background to this passage. *Gifts and Commodities* is now an almost thirty-year old work. In the wake of the youth rebellion of 1968, students in many countries took to Marxism. In anthropology they threw also themselves into the study of Marx and Engels. It sounds strange today that students of anthropology would pore for months and years over the turgid volumes of *Capital* and *Grundrisse* for guidance in understanding rural populations of third world countries. But in the social sciences many during those years shared the belief that profound insight about society could be won by building on the nineteenth century founders of Marxism.<sup>4</sup> When I went out to Papua New Guinea in 1971 to do fieldwork on Rossel I brought with me the slim volume by Emmanuel Terray on the lineage mode of production in West Africa.<sup>5</sup> It was a disappointment, however, to find that it was of no use in this society where descent groups were not corporate units in production. When *Gifts and Commodities* was published I had already returned from my third sojourn on Rossel.

Gregory’s book was another product of the fairly short era of Marxist anthropology. For a period after its publication he became prominent in the small band of Marxist scholars in Melanesian studies (including Godelier, Damon, Feil, Modjeska). Gregory’s argument was squarely based on Marx’s writings supplemented with Morgan, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. His conception of the social structure of PNG societies was taken from the ‘gentile society’ of Morgan’s 110-year old book about kinship systems (1871) and his *Ancient Society* (1877). It was based on the exogamous clan (gens), a corporate group whose members were supposed to hold property in common (Gregory 1982: 12, 17). Morgan’s early version of ‘primitive society’ became the basis for the vision of *Urkommunismus* of Marx and Engels. Gregory proceeded by deducing the properties of the commodity according to Marx and went on to derive those of the gift as a strict inversion of the commodity. As commodity exchange was the exchange of alienable things between transactors in a state of reciprocal independence, gift exchange became, by his logic of dialectics, the exchange of inalienable things between persons in a state of reciprocal dependence. “An inalienable thing that is given away must be returned. Thus a gift creates a debt that has to be repaid.” (Gregory 1982: 19) This was because “in a clan-based society, where there is no private property, people do not have alienable rights over things” (ibid. 18). This meant that there is an indissoluble bond between the producer and his product. Gregory here referred to “the

inalienable *nature*” of gifts (ibid. 18, 20; my emphasis). He now rejects having ever “claimed that gifts are ‘ontologically inalienable’” (this issue: 85). I admit that he didn’t use the o-word, but it seems to me that he came very close. My phrasing is thus hardly “the polar opposite of truth”. On the basis of the background provided here, nor do I feel that the term ‘dogma’ is much out of the way. With regard to Marilyn Strathern, Gregory asserts that “the idea that my historically-informed method has anything in common with [her] ahistorical ‘controlled fictions’ (...) is simply false” (this issue: 85). He refers to a different page in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988: 18) but, in fact, Strathern here says: “The contrast sustained in this book is taken directly from Gregory’s (1982) work.” While Strathern and I both talk about his *theory*, he deftly refers to his *method* which is a different thing.

For my part, Gregory’s abstract logical construction of the concept of the gift was a stumbling block to analysis. My material was replete with information about unpaid debts, forced substitution of shells of inferior value to former recipients of high-ranking shells, and evasion of returns of loans.<sup>6</sup> His straitjacket of a framework was in defiance of my data and his premises appeared to me to be fundamentally wrong. Here I have provided some background to why I said what I said. Was it too strong language to use the word ‘absurd’? The reader may decide. I could have said ‘seriously misleading’ instead, except that I had already said that about Mauss. And it would hardly have satisfied Gregory either.

I was more impressed by Gregory’s insistence on historical awareness, by his discussion of the interaction of gift and commodity economies in PNG, and by his drawing attention to the paradox of the efflorescence of gift exchange in the face of encroaching capitalism. These elements have contributed to my thinking. If I have omitted to do so in my book I would like to credit him here.

