

| Colloquia |



On the culture of material value and the cosmography of riches

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Herein is a discourse on value and how economics fails as a science thereof by banishing culture to the status of “exogenous factors.” The argument is demonstrated by an ethnographically informed study of the external origins of riches. Among the conclusions: money (“magical property”) as a means rather than the antithesis of extended kinship; scarcity as a function of value rather than the value of scarcity; and other such contradictions of the deceived wisdom.

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In so far as it is a science in the current sense of the term, any science, such as economics, which has to do with human conduct, becomes a genetic inquiry into the human scheme of life; and where, as in economics, the subject of inquiry is the conduct of man in his dealings with the material means of life, the science is necessarily an inquiry into the life-history of material civilization. . . . Not that the economist’s inquiry isolates material civilization from all other phases and bearings of human culture, and so studies the motions of an abstractly conceived “economic man.” On the contrary, no theoretical inquiry into this material civilization that shall be adequate to any scientific purpose can be carried out without taking this material civilization in its causal, that is to say, its genetic, relations to other phases and bearings of the cultural complex; without studying it as it is wrought upon by other lines of cultural growth and as working its effects on these other lines.

Thorstein Veblen, “The limitations of marginal utility”

Zombie economic ideas that refuse to die

There is enough news in any daily paper to prove that “the economy” is an objectification of cultural-historical relations and forces. The news would be enough to prove that economic science, like the anthropology of which it is an

aspect, is a systematic synthesis of the historical contingencies of cultural structures—although that would require that economists give up their fruitless attempt to separate “the economy” (so-called) from the “exogenous factors” (so-called) that are actually determining it. Daily determining it, as in these reports from a randomly chosen issue of the *New York Times* (30 January 2011):

“Israel shaken as turbulence rocks an ally”

The street revolt in Egypt has thrown the Israeli government and military into turmoil. . . . nearly half the natural gas [Israel] uses is imported from Egypt. . . . Thanks to its treaty with Egypt, Israel has reduced its defense expenditure from 23 percent of its gross national product in the 1970s to 9 percent today.

“A political crisis starts to be felt economically as commerce slows to a halt”

“A big part of the [Egyptian] production system is government run, and this is frozen, including many of the bakeries making the subsidized bread,” said Hada Youssaf, an economist at the Arab Forum for Alternatives. . . . And on Sunday there was anecdotal evidence that food prices were already rising. . . . The effect was immediately felt by businesses because so many transactions are completed by the internet.

“The sudden uprising in Egypt unsettles worldwide markets”

On Wall Street it is what is known as an exogenous event—a sudden political or economic fact that cannot be predicted or modeled but sends shock waves through global markets. . . . While Egypt’s banks and stock market were closed . . . other Middle Eastern markets declined in trading Sunday, with shares falling by 4.3 percent in Dubai, 3.7 percent in Abu Dhabi and 2.9 percent in Qatar. By Monday, Asian markets were trading lower. Oil prices rose 3.7%. A sustained increase in oil prices could choke growth [in the U.S.]. “If tensions in the Mideast cause oil prices to rise by \$5 [per barrel] for even just three months, over \$5 billion dollars will leave the U.S. economy,” said Jason S. Grumet, president of the Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington Research Group. . . . Egypt is not an oil exporter. . . . As the home of the Suez Canal and the Sumed pipeline, however, it is one of a handful of spots classified as World Oil Transit Chokepoints by the [U.S.] Energy Department and events there can have an outsize impact on global energy prices.

So is it the self-regulating market that determines oil prices, or the Suez Canal? The report says that such “exogenous” events cannot be predicted or modeled. Exogenous? The report speaks of “a sudden political or *economic* fact.” Not modeled? The report demonstrates that the price of oil is systematically related to geo-political realities. Not predicted? Yes, as a contingent event. But an event is only such, in its character and consequences, in terms of the structural order in which it occurs. There is a structure to this conjuncture that turns the Egyptian uprising into an economic event, whatever else it may be. Hence the economist is

prepared to predict, indeed calculably predict in dollars, what its long-term effect will be on the American balance of trade.

The actual determinants of oil prices—cultural and natural, broadly speaking—are “hidden in plain sight” as Jane Guyer (2009: 205) so appropriately remarks. Ranging from global geo-politics to individual consumer preferences, the so-called “non economic factors” that are realized in prices are diverse in form as well as magnitude, if all alike as culturally constituted values. At the highest levels, the planetary distribution of oil resources is brought into play through an international system of alliances and hostilities. Consider the “economic sanctions” including oil embargos that Western governments have imposed on Iraq and Iran in recent years. At the national level, we have seen what Middle Eastern uprisings can do to barrel prices, not to forget the ordinary national politics of tariffs and taxes, energy lobbies, and alternate energy initiatives. At the provincial and municipal levels: taxation again, and the battle of public and private transportation. Recall General Motors successful campaign to eliminate streetcars in American cities; or the recent refusal by the neoliberal governor of Wisconsin of federal funds that were designated for the construction of a highspeed railway between the state capital of Madison and the principal city of Milwaukee. As for consumer preferences, the unexamined life may not be worth living, but for economists it is business as usual, insofar as there is no disputing consumers’ tastes. In regard to oil, consider such socially and historically founded obsessions as privately owned and operated automobiles, which thereupon choke the underfunded American highways with cars occupied by single drivers and no passengers; or the American standards of bodily comfort as these regulate energy use in heating and cooling—with the effect that the average surrounding temperature in which Americans live is warmer in the winter than in the summer. If, as Guyer argues, these determinants of value are hidden “by the very difference of their presence” from the pecuniary calculus of the supply-demand-price mechanism, it must be because we are blinded by the illusion that they are “externalities,” “non-economic,” “exogenous,” “irrational,” or some such scales before our eyes. The cultural and historical phenomena that account for the constitution and transformation of the material life of society are thereby rendered outside the purview of economic science.

This banishment of materially-relevant “exogenous factors” is one of the more fateful “zombie economic ideas that refuse to die” (to adapt the telling phrase of the Australian economist John Quiggin [2010a; 2010b]). Quiggin’s apt characterization would cover a large series of customary economic ideas that have had stakes repeatedly driven through their heart for going on two centuries, yet are still walking around alive and well. One would think the whole discipline had been mortally wounded by the critical attacks of its own practitioners—let alone the likes of anthropologists—on its abstract, unrealistic, post-hoc, pseudo-scientific, fantastic, fetishistic, Platonic, chimerical, rhetorical, ideological, non-empirical, teleological, metaphorical, tautological, mythological, and otherwise louche theoretical propositions. Here is a brave, new “invented world of the eighteenth century” that has no actual people in it (Servet 2009: 88). Rather, it is populated solely by this “rational fool” *Homo Economicus* (Sen 1977: 336): a “character without character” (Klamer 2001: 93); an impulsive, manipulative, and shallow sociopath (McCloskey 2006: 135), whose single-minded pursuit of his own pleasure or gain by the rational choice of the alternatives presented by a supposedly self-regulating market is “the

central illusion of our age” (Polanyi 1997: 5; cf. 1947). “Few textbooks contain a direct portrait of rational economic man,” write Martin Hollis and Edward Neil (1975: 53–54):

He is introduced furtively and piece by piece. . . . He lurks in the assumptions, leading an enlightened existence between input and output, stimulus and response. He is neither tall nor short, fat nor thin, married nor single. There is no telling whether he loves his dog, beats his wife or prefers pushpin to poetry [pushpin to Pushkin³]. We do not know what he wants. But we do know that whatever it is, he will maximize ruthlessly to get it.¹

Problem is, of course, with the commodification of everything, thus mystifying cultural facts as pecuniary values, the notion that the cultural order is the effect of people’s economizing, rather than the means thereof, became the native bourgeois common sense as well as its social science. Thereupon, as Karl Polanyi observed: “Realistic thinkers vainly spelled out the distinction between the economy in general and its market forms; time and again the distinction was obliterated by the economic *Zeitgeist*” (1977: 6).