Except for Maurice Godelier (1999), there are not many anthropologists who like Annette Weiner’s concept of “inalienable possessions” (1992). This is also the case with Gregory who of course prefers his own conception of inalienability. There are good reasons why others have been critical. Weiner had a tendency to reify what she called inalienable possessions, to make them the cause of those social relations which would rather have produced them. She defined inalienable possessions in a way that emphasized their isolation from exchange but, nevertheless, used the notion for example about high-ranking *kula* valuables that *do* circulate, although they may ‘sit’ with a possessor for decades before a new transfer is arranged. Her feminism made her believe that if women in the Pacific produced so-called cloth wealth they also controlled its exchange. Her approach was, as Gregory says, ahistorical and uninterested in change.

Nevertheless, I found *Inalienable Possessions* liberating for my thinking because of Weiner’s idea that certain valuable possessions may, through time, come to document the history and status of a line of owners. They may become sacralized and in the end authorize the owner’s pre-eminent social position. They have to be kept in the lineage and barred from exchange. They thus become symbols of distinction and difference from others. Weiner added that other less valuable things, which partook of the ‘aura’ of inalienable possessions, would be given in exchange (1992: 10, 37). Her theory of exchange thus suggested a limited zone of inalienability in a wider field of gift exchange where alienation was a possibility. This approach fit the Rossel Island situation like a glove (indeed, better than most of Weiner’s own cases). Here the sacred high-ranking *ndap* are truly inalienable while lower-ranking shells are exchanged in replacement (another Weiner concept) for them. It



gave me the inspiration to make sense of my data. For Gregory this is a “curious choice” because he finds her notion of ‘keeping-while-giving’ contradictory (this issue: 86). He seems to believe that for Weiner the same things are both kept and given. This is certainly a misunderstanding. Inalienable possessions are kept while it is lesser valuables that are given. For my part Weiner’s idea of inalienable possessions was very useful although there is much of her thinking I do not accept. I believe that many of those who have distanced themselves from Weiner have taken her too literally and thrown away the grains with the chaff.

Gregory takes me to task for my use of concepts. He intimates that I am muddled about terms such as ‘hierarchy’, ‘rank’, ‘inequality’ and ‘stratification’. I think this is unfair. I use ‘rank’ about a distinct social class of the population in a society. A rank is part of a ‘rank order’.<sup>7</sup> The latter is also a ‘hierarchy’, although when I speak of hierarchy I include a chiefly system. A hierarchy involves social inequality, but the latter may also exist in societies without rank and hierarchy. Thus I talk about hierarchy in the chiefly, ranked societies of Polynesia and Micronesia while I use the more elastic term ‘inequality’ in Melanesia, except in the minority of societies there which possess chiefs and ranked groups (such as the Trobriands). I never use ‘rank’ or ‘hierarchy’ about descent group structure on Rossel because it is not a society of ranked groups. I have chosen to apply the term ‘stratification’ in the last chapter of my book to outline a more diffuse, ‘class-like’ differentiation of people in terms of the ownership and control of shell money and their exchange on Rossel Island. I believe that readers will have no difficulty in following the discussions in my book. The sentence Gregory quotes as an example of my confusion most people would read without lifting an eyebrow. He lectures on the correct meaning of these concepts. But there is no generally accepted use of concepts in the social sciences. Gregory’s definitions are of course not authorized definitions, just the ones he prefers himself. When he thus declares that “Rank, hierarchy and stratification are cross-cutting orderings of people found in all societies” (this issue: 89), he is free to do so if he finds it useful. But I am as free to disagree.

The last chapter already appears to be the most provocative part of my book. Although the main theme of my monograph is ranked exchange and the special Rossel Island version of it, the question of power also runs like a red thread through the book. A whole chapter is concerned with dimensions of power in seniors’ secular and ritual knowledge, in the fear of sorcery and in the multitude of taboos surrounding women’s lives. In my analyses of exchange institutions I repeatedly touch on how power is appropriated and maintained through the control of shell money. In the conclusion of the book I return to the problem of power in Rossel Island society. I sketch a profile of social stratification where a minority of big men dominate the rest of the population through their ownership of high-ranking shells, their superior control of exchange and their monetary manipulations. This kind of hegemony I have chosen to call a plutocracy: an “influential class of wealthy people” (COD 1964).

Gregory objects that the title of my book is a misnomer. The idea of a plutocracy “is not fully developed”, the evidence is “anecdotal”, the “data is unconvincing” (this issue: 90). There is some basis for such a view when the eye that looks is a stern and rigorous one. Indeed, the last part of my conclusion is tentative or experimental. Gregory would have preferred that I restrict my theme more narrowly to ranked exchange. Plutocracy “would

be another book". But my aim has been to explore also the contexts and consequences of the Rossel version of ranked exchange, as far as my material and imagination would take me—in *this* book. What happened in this indigenous society where a monetary instrument became the key medium in the practice of social relations? The title *Plutocracy* is evocative of this manifestation of big man power. It is also provocative as a contrast to the prevalent picture of traditional Melanesian leadership and exchange. The subtitle more specifically indicates the main topic of the content. Such an arrangement of titles is not all that unusual. Gregory would prefer it the other way round and with a question mark. That would strictly be more correct. But it would be much less effective on the cover of a book.

*Time and the missing person: response to Ton Otto*

Ton Otto approves my ethnography and in general also my approach from practice theory. He is also the only one of my three reviewers who accepts my idea of plutocracy, which is encouraging. He takes up two issues where he suggests that alternative theories to those I have already employed would throw new light on our understanding of Rossel exchange. This is always welcome in that it challenges one to consider the argument once more from new viewpoints.

Otto cunningly arrests me for accusing "classical exchange theory" of an underlying reflection of "Western economic ideology" and goes on to point out that my practice theory "has roots in Marxism and Western economic thinking" (this issue: 93). I am happy to declare that I did not use the term 'Western' in this connection. I talked about capitalist market ideology. A favourite pastime of Western anthropologists is Western-bashing. We work in Western universities, publish in Western languages in Western journals and our interests are regularly inspired by Western issues and debates. Still, we habitually critique one or the other theory for being Western. I call for a truce in this uncivil war. It is time we admit that all our theories are 'Western'. This is also the case with the notions of 'time' and 'personhood', which Otto takes up here.

Otto argues that my "historical-middle-range-practice theory" is insufficient to explain monetary exchanges on Rossel. For a fuller picture, he says, we need a theoretical perspective that takes in personhood and agency to answer questions such as: how plutocrats could persuade the rest of society to accept the hierarchy of ranked exchange; why shells have received so much respect; why people would believe they were empowered by the spirits of cannibal victims, etc. (this issue: 94) Here I agree with Edmund Leach, who once argued that "the 'why' questions posed by ethnography are always unanswerable (...) the only answer is historical" (1983: 530). This is the answer I have attempted to outline in my book. Otto's last question in this sequence, on what the relation of the shell money is to social value and personal worth, demands further consideration. I shall return to that.

Armstrong's theory about shell money supposed that the value relationship between ranks of shells depended on compound interest. The value of a shell of a certain rank was determined by the length of time the shell had to be on loan for a shell of the next higher rank to be returned. It was a strictly logical and elegant theory, but it was utterly wrong, as my investigations soon revealed. Otto now suggests that my rejection of Armstrong's idea of time has led me to disregard the central role of time in Rossel exchange processes. He



first refers to Bourdieu's critique of the synchronic structuralist model of reciprocity (1977: 4 ff.). It disregards the fact, Bourdieu argues, that for agents exchange is experienced as irreversible because it unfolds over time. Bourdieu, influenced by game theory, looks upon exchange as a game where the *timing* of gifts and counter-gifts is of strategic importance. His point did not overly impress me when I read it. His emphasis on strategy in exchange was valuable but I was on my way to develop a more radical critique of the principle of reciprocity whereas he seemed to accept that it worked out in the long run. Timing is also the issue in the (constructed) case collected in the Dobu area of the Massim by Fortune that Otto quotes (this issue: 95). This was the first time 'gaming' in the *kula* was reported, but Fortune was not in doubt that reciprocity in the end would be respected. The new wave of Massim anthropologists in the 1970s were the first to report 'dirty gaming' where inexperienced *kula* men are regularly stripped from their valuables.