The same hedonistic zombie has long stalked anthropology in the guise of the Trobriand islander, the Inuit, the Maori, or some such exotic fellow whose seemingly “irrational” behavior is recuperated for rational choice theory by the supposition that he is really maximizing motherhood, chiefly honor, friendship, or any you-name-it “value” other than material utility. Thus assuming the value preferences by which the choice of value is explained, the tautology is the epistemological absolute zero of anthropological understanding.² Rational choice theory has to give itself the culture *a priori*, inasmuch as it is the cultural order that makes the material action rational, but hardly the rationality that makes the culture. In order to understand why a Trobriand islander every year gives half his yam harvest to his sister’s husband, only to receive half his wife’s brother’s yams—a circulation which in fact involves neither choice nor gain—at least one has to know that in this markedly matrilineal society, sisters’ sons succeed their mothers’ brothers whose

1. Deirdre McCloskey writes that although Adam Smith took his theory and Chair of moral sentiments seriously, with consideration of a range of human motivations, his successors, beginning with Jeremy Bentham & Co., “came to believe that a profane Prudence, called ‘Utility,’ rules.” In the twentieth century came those such as Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Arrow, Milton Friedman, and Gary Becker, “good men, great scientists, beloved teachers, and friends of mine. But their confused advocacy of Prudence Only has been a catastrophe for the science Adam Smith inaugurated” (2006: 119). See also Harcourt (2011), Kaul (2011), Reddy (1994), and Zelizer (2011), among many others.

2. For example:

The motives underlying Tikopia marriage and funeral exchanges, as well as those in exchange of other kinds, involve a strong response to complex social situations. But these may be considered part of a rational economic choice, if a preference for other types of advantage or satisfaction than the mere increase of wealth be regarded as legitimate, in view of the value of securing and maintaining social co-operation. (Firth 1950: 331)

harvest thus fed their households. How else can we understand that what is a rational disposition of yams in the Trobriand Islands makes no sense at all in New Britain—let alone old Britain?³

An analogous tautological resort is present in the ad hoc procedures of bourgeois economics when confronted with situations where the hedonistic calculus of pecuniary value isn't working. "An interpretive strategy rather than an empirical finding, based on metaphor rather than measurement," by this procedure "anything which a human might want—honor, pleasure, security, salvation—could be categorized as gain or advantage" (Reddy 1984: 48).⁴ Yet this nominal gain in utility is at the cost of a large loss in anthropology, inasmuch as values such as "honor" lose their social status, attributes, and force, in the translation to individual desire. Consider Gary Becker's explanation of American norms of marriage, where the religiously sanctioned rule of monogamy as well as the associated patriarchy are hidden in plain sight in the form of certain individual dispositions. The reason we don't practice polygyny, he says, is that men no longer want many children: "Polygyny was popular in the past when men valued many children. That is no longer the case, since few couples want more than three children, a number that can be easily attained with a single wife." (2009: 27). On one hand, we are offered a fairy tale history of the American (Western?) family—complemented by the implication (of current political significance) that women are secondary players in such reproductive matters. Even so, how does it happen that people (men) went from wanting many children to a maximum of exactly three? And how did couples replace men as the determining agents of family size and marital preference? On the other hand, a social movement involving a determinate group of people at a given historical moment, the purported majority, is here mystified as a matter of individual rational choice. Actually in this story, only the majority have a choice: whatever the polygamous preferences of the purported minority, they and their "tastes" have no effect on their marital practice; as it were, they have been morally and legally excluded from the demand curve. Nolens volens, they will be monogamous. Or is it now that for them the rational choice is to obey the law? Clearly, the optical illusion here consists in reducing social facts to individual "tastes." In the upshot, as Louis Dumont (1970: 9-10) observes, ends are thereby confused with means and effects with causes:

3. A foundational anthropological critique of rational choice theory, making many of the above points, is Godelier (1972).

4. On the entailed tautology:

It is possible to define a person's interests in such a way that no matter what he does can be seen as furthering his own interests in every isolated act of choice. . . . The reduction of man to a self-seeking animal depends in this approach on careful definition. If you are observed to choose *x* rejecting *y*, you are declared to have 'revealed' a preference for *x* over *y*. . . . With this definition you can hardly escape maximizing your own utility, except through inconsistency. . . . But if you are consistent, then no matter whether you are a singled-minded egoist or a raving altruist or a class conscious militant, you will appear to be maximizing your own utility in this enchanted world of definitions. (Sen 1977: 322-23)

The kingdom of ends coincides with each man's legitimate ends, and so the values are turned upside down. What is still called "society" is the means, the life of each man is the end. Ontologically, the society no longer exists, it is no more than an irreducible datum, which must in no way thwart the demands of liberty and equality. Of course, the above is a description of values, a view of mind. . . . A society as conceived by individualism has never existed anywhere for the reason we have given, namely, that the individual lives on social ideas.

At the extreme of the hedonistic hubris, all kinds of non-pecuniary things, re-named as "utilities," "tastes," even "capital" and "commodities," lose their own attributes and *raison d'être* to become *a priori* conditions of an individual practice of rational choice that cannot account for them nor, therefore, for itself. Thus for Becker, "individual preferences" include "personal habits and addictions, peer pressure, parental influences on the tastes for children, love and empathy, and other neglected behavior" (1996: 4); household-produced "commodities" include "health, social standing and reputation, and pleasures of the senses" (*ibid.*: 5); "goods" include, besides apples and clothing, "advertisements, education, and other determinants of preferences not ordinarily considered as goods" (*ibid.*: 5); and also involved in rational choice are people's time, skills, training, and other "human capital" (*ibid.*: 26).⁵ It is as if the whole cultural order had been usurped by the individual actors, so all that could now be perceived as a consequence of their actions and a function of their desires.

Or at least, in the sweet by-and-by: economic science is singularly oriented to the future—even though it is famously unable to predict it. As Thorstein Veblen divined long ago, its main concern is to take a given situation of monetary value to some happy teleological outcome of optimal satisfactions, maximum gains, or efficient markets. Veblen's claim that marginal utility theory and the classical economics from which it derived were essentially homeostatic in principle—"statical" as he put it—only seemingly contradicted his observation of the theoretical devotion to benign finalities. Granted that the aim was to work out "the adjustment of values to a given situation" (Veblen 1909: 620), thus that it entailed a certain imagined diachrony, such theories of themselves had no means of accounting for the change from one value situation to another. The entailed dynamic sense was no better than the textbook mystification involved in presenting two different supply-demand curves of the same commodity, as if the difference between them represented an historical account, although in fact they are only related by the ad hoc input of some change in the supply or demand schedule—theory itself being unable to specify what, why, or how (Segal 2011).