On Rossel Island big men are frequently reproached for delaying repayment of shell loans for months or years, if they do it at all. Time of course plays a role here. I am, however, uncomfortable with Otto's suggestion that delay "creates value for the person who is able to enforce such a delay" (this issue: 95). It is not entirely clear what is meant by 'value' here. Is it additional shell value at his disposal, or is it the value of enhancement of his person and format as a big man? Both elements are to some degree true, but no new value in terms of shell money is produced. If big men regularly employ the strategy of delay it means that they are able to move shells about in exchanges with a greater velocity than lesser men. If one wants to be high-brow one can say that they profit from time compression. This does not mean that a big man accumulates shells in his basket; he puts them into action in as many exchange rituals as possible. Another instance of timing has to do with the high-ranking *ndap* which are the inalienable possessions of their big-man owners, but are necessary as deposits to authorize important exchange rituals. As Otto rightly points out (and I also mention in my book p. 182) this gives the big men influence over the timing of these exchange events. One may say that they control time better than others. Still, major exchange rituals are so complex and involve so many actors and their networks that random mishaps often upset planning.

Otto moves on to invoke time as a factor in the superior value of *ndap* shells of the two highest divisions (not only the very highest) of sacred, ancient shells with a name and history. Here we have to do with time as historical duration, *la longue durée*. But this would be a very different notion of time than timing. And it is not really of importance in this context. Mere age does not produce high value. I can say this because there is a group of low-rank *ndap* which, although regarded as ancient and made by the gods like the inalienable high-ranking shells, have no names, circulate freely with other low-ranking shells and are not very valuable (p. 82–83). I suggest that the superior value of high-ranking shells is not mainly a consequence of their having been about 'long time' but because generations of big men of yore invested them with myths, displayed and exchanged them at important events and lent them the renown of their personalities. Time as an explanatory concept does not seem to apply here. All things considered, I find that time is hardly of the central importance that Otto wants to give it.

Otto is surprised that I have refrained from entering the trail in Melanesian exchange studies blazed by the New Melanesian Ethnography (NME). I only touch it lightly in a footnote referring to *The Gender of the Gift* and why I could not use that work as a point of

departure. Otto is puzzled that I missed the opportunity to draw on this alternative to what he calls my individualistic practice theory and narrow monetary perspective. My approach is too grounded in 'traditional economic anthropology'. I could have improved my analysis by exploring how exchange makes social relations appear, for example in the pig feast. I would then have been able to show how the display of shells ordered after rank is a representation of the value and relative importance of the participants. Those who take part in a pig feast display their agency by being seen and acknowledged. (this issue: 97)

Otto's challenge forces me into a zone of 'overgrown paths'<sup>8</sup> that I am reluctant to tread again. But I shall return to that below. In academic life each generation has its favourite paradigm. It provides you a certain vision of how things link up with each other in a complex world. It becomes a foundation, a source of motivation and a set of keys to problems you learn to find interesting. Each new paradigm is developed in opposition to the one it sets out to replace. A new paradigm demands that you accept a new perspective, a new conceptual vocabulary and a new academic style. It must be a difficult one that promises to lead to deep and hitherto undiscovered insights. You must learn to inhabit your paradigm and to some degree make it a part of your identity. As years go by and new paradigms compete, most of us find that one must make a choice: is all that mental struggle worth it once again?

During my undergraduate years I was introduced to classic British social anthropology. When we read Fredrik Barth's *Models of Social Organisation* (1966) some of us found his generative and processional approach path-breaking. It constituted a new paradigm and we struggled hard to understand *Models*. My practice theory is in fact derived from Barth. Bourdieu's *Outline* (1977) was largely Barth with a frosting of pretentious verbiage, I found. Being on the left, I made economic and political anthropology, both prominent branches of the discipline in the late 60s and the 70s, my major interests. I am at bottom an economic anthropologist. After Marxism, with the hype of Culture, neo-liberalism and its intellectual child post-modernism, economic anthropology has become old hat. Otto is kind to say 'traditional'. The crash of 2008 will, I predict, mean a renaissance for this subfield. When I returned to my department from fieldwork, Marxism was in its heyday. I spent some years learning to grasp the heavy German thinking of Marx and Engels and the growing literature of Marxist anthropology. I slowly realised that it was of small use for me. From then on I became aware that I would have to be selective in my choice of new paradigms.

For my own part I always try to express myself as plainly as possible. When key texts for a new paradigm become too abstruse I step off the wagon. This is my major problem with the magnificent school of NME. From Roy Wagner's first theoretical book (1975) I picked one morsel I could understand and benefit from (p. 4). The rest of Wagner's theoretical *oeuvre* is a closed book to me. I am loath to criticize Marilyn Strathern. She has been kind to me.<sup>9</sup> This is one reason why I only referred to *The Gender of the Gift* in a footnote. But provoked by Otto I must admit that I had great difficulties in making sense of the book. I read it one-and-a-half times. Every few lines I thought 'this is interesting', but by the next page she had lost me. I had a major problem with her point of departure in Gregory's definition of the gift as inalienable.<sup>10</sup> As was Gregory himself, I was astounded that she took no account of the interplay of gift and commodity exchange in PNG. Her lack of interest in change was also disappointing. Further, I prefer materialism to idealism. I look at problems from bottom up. When scholars go the other way and only take departure in

beliefs and symbols I am sceptical.<sup>11</sup> As I see it, NME is another version of symbolic anthropology. I am uncomfortable also with the notion of personhood, especially the idea that there is a 'Melanesian person' but no Melanesian individuals. The person, we are told, is partible or relational, a cross-point of social relations. This is not what I experienced on Rossel Island. Here people had a clear notion that other individuals had their own 'mind', propensities and interests. The same has been reported from other areas of Melanesia (A. Strathern 1981; Kuehling 2005). Of course, in face-to-face village societies people are more entangled in binding social relations, more collective, as an earlier age would say, but they also possess some autonomy. This is the same with our own societies although the ratio may be different. NME is a prime example of alterization.

It must be acknowledged that for Strathern her argument was, as Gregory reminds us, an intellectual experiment in 'controlled fiction' and her 'Melanesia' was created as a foil for criticizing feminist anthropology. She can hardly be responsible that others have taken her constructions for the final word on Melanesian personhood. Thus Mosko (2000) in his acid attempt to demolish Weiner's concept of inalienable possessions proclaims that it runs counter to the 'canonical' principle of reciprocity as well as "prevailing views of Melanesian personhood" [i.e. Strathern's], and "well-founded understandings of Melanesian sociality" (Mosko 2000: 378).

There is yet another more disturbing element in my encounter with NME. In 1989 I went out to Rossel Island after an absence of ten years. This was to be a brief revisit of two-and-a-half months on my way to Canberra to visit the Austronesian research project at the Australian National University. It turned out to become my last stay on Rossel. I had planned an investigation of nutrition including a study of the social cosmology of the body. I hoped to discover some nice structure connecting gender relations, food flows, body parts and kinship exchanges. This was indeed a project influenced by Strathern's ideas, in the main inspired by her more easily comprehensible article on marriage exchanges (1984). My research during this sojourn did not come off well. In short, despite all my collection of information about these matters, no overall pattern seemed to emerge in my data. Further, I began to realize that my time slot was too short and that deeper understanding probably demanded a fluency in the extremely difficult Rossel language that I never acquired. Then followed a severe malaria attack and its treatment, and a traumatic death in the hamlet where I stayed. With a rising feeling of looming failure, anxiety grew and became generalised. I had to leave the island two weeks before time.<sup>12</sup> The question of whether this failure was due to my own inadequacy or whether my quest for grand structure had been a wild goose chase haunted me for some years. For my own peace of mind I have settled for the latter option.

Otto arrests a comment of mine that on Rossel people 'get a share in' a girl they have provided with food and this is a basis for claiming bridewealth (this issue: 97). I say that this is a 'Rossel labour theory of value' (I put it in inverted commas in the text) and suggested that it may be influenced by the experience of commodity labour and exchange. This may not be one of my brightest ideas but I think that Otto takes me too literally. It *is* a 'labour theory of value' in the same sense as it is a 'theory of exploitation' when Andes Indians suspect whites of kidnapping people and stealing their body fat to lubricate their machines. The Rossels have a clear concept of 'work' and assert that the drudgery of gardening is 'heavy work' (as is making ceremonial exchanges). The suggestion about

commodity experience is less robust, but in the early 1970s Rossel men had worked as contract labourers on the local European plantation for a number of generations and traded copra for money. There were small local trade stores in every village. People were conversant with paid labour and commodity consumption. In the book I report how young men, who were critical of the big-man control over the inalienable high-ranking *ndap* and ranked exchange in general, said that when all the big men had died they would change the system so that exchange became just 'like [in a] store'. They had also experimented with a commercial form of pig feast where meat was exchanged for shells and modern money (see below). So commodity ideas have influenced conceptualizations of labour, food and rights in people, but in this case it is more likely that the latter go farther back in time.