Here again, in the understanding of economic change, is another disabling effect of subsuming the cultural and historical forces that constitute the values of persons and the objects of their existence as individual preferences. Veblen (1909: 623–24) had already perceived the anthropological problem:

The cultural elements involved in the theoretical scheme, elements that are of the nature of institutions, human relations governed by use and

5. All the same, values and social norms, for Becker, are "ad hoc and useless explanations of behavior" (quoted in Zelizer 2004: 365). Huh?

wont in whatever kind and connection, are not subject to inquiry but are taken for granted as pre-existing in a finished, typical form and as making up a normal and definitive economic situation, under which and in terms of which human intercourse is necessarily carried on.

Hence even as economic science allowed certain ethnocentric notions of private property and contractual liberty to tacitly enter its calculations, as Veblen observed, it remained theoretically innocent of the cultural practices and historical events that order and reorder the dispositions of material means in ways specific to given forms of life. Economics, as constituted, is an anti-anthropology. “As to the causes of change in the unfolding of the phenomena of economic life,” Veblen wrote, “they [the economists] have had nothing to say hitherto; nor can they, since their theory is not drawn in causal terms but in terms of teleology” (ibid.: 621). The teleological endgame is of course motivated by that “hedonistic” conception of man as a “lightening calculator of pleasures and pains, who oscillates like a homogenous globule of desire of happiness.” (Veblen 1898: 389). In every respect, then, from the rational finalities of economic man to the hypothetical trajectories of pecuniary value, economics would confirm Durkheim’s dictum that “a science of the future has no subject matter.”

In the meantime, we should consider intersecting supply and demand curves for what they are: a representation in pecuniary terms of a situation of society at a given time; if you will, a structure of the conjuncture.

On the culture of material life

The founding father of economics, Adam Smith, had a strong sense of the cultural matrix of economic phenomena. One of the most interesting of the unasked questions of intellectual history is how the science of economics should have lost this sense and become an abstract discipline void of almost any cultural context. (Boulding 1973: 47)

The answer to Kenneth Boulding’s unasked question, as well as the reason it isn’t asked, already exists in the way he phrased its absence: as though “economic phenomena” were not themselves cultural facts, but some other kind of stuff embedded in a “cultural matrix” or “cultural context.” The problem is ontological: it consists of the banishment of the cultural organization of material life to the unexamined realm of “externalities,” the “non-economic,” whence this or that factor would have to be arbitrarily summoned on an impromptu basis—sometimes rather literally like a “god in the machine”—when needed to account for the (supposed) rationality of some particular pecuniary outcome. Yet when the so-called “exogenous factors” are thus conveniently translated into preferences of the hedonistic calculus, they are dissolved as such. The effect is merely to add various epicycles to the theory of the market as a self-regulating universe revolving around an egocentric individual by adducing one or another factor of imperfect competition or constrained satisfaction. To speak for example of a “segmented labor market” divided by race or gender is simply to appropriate a necessary (economic) condition from the cultural order that market theory itself cannot provide. Likewise for “risk aversion” and all such reservations on the rational dispositions of Max U (Maximum Utility): they may change his optimizing to satisficing but they leave intact the disguise of social values as personal desires, hence the resolution of material ways of life to

individual interests. Yet for most material transactions in most (or all?) societies known to anthropology, insofar as these transactions take place among kinsmen, material interest is not even an individual fact.

For kinship entails participation in the being of the other rather than differentiation of the self—from which it follows that the self is not the sole end of an individual's existence any more than it is the exclusive means. As Aristotle put it, kinship is the same entity in discrete subjects. Parents love children as other selves of themselves, even as brothers and cousins belong to one another, if in varying manners and degrees (Aristotle 2002: VIII, 1161a-1162b). Kinship, as I have argued elsewhere, is mutuality of being (Sahlins 2013). Kinfolk are members of one another, intrinsic to each other's persons and identities. Participating thus in each other's existence, kinsmen symbolically and emotionally live each other's lives and die each other's deaths, knowing the other's pleasures and pains as their own. "You were born in me," says a Maori man to another. "Yes, that is true," replies the other, "I was born in you" (Prytz-Johansen 1954: 37). The term for "kinship" in Palau translates as "mutual person," and it includes relationships established through shared land and shared gift exchange as well as shared "blood" (Smith 1981: 226). The Ndembu people live together because they are matrilineally related, Victor Turner (1957: 129) observes, for "the dogma of kinship asserts that matrilineal kin participate in one another's existence." Indeed many African and Asian people say that members of a descent group share the same bones. Maurice Bloch (1992: 75) comments:

To say this is not to use a metaphor for closeness; it means exactly what it says in that these people believe that the bones of their body are part of a greater undifferentiated totality. In cases such as these the body is not experienced as formally grounded by the air around it; it is also continuous with parts of the bodies of people who in modern Western ideology could be seen as "others." . . . What such *bodyness* implies is that what happens to other members of your household is, to a certain extent, happening to you.

Bodies are not merely individual facts in kinship contexts, any more than bodily desires and satisfactions are attributes solely of individual persons. Rather, as the old Irish text has it, "each person's body is his kindred" (Charles-Edwards 1993: 39). The condition of a person's body, Anne Becker (1995: 59) reports from Fiji, "reflects the achievement of its caretakers. A body is the responsibility of the microcommunity that feeds and cares for it; consequently crafting its form is the province of the community rather than the self." Morphology is thus sociology. It follows that even eating is transpersonal, as Marilyn Strathern (1988: 294) reports of Melanesian peoples:

Eating is not an intrinsically beneficial act, as it is taken to be in the Western community view that regards the self as perpetuating its own existence . . . rather, in being a proper receptacle for nourishment, the nourished person bears witness to the effectiveness of the mother, father, sister's husband or whoever is doing the feeding. . . . Consumption is

not a simple matter of self-replacement, then, but the recognition and monitoring of relationships.⁶

Insofar as kinship entails transpersonal being—dualities that are unities as Levy-Bruhl (1949) put it—then material interest, intentionality, and agency inhere in the relationships, rather than in individuals whose satisfactions begin and end with the limits of their own bodies. Moreover, in many societies of ethnographic note, kinship encompasses everyone with whom one has to do, and even in Western societies it includes those with whom one has most to do. Neither, then, is our own domestic economy a market in goods and money. (I admit that during the McCarthy era in America I used to *épater* the bourgeois students by rehearsing L. H. Morgan's (1876) dictum that the family economy was "communism in living," running on the principle of from each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her need. If you were afraid of communism, I warned, you shouldn't go home.) It follows that for the greater part of humanity, for the greater part of their social relationships, the supposed natural inclination of man to truck and barter in his own private interest would in fact be *unnatural*. Neither universal nor estimable, *Homo Economicus* is here no paragon of natural or social virtue. Rather, such a globule of desire acting with an eye singular to his own happiness is more likely to be excluded from society—ignored, ostracized, or even executed—for offenses against humanity.

Yet whether kinship-dependent or market-organized, the economy is no more free of the total cultural order it expresses than individuals are the autonomous authors of the cultural values they enact. In this connection, it seems Karl Polanyi exaggerated when he claimed that, if only for a brief period, the self-regulating market economy, functioning on its own supply-demand-price mechanism, not only freed itself from the rest of society but dominated and determined it. "The commodity fiction," he wrote, "handed over the fate of man and nature to the play of an automaton that ran in its own grooves and was governed by its own laws. This instrument of material welfare was controlled solely by the incentives of hunger and gain" (1977: 10-11). Moreover, Polanyi allowed that even if economic determinism is a delusion as a general law of human society, for the free market economy it holds good. "Indeed, the working of the economic system here not only 'influences' the rest of society," he said, "but actually determines it" (*ibid.*: 12). Of course, we have known this cannot be true at least since Durkheim observed that not everything in the contract is contractual, or, as Veblen likewise noted, that the market depends on presupposed notions of contract and property it cannot account for. Many others have remarked on the numerous political regulations, not to mention criminal incarcerations, necessary to maintain a "self-regulating" market system (e.g., Hart 2009; Harcourt 2011). Similarly the notion was already betrayed in the way Polanyi stated it. For if the commodifications of labor and land are indeed "fictitious," as he said, then all the social attributes of people and natural qualities of resources will remain decisive for the determination of their price. For as Guyer (2009: 216) says, "Fictitious commodities *remain* recognizably

6. For excellent ethnographies of the transpersonal nature of kinship see Prytz-Johansen (1954), Munn (1986), and Stasch (2009). See also the articles collected in Carsten (2000).

fictitious because of the continuing inability of the ‘genuine’ commodity forms to contain all their attributes.” Then again, if “hunger” and “gain”—or elsewhere, “greed”—control the economy, in what exactly do these consist? Surely, hunger, gain, and greed are historically and culturally relative: they can only be specified in the terms of a given mode of life—from which it follows that the market is a way of instituting a specific cultural-historical conjuncture rather than determining it. The idea that the market is an independent entity dominating the rest of the society is a form of commodity fetishism raised to the level of the social totality.

I am not saying simply that the pecuniary market system is “embedded” in a “cultural matrix,” the way that in a kinship system the relations between things are famously dependent on the relations between persons. I say rather that the market is one way among others of objectifying the cultural-historical order, in this case on a large and impersonal scale by competitive pecuniary transactions. Material rationality is thus a representation in monetary terms of a subjacent set of meaningful relationships among persons and the objects of their existence. Utility values are the realizations of differential cultural values, while for their part cultural values are engaged in motivated symbolic schemes: the way evening gowns are distinguished from little daytime dresses, business suits from overalls, uniforms from mufti, silk from denim, and these are related to differences in status, class, place, occasions of use, gender, time of day, etc. The market is thus a medium and mediator of cultural order. And rather than an ontologically distinctive and structurally independent entity, the economy is here as elsewhere the material functioning of a cultural state of affairs. One might even say, as Stephen Gudeman (1986) argued some years ago, the economy is the pragmatic objectification of cosmology. Certainly, there are more values of things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your market philosophy.

The case for the cultural rationality of material practice has been made over and over again for the production and consumption of food, for example, both in ethnographic study and in classical analyses such as Mary Douglas’ “Deciphering a Meal” (1972) or the articles of Edmund Leach (1964) and Stanley Tambiah (1969) on the cosmography, sociality, and edibility of animals. Foods are often gendered in their production and consumption, and at the same time marked for status, the way steaks are relatively masculine for Americans and more suitable for honorable dinners and special occasions than salads, which are relatively feminine and more likely a main course at lunch than at dinner. Note that there is no particular nutritional utility in the cultural valuations of meats: steak is not appreciably healthier than liver or tongue. Meats known by the names of human organs, however, are generally *déclassé* in middle-class American cuisine and the subject of strong distastes. The devaluation of internal organs seems part of a broad aversion to cannibalism: an aversion also apparent in the taboos against the consumption of domestic and working animals—notably dogs, whose meat not only goes to waste in America but whose diet is usually subject to greater inspection and control for health than is customary for other members of the family (Sahlins 1976).

Or, to take another food system: in Fiji, yams and pigs are the domestic foods of highest value; although as the sea generally outranks the land and intercalary species are particularly marked, so do turtles, as “fish that breathe,” receive even more distinction in the rituals of their production, exchange, and consumption. In eastern Fiji, where I have worked, it would hardly be rational for women to

cultivate yams, slaughter pigs, or capture turtle, no matter how much time and energy they have on hand. All of these are foods for feasts, on which occasions they are also cooked by men. They are indeed gifts to honored guests, tributes to chiefs, and sacrifices to gods: practices that in Fiji amount to much the same thing. The traditional relations of production and exchange were largely ordered by a set of correlated oppositions between the sea and the land, the foreign and the native, chiefs and commoners, men and women, gods and humans, and sisters' sons and their mothers' brothers' people. These proportionate relations were reflexes of a dynamic charter of the social formation in which the ruling chiefs, sea-borne foreigners by origin, were domesticated and installed by the native people of the land through marriage of an immigrant hero with a daughter of the indigenous ruler. The stranger-chiefs thereby became sacred uterine nephews of the native people, with a privileged right to appropriate the sacrifices made to the latter's god, whose place they thus usurped. These traditional relations were then realized in current material practices ranging from the division of labor between descent groups according to their place of origin, to tributes cum offerings to ruling chiefs (always made first to the gods), to the privileged claims of affinal or cross kin to each others' property. In sum, the economy is a material realization of the society.

The political economy of alterity

Proportions linking distinctions of persons with differences of goods they produce, exchange, or consume are shorthand or habitus forms of larger cultural schemes whose symbolic order and extent may well be unknown to those who use them (Bourdieu 1977). Operating practically, it is enough for Americans consumers to know that filet mignon is to hamburger as fine dining is to lunch, so that they do not buy hamburgers to entertain honored guests. Yet at some level they must know that "filet mignon" is French, even as incorporating an honored guest in a familial meal is analogously the domestication of higher external values. Such marked valuation of alterity in a culinary system allows me to introduce the positive aim of this exercise in economic critique, which is to argue that cross-culturally, life and death powers are generally situated in transcendent cosmic realms, whence come objectifications of such otherworldly powers in the in the form of the "magical property" or "prestige goods" that comprise the monies of life-giving, status-endowing, and society-making transactions. I do the cosmological economics of human finitude—in which scarcity is a function of value rather than the other way round, inasmuch as the value of things is a function of their provenience in the external realms on which human existence depends. There follow a few exemplary reports from about the planet, starting again from home.

For in such regards, we are one of the others: the appropriation and domestication of difference has a certain prestige value even in quotidian American consumption practice. Dan Segal (personal communication) first called my attention to the diurnal sequence of increasing diversity in middle-class American meals, correlated moreover to the social value of the commensality. In the mornings, people generally eat the same thing day after day from a limited repertoire of distinctive breakfast foods (cereals, eggs, etc), and often in an individual catch-as-catch-can manner rather than collectively at a familial table. Lunch for most family members is likely to be taken outside the home on working days, from a somewhat more varied menu (soups, sandwiches, salads, etc.), in the company of

friendly acquaintances or colleagues. Dinner, by contrast, is paradigmatically a family occasion, thus of the greatest intimacy as well as the highest social value, and it is marked by the greatest culinary diversity—not only in relation to earlier meals but from day to day. Hence the “rational choices” of shoppers in American supermarkets deciding on the purchase of different meats, poultry, or fish on the arbitrary principle of having “something different from last night’s dinner,” where difference is determined from a complex typology of “main dishes” and methods of cooking (frying, roasting, boiling, etc.). One might even “go ethnic” for dinner at a Chinese, Brazilian, or Ethiopian restaurant. When I was doing fieldwork in Fiji, the people commented on how bizarre were the European food habits that not only required different foods every day, but different foods three times a day. Still the Fijian food of the greatest value and the most ritual attention was foreign: enemy cannibal victims.

And the greatest Fijian valuables were (and still are) sperm whale teeth, acquired accidentally from beached whales or in external trade with other Pacific island peoples. Used notably in marital and military alliances, thus as means of vitality and mortality, whale teeth, as one European observer put it, were considered “the price of a human life” (Wilkes 1845: 103). Cooked men, raw women, and whale teeth are what Fijians call “great things.” Their common fungible value—amounting to a classic “sphere of exchange”—resides in their common life-giving finalities. Traditionally, cooked men are cannibal victims whose offering to the chieftom god brings divine benefits in prosperity; raw women are reproductive virgin daughters; and whale teeth, as I say, are presented for procuring both. Here, then, is a certain relation between alterity and material value by way of reproductive virtues.

Consider the like in the report of Signe Howell on the value of gold for the Lio people of Flores. Originating beyond Lio society, gold is notably acquired in affinal exchanges by wife-givers, thus in return for the transfer of women’s reproductive powers between patrilineal groups. Not incidentally, this is a common use of foreign-derived wealth the anthropological world around—which also suggests that the original money uses were social payments and storage of the life-values thereof. As Howell (1989: 430–31) relates, life inheres in Flores’ gold, not inertly but as a communicable force:

Gold is . . . not inanimate, it is imbued with life-force—a life-force which is as necessary for the recreation of life-processes as rice and women. . . . [G]old in itself has potency of a life-promoting kind: gold alone among things in the Lio world shows no sign of aging, its shine continues through the ages. . . . I suggest that there is a conceptual link between red gold [the most valuable kind], blood, and women, which together adds to the significance of gold as the vital part of alliance exchanges. . . . Gold and women/rice constitute each other within the semantic domain of the flow of life.

This flow of life through the acquisition of the foreign objects that embody it is richly documented in the hierarchical transactions between lowland states and upland “tribal” peoples in Southeast Asia. In this respect, observes James Scott, the “cultural charisma” of the lowland realms typically has greater extent and effect than the any force they could exert:

Even in the most remote hill settlements one encounters symbols of the authority and tokens of power that seem to flood up in fragments from the valley states: robes, hats ceremonial staffs, scrolls, copies of court architecture, verbal formulas, bits of court ritual. There is hardly any claim to extravillage authority in the hills that does not employ some cosmopolitan trapping to enhance its assertion of authority. (Scott 2009: 270–71, cf. 305–06, et passim)

Nor are these transactions one way only, insofar as the greater states reciprocally sought the wild potencies of hinterland goods and forest magic. As Anthony Reid (1994: 271; cf. Fox 1995) tells, almost every Southeast Asian lowland people had to deal with adjacent uplanders who, if lacking in civilization, “were seen as the original inhabitants, often having a special (if servile) relation with the coastal ruler and mysterious, even magical, powers over the supernatural forces of forest and sea.” Speaking of the exchange relations between Tai states and the upland peoples they derisively considered *kha* or ‘serfs,’ David Turton observes that a certain mutual attraction and even some mutual respect was involved—as were powers of human vitality. For the Tai center also desired “the resources, the potency and potentiality, the ‘alien power’ of the periphery, the wild, the forest. Both center and periphery seek to restore ‘vitality’ in the exchange of powers” (Turton 2000: 25–26; see also Gesick 1983: 1–2).

From the Native North American West come reports on the wealth in dentalium shells obtained from the distant spiritual realms of “Dentalium Land” or “Money’s Home,” to be used likewise in local payments for life powers, particularly bride-price and weregeld. Bushnell and Bushnell summarize the relevant sources, especially Alfred Kroeber ([1925] 1976) on the Yurok:

Although men yearned and strove for dentalia . . . it is clear that this most prized of wealth objects ultimately belonged to the gods and partook of their magical, godlike qualities. For the Yurok, Kroeber referred to Dentalium Land (also translated as Dentalium Home and Money’s Home) across the ocean at the north of the world where the ceremonial dances never cease. . . . In addition to dentalia, most if not all of the other greatly prized and highly valued objects . . . are intimately linked to the world of the immortals and characteristically emit supernatural power that redounds to the good fortune and health of those who possess them. (Bushnell and Bushnell 1977: 123, 128)

As the ultimate source of dentalium monies was the gods, so their acquisition by aspiring young men involved vision quests in which the suppliant apparently sought divine favor by self-inflicted suffering of the body and singular concentration of the mind. If successful, he used the money to advance his status in the ways decreed by Great Dentalium, the divine instantiation of precious wealth. “Let it be that a man will buy a woman [in marriage],” Great Dentalium said, and have him pay more for a rich than a poor woman; for “if he has children without buying her, they will be just like dogs: it will be like a bitch breeding pups.” And also, “when they kill a man, let them pay,” otherwise they will be tempted to kill again, and they will be fighting all the time (ibid.: 125). In sum, money mediated and resolved existential difference. By effecting marital alliances between groups, by giving legitimacy and social value to children, and by compensating killings, and not least by elevating the standing of men who accumulated it, money was strategically

involved in constituting the good order and reproduction of the larger society. This helps explain the recurrent politics of alterity in the ethnographic notices considered here: the relation between wealth and power established by way of the heroic appropriation of foreign things endowed with animate forces of life and death. As among Yurok, Hupa, Tolowa-Tutuni, and other aboriginal California peoples, such feats of derring-do involving the capture of existential powers from abroad marked the achievement of authority even in the absence of chiefs or kings.

Across the continent, the indigenous peoples of the Northeast Woodlands also knew how to turn external material value into internal social value, inasmuch as prized objects obtained beyond the bounds of society were, as George Hamell described, “inherently a kind of medicine” (1986–87: 77). Consisting of such as white shells, native copper, and the blood of a white panther, these precious goods likewise originated in transactions of ancient memory with the powerful beings beyond the great waters, where past time converged with distant space. Besides their circulation in affinal exchanges, such divine riches indeed made up the content of individual and social medicine bundles, where they “gave assurance of physical, spiritual, and social well-being—of long life through spiritual resuscitation—and success, especially in the conceptually related activities of courtship, hunting and warfare” (ibid.). Why conceptually related? They all involve the acquisition of external sources of life, upon which persons and groups depend for their own well-being.

Or again, for something not completely different from the Pacific: the complex monies of Palau (aka Belau), consisting of beads and bracelet segments of various colors, shapes, and composition, were all of foreign provenience. Ultimately derived from India, China, Malaya, or the Philippines, these monies were brought by voyagers at least several hundred years ago, albeit in the Palauan view their origins were rather more marvelous. As Richard Parmentier (1987: 39) observes, “there is an important connection in Belau, as elsewhere in the Austronesian world, between the notion of foreign provenience and the idea of sacred power.” Continuing even into modern times, “foreigners bringing money, firearms and new religions are ‘next to the gods’” (ibid.: 154). Hence by long tradition, “money is of foreign, celestial, or magical origin, coming from distant lands, from visiting ships, from the eyes of the gods in heaven, or from magical fish from the depths of the sea” (Parmentier 2002: 67). Especially money comes from the heavens, but in Parmentier’s persuasive analysis, the significant point is its situation in a decidedly non-historical locus, in this way reinforcing its transcendental quality, and thereby making the system of rank resistant to contingency. Here again, money is engaged in in the construction of the greater order of society: commonly in the transactions by which husbands compensate their wives’ matrilines for the food and services the women provide; and importantly in the elite circulation and/or sequestration of higher value monies among chiefs. The augmentation of being is at stake even in ordinary affinal exchange, insofar as a husband’s gift of valuables increases the status of the wife and her children in their own group while redounding to standing of the husband among other men (see also Smith 1983). Besides affinal prestations among the elite, high value money passes between, and sometimes settles down within, chiefly houses through various transactions undertaken with an eye toward recuperating, maintaining, or enhancing positions in in the greater political order. Hence Parmentier’s (2002: 76) observation that money is “a creative diagram of

Palau's hierarchical social system." The argument is that while the Palauan social system, like any other, is subject to contingent fluctuations in the conditions of its reproduction, money anchors this process, "in being both the sedimented embodiment of accomplished power and the transactional mechanism for its attainment. By monopolizing the exchange of tokens of value whose origins lie in celestial and natural forces, titleholders in the centuries before Western contact reinforced their privilege with sacred, foreign, and magical authority" (ibid.: 76).

The Manambu of the Middle Sepik region of New Guinea regard their purchase of rituals, myths, and cult objects from their Iatmul neighbors as no less powerful since, as Simon Harrison (1990: 78) recounts, "in very many ways the Manambu implicitly associate the Iatmul with the invisible world of spirits" (1990: 78). Even Iatmul words figure significantly in all the speech registers of Manambu ceremony and myth-telling, for to their ears, "the Iatmul language is entirely evocative of the whole conceived world of myth and totemic cosmology." More than any of their other neighbors, the Iatmul "embody . . . that other, hidden order of existence which is the perceived source of all power" (ibid.: 78-9). Indeed, the most potent objects the Manambu know, so imbued with spiritual force that it would be death for anyone to approach them other than hereditary leaders of the men's cult in whose houses they are kept, are the large decorated clay pots in which Iatmul women daily make their cooking fires. The mundane, feminine, and foreign associations of these sacred pots might seem incongruous were it not that "to the Manambu [they] are potent symbols of the 'female' powers of feeding and nurturance which men arrogate to themselves in ritual, and they are so because they are specifically *Iatmul* symbols of these powers" (ibid.: 106).

Note the ambivalence in the relation to the foreign valuables, at once life-giving and life threatening: a condition of the alternation between raid and trade that marks Manambu-Iatmul relations in general. Just so, it is the dangerous potency of things Iatmul that makes them so desirable. "To the Manambu, the cultural forms of the Iatmul are surrounded by an aura of especially dangerous power, and therefore valuable to acquire" (ibid.: 20). No doubt the desirability consists, in part, in the implication of triumph and control over life-giving and death-dealing spiritual forces embodied in Iatmul cultural forms and practices. But the question remains of why these are dangerous. For the Manambu—and many analogous cases in Melanesia, Amazonia, and elsewhere—I believe it is necessary to take the animism of these exchanges seriously (cf. Harrison 1993; Gregory 1982). More on this animism presently, but here be it noted that the appropriation of foreign valuables from nearby peoples amounts to the invasion of foreign beings. The seeming contradictions may go so far as to combine the appropriation of foreign identity with enmity and ethnocentricity. The cult houses of the Manambu were constructed in a slightly different style than those of Iatmul, for they "claimed they would 'die' if they built cult-houses like those of Iatmul" (Harrison 1993: 148). Combining diffusion with opposition, here is a Melanesian case of the narcissism of minor differences

In an article on "The commerce of cultures in Melanesia" that speaks to the widespread exchange of cultural forms in the region, and specifically to the transactions in rituals that convey "surrogate human beings" and "living force," Harrison (1993: 148) observes: "An alien gift was a gift of power, potentiating the group receiving it. Indeed, some Melanesian peoples seemed to regard the efficacy

of rituals as tending to increase in proportion to the foreignness of their provenience.” This helps explain a phenomenon of a kind Harrison came across in his own Manambu fieldwork and is often remarked elsewhere under the heading of “acculturation,” namely the indigenization of colonial power. He tells of a certain Manambu subclan that some years back claimed European clothes as its totem on the basis of a purported mythological connection with the local colonial administrators. Thereupon, “this bid for prestige provoked its main political rival, the subclan Sarak, to claim totemic ownership of the Queen” (Harrison 1987: 495). Here was a classic stroke of complementary schismogenesis involving a move outside and above the society in order to make an invidious contrast with a competitor within, followed by the latter’s equally practiced riposte of symmetrical schismogenesis aimed at downing his rival by doing more and better of the same—the way the Queen trumps the colonial administrator. I venture to claim this is a main dynamic in the analogous appropriation of external prestige goods. Indeed, precisely as their totems represent the being of the groups involved, the animistic resemblance in the assumption of the prestigious foreign identities is something more than analogous.⁷

A similar political economy of alterity obtains among the Chambri neighbors of Manambu. As documented in the excellent ethnographic reports of Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, the Chambri explicitly base their culture on borrowing. They became something of a cosmopolis of spiritual forces, insofar as many of their ancestors from foreign places brought with them the diverse potencies of their homelands. The Chambri were indeed empowered from all around, not only by their imports of rituals and esoteric knowledge from the dominant Iatmul, but also of dance complexes, myths, flutes, and talismans from a variety of other, less powerful groups. To neighboring peoples in turn they exported masks, flutes, shields, stone monoliths, and other cult objects and practices (Errington and Gewertz 1989; Gewertz 1983; see also Forge 1990). Not that these transactions preclude hostilities, since the Chambri (like the Manambu) were also known to fight the people with whom they exchanged, including the Iatmul with whom they could identify—again the animistic contradiction of autonomy and heteronomy.

As elsewhere in Melanesia, these Sepik peoples were engaged in a large regional network of trade in prestige items, notably of rituals and dance complexes for shell valuables, that reached the north coast and offshore islands of New Guinea and included, among others, the well known “importing culture” of the Mountain Arapesh, as so characterised by Margaret Mead ([1935] 2003). For other examples, one need only mention the famous kula trade of the Massim, the Moka and Tee systems of the New Guinea Highlands, or the similar regional commerce in the Admiralties, the Solomons, and Vanuatu. Or, with regard to shell monies in particular, Joel Robbins and David Akin (1999: 19–20) write:

The ability of shells to flow across borders is central to their meaning in many Melanesian cultures. The Kwaio . . . are unusual in manu-

7. On complementary and symmetrical schismogenesis (schizmogogenesis) see Bateson ([1936] 1958); and on its practice in intercultural relations in Melanesia, see Bateson (1935).

facturing their own primary currency from local shells [which shells they do not manufacture, however], and even they also use currencies imported from elsewhere. Melanesian big-men have typically demonstrated their prowess by “pulling” in foreign, sometimes “wild” shells that are deemed essential to local social reproduction, and by controlling the networks along which they travel. . . . The need for foreign shells to accomplish local reproduction can present a troublesome contradiction in societies where autonomy is highly valued.⁸

In the same way as Manambu clans fashioned totems out of the colonial encounter, the advent of Europeans radically changed the cosmography of power for Tikopians, expanding both the range and variety of talismanic goods and experiences. As Raymond Firth (1961: 152) related, a great outburst of overseas voyaging—or “travelling about the sky” as Tikopians called it—followed on “the increasing realization of the new worlds that lay beyond the horizon and the exciting experiences offered by contact with Europeans there.” The disastrous effects were numerous deaths at sea: well over 100 men in the few generations before Firth’s 1929 fieldwork, when the population was 1298, and another 80 in 30 voyages after 1929. A popular song tells what was at stake—valuables from abroad:

We here, great is the greed of our eyes

for valuables from abroad

which come with disaster (Firth 1957: 36; see also Sahlins 2012).

Stephen Hugh-Jones (1992) writes in a similar vein of the desires of European goods by the Barasana people of Colombia, arguing that these desires are not simply forced upon them by White men. On the contrary, for Barasana, European manufactured things are imbued with *ewa*, “an irresistibly attractive and potent force which leads them to act in an uncontrolled manner and to do things against their better judgment” (ibid.: 46). Guns, clothes, and the other manufactures were created by the extraordinary shamanic powers of the ancestral “father” of the White people, one Waribi. They now come from spirits in the world of the dead, which the Barasana represent in myth as the towns of the Whites. “To possess such goods is to share in the world from which they derive, and to appropriate some of the transformational power that is used to make them” (ibid.: 58).

The differences notwithstanding, many African societies were likewise concerned to domesticate and incorporate powerful external beings, forces, and things. Nor is it unusual that these exotica were dangerous. Michael Rowlands (1987: 60) speaks of the royal realms of the Cameroon grassfields, for example:

The ideal of a closed and involuted society, spatially represented in dense settlements behind massive defense works, on fuller examination reveals a “reality” of external dependency and exchange with power itself as a foreign substance which could serve to tear society asunder. . . . If

8. For other pertinent Melanesian examples of the nature and uses of shell monies, see the excellent collection of articles in Akin and Robbins (1999), especially those of Joel Robbins on Urapmin, David Akin on Kwaio, John Liep on Rossel Island, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart on Hagen, and Jane Guyer comparing African and Melanesian currencies.

the outside is the source of all evil, then logically it was this external arena which had to be brought within the bounds of moral order. Warfare, formal alliances, gift exchange, inter-marriage and the diffusion of royal regalia were all elements of a single strategy to achieve this end. The interregional hierarchy of *fons* [rulers] was crucial . . . both for facilitating profitable trading and for acquiring the symbolic materials necessary to maintain social order.

In a complementary observation regarding the ancient Kongo kingdom, Kaja Ekhholm, marks the convertibility between prestige items and human lives. The chiefs, she says, did not keep such things; they redistributed them. “But it is not simply a question of circulating prestige articles: within this process we find the important element of converting ‘money’ into human beings. The rich transferred prestige articles to subordinate groups in exchange for wives—i.e., they paid brideprice—or for slaves” (Ekhholm 1972: 20).

Domestic cattle as riches, most notably in East and Central Africa, amount to the proverbial exception to this political economy of alterity that proves the rule. For they are indeed *domesticated*: that is, tamed descendants of once-wild beasts, sometimes explicitly so in traditions of their origin, who continue to wander and feed daily in pasturages beyond the human homesteads and villages. Cattle are, in such respects, the wild within the settled itself, the natural within the cultural. As in the instance of the Cameroon grassfields, the opposition between the socius and its untamed surrounds was radical in many parts of Africa, the human settlements being bordered by a world of dangerous beings and forces—at the same time that it contained the resources and powers on which human welfare depended, both practically and spiritually. So James Fernandez (1982: 109) writes of the Fang people of Gabon,

The movement out from the village into the forest was not only an experience of succeeding zones with qualitatively different associations but it was also an experience of the passage beyond a threshold. One crossed a boundary from the domain of familiar and domestic activity, the village and its associated gardens and plantations, to the other realm, the deep forest with its useful trees, its game and well stocked streams, but alien uncertainties. . . . [T]he village so at odds with the forest was yet constructed out of it, and to that extent the distinction between these two realms was transformed into a close association.

This opposition between the wild and the settled implies a certain commonality between hunting and herding in African cultural schemes. Consider that insofar as large and dangerous beasts incarnate the vital and mortal powers of the wild, hunting takes on social and political values as much as (or more than) its role as a mode of subsistence. Not only is hunting a current means of masculine status, it is celebrated as an heroic attribute of dynastic founding heroes, who are often famous hunters, and whose kingly successors are identified with lions, leopards, elephants, vipers, and other such feral royalty. But then, as domestic counterparts of such wild beasts, cattle instantiate and transmit similar transcendent virtues to their human possessors. For Nuer, the relation to hunting is more direct, since they were ordained by God to obtain cattle by raiding the Dinka. In the beginning God gave an old cow to the Dinka and a calf to the Nuer, but when the Dinka stole the calf, God was angry “and charged Nuer to avenge the injury by raiding

Dinka's cattle to the end of time" (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 125). In Evans-Pritchard's oft-cited description of Nuer relations to their cattle, people know themselves and each other by the ox-names or cow-names taken from cherished beasts. And while people are thus totemically identified with cattle, cattle are animistically identified with people, insofar as cattle have anthropomorphic qualities including lineages quite like the Nuer. (Totemism and animism as two sides of the same ontology.) Further, by means of the particular cows dedicated to lineage or personal spirits, or to the dead, Nuer are able to ritually communicate with and receive benefits from these transcendent beings. One is reminded of the Tswana characterization of cattle cited by Jean and John Comaroff (1990: 206), "gods with wet noses." The Comaroffs also tell how here the intersubjective identity of humans and cattle functions politically, as in the case of animals agisted by ruling chiefs to client herdsmen: "For a man to hold a beast that belonged (or had once belonged) to the ruler was to have the presence of the sovereign himself in the midst of his personal property. To succor that beast was to honor the chief and, by extension, the chiefship and the polity embodied in him. Cattle, in sum, naturalized sovereign authority and gave it an enduring quality" (ibid.: 205). As social payments and stores of life-giving value, cattle in these societies serve the ordering functions of alliance, ranking, and peace-making already noted of external wealth elsewhere. To judge from another well-known passage of Evans-Pritchard's, cattle, as a kind of total social fact, would then be a condition of the possibility of society: "Nuer tend to define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle. Their social idiom is a bovine idiom" (1940: 19).⁹

These notices of the values of cattle and hunting support Jane Guyer's (1993: 257) observation that capture was a pervasive mode of the acquisition of riches in Africa, "more important in these economies than our image of 'production' can encompass." Following Jan Vansina, she affirms that political hierarchies were marked by the distribution chains of highly valued spoils of the hunt. She also cites reports from the Beti-Fang area, where people say, "we made war in order to have wealth, to have wives and slaves." Here, "the very idea of power . . . involved the acquisition of the magical force of another person through warfare, that is, through capture." (ibid.).

Perhaps these reports of traffic in foreign goods embodying otherworldly powers are sufficient to demonstrate the extent of the practice. For the phenomenon is indeed general. I have not even mentioned many other well known examples: the stone money of Yap; the wampum of eastern North America; the bronze gongs and drums of Southeast Asia; the shell, cloth, iron, and brass monies of Equatorial Africa; the red feather money of Santa Cruz. In any case it would be easy to add more of the same, thanks to a remarkable series of works by Mary Helms (1988; 1993; 1998), filled with scores of ethnographic and historical examples from around the planet. Especially *Craft and the kingly ideal*, which is a long demonstration of the thesis that kingship is "associated with distant power-filled spaces that carry ancestral and godly connotations; and the acquisition,

9. Other instances where the possession and exchange of large domesticated animals generates social value and constitutes social order would include the cattle of the Old Irish and their distant Gaulish kin, the buffalo of hinterland Southeast Asia, and the pigs of the New Guinea Highlands.

from this outside world, of valued resources beneficial for society at home and that will also enhance kingly fame, glory, and authority” (Helms 1993: 3). Here indeed is the whole political economy of alterity:

Those who create and/or acquire goods and benefits from some dimension of the cosmological outside are not only providing goods and benefits per se but also are presenting tangible evidence that they themselves possess or command the unique qualities and ideals generally expected in persons who have ties with distant places of supernatural origins and, therefore, are themselves “second creators.” Evidence of inalienable connections with places of cosmological origins thus conveys a certain sacraliity which readily translates into political-ideological legitimacy and facilitates successful exercise of power. This, in a nutshell, is why in traditional societies seekers or holders of influential political positions must give evidence of distant outside contacts, be they via the vertical realm, the geographical realm, or both (ibid.: 49–50).

The question that remains is why these vital powers inhere in otherness, which is also the question of why the material goods of the highest value—variously described as monies, valuables, prestige goods, treasures, wealth, or riches—originate in “the cosmological outside.” Durkheim made some headway toward a solution of the riches problem when he noted, or rather footnoted, that “economic value is a sort of power or efficacy, and we know the religious origins of the idea of power” ([1915] 1964: 419, n. 1304). But if Durkheim got no further with this insight, it was probably because he had already identified religion with the power of society, thus directing attention internally; whereas, what was at issue was the economic cum spiritual value of foreign objects. It was left to Mauss to augment the argument, not only by his golden analysis of the animate qualities of the gift, but by his explicit general observation on the divine origins of riches—no doubt from his extensive study of ethnographic reports of the kind sampled here: “Among the first groups of beings with whom we must have made contracts were the spirits of the dead and the gods. They in fact are the real owners of the world’s wealth. With them it is particularly necessary to exchange” (Mauss 1954: 13). All of which leads to the satisfactory sequitur to the effect that the alterity of material value resides in the spiritual value of alterity.

The value of alterity and vice versa¹⁰

In ways all too broad and banal, I claim that riches, being largely valued for their otherness, have their ultimate source in human finitude. Lack of control over fundamental conditions of life and death is the reason for a radical construction of difference, the transcendence and incorporation of which thus creates an always-heteronomous society. In this connection, I have more than once cited Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1992: 190–91) account of the Amazonian Araweté: “If humans were immortal, perhaps society would be confounded with the cosmos. Since death exists, it is necessary for society to be linked with something that is outside itself—and that it be linked socially to this exterior”

10. The author has repeated parts of the argument in this section, some of it verbatim, elsewhere (see Sahlins 2010a, 2010b, 2012). —Ed.

Moreover, it is not only death, but life, health, and the natural conditions of prosperity that are beyond the powers of human agency, and so destine society to be linked to more-than-human potencies outside itself—hence magically, then, as well as socially. Ranging from beasts, spirits, and gods to the ineffable forces of mana or manitou, by way of the ancestors or other peoples with their remarkable gifts, the extraordinary agents that govern the human fate live outside the space of human governance. More precisely, the lack of control translates as being-in-other-space. The proposition is, as I say, banal: one is reminded of Malinowski’s observation that “magic” comes into play in Trobriand fishing, gardening, and canoe construction where technical capacities leave off. Magic is practiced in dangerous deep-sea fishing as opposed to netting fish within the reef; or it appears in connection with “agencies and forces” that one year bestow good crops and another year bad weather and noxious insects; or again, in overseas voyaging, since for all the Trobrianders’ skills in canoe construction and navigation, they remain “at the mercy of powerful and incalculable tides, sudden gales . . . and unknown reefs” (Malinowski 1948: 12ff). Ignore for present purposes the usual distinctions of “magic” and “religion.” The proposition is that people must depend for their own existence on external conditions not of their own making—hence and whence their notions of other-worldly powers. Nothing foreign is merely human to them.

The going anthropological alternative is that divinity is a misrecognition of humanity. For Durkheim, god is a misplaced conception of the power of society, which people experience, but know not its true source. For a certain Marxian anthropology, god is an alienated projection of people’s own capacities of production and reproduction, an unhappy consciousness that has transferred human self-fashioning to the deity. Yet all such notions of misrecognition do not tell us why society is set in a cosmos of beings invested with powers of vitality and mortality beyond any that humans in fact know or control, produce, or reproduce. These ideas of false consciousness do not take account of the generic predicament of the human condition, this dependence on *sui generis* forces of life and death that are neither created by human science nor governed by human intentionality. If people really were in control of their own existence, they would not die. Or fall ill. Nor do they control the biological workings of agricultural or sexual generation. Or the weather on which their prosperity depends. Or, notably for the present argument, the other peoples of their ken: peoples whose own mode of existence may be enviable or scandalous to them, but in any case by their very difference from themselves, strangers who offer a transcendent capacity for life.

Off the west coast of New Guinea, at the marriage ceremonies of Biak islanders, the bride appears in procession to her husband’s home as “an ambulatory icon