Otto cannot understand why it is a puzzle for me that big men often contribute big *kê* at a pig feast and receive big lumps of pork only to demand the shells back without prior agreement later. He objects that the pig feast is not primarily concerned with exchanging money for meat. If I had understood that the pig feast is really about acknowledging social relations and personhood everything would have made sense. According to Otto the shells are there to represent the value of personhood and agency. (this issue: 98) But it is a part of the puzzle that the recipients actually resent these withdrawals and are disappointed at being unable to keep the big shells. I mentioned above that there is a version of pig-feasting called 'paying pig like store' where high-ranking shells are dispensed with and meat paid for with shells and state money (p. 281). But the big men strongly oppose it. There are many dimensions in the pig feast. One of them is that persons or, as I prefer, identities are on stage, as are the strengths or weaknesses of their relationships. But this aspect is not entirely overlooked in my book. On the bridewealth paying ritual, for example, I say, after having described the atmosphere of complaints and quarrelling typical of this occasion:

the shell money is differentiated on a qualitative scale and (...) what one receives is an index of how others estimate one, as well as acknowledging one's former prestations on their behalf. The occasion thus becomes a scene for the construction of selves and identities, which may turn into a 'site of struggle', where the reputation and self-esteem of actors is at stake. A plea for recognition is therefore hardly distinguishable from a greed for money. (p. 230)

What more does Otto want? I think that if I had said 'agent' instead of 'actor' and 'personhood' instead of 'identity' and had rigged up a couple of references to NME texts he would have been more than satisfied.

For my own part, the New Melanesian Ethnography has been an excellent school for me to stay away from.<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I did not put it, as Robbins says, that Rossel Island money is "an anthropological freak". I said that Armstrong's erroneous interpretation did so. And that is a different thing.

<sup>2</sup> This essay was in fact already written in 1981. Due to delays in publication it was printed only in 1989.

<sup>3</sup> As far as I remember, none of them, however, went so far as to use the word 'absurd'.

<sup>4</sup> I did that myself, but must say that for me Marxism in the end had no more to offer than the notion

of historical specificity and the concept of social reproduction. I was a socialist (I still am) and was at first positive towards Marx's work, but I later became convinced that his theories, now of course much outdated, were mainly relevant only for a critique of industrial capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> Mine was in a Swedish translation published two years earlier than the English (1972).

<sup>6</sup> In my book I quote similar evidence from a number of Pacific societies to show that the practice of Rossel exchange is not an aberrant case (p. 318–319).

<sup>7</sup> I further use 'rank' about position in an order of precedence as, for example, the 'rank' of a category of Rossel Island shell money. Occasionally, I refer to the whole system of *ndap* ranks as a 'hierarchy'.

<sup>8</sup> *On Overgrown Paths* was the title of Knut Hamsun's last novel written in his old age.

<sup>9</sup> After having heard a paper on 'Gift exchange and the construction of identity' (at the Helsinki conference 'Culture and history in the Pacific' in early 1987), Strathern invited me to the renowned workshop on 'Big men and great men' she organized with Maurice Godelier in Paris later the same year.

<sup>10</sup> Otto leaves some doubt whether my reading of Strathern is correct. He didn't follow up my reference to Strathern (1988: 161) in the footnote. I quote "Here is the crucial factor that makes it impossible to speak of alienations in the Gift economy (...) Inalienability signifies the absence of a property relation." She explicitly refers to Gregory in this paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> I make an exception with Lévi-Strauss, whom I regard as the greatest anthropologist of the twentieth century.

<sup>12</sup> Otto knows well my condition on arrival in Canberra, because we shared offices at the department.

<sup>13</sup> This is a paraphrase of a Hemingway joke (1977: 77)

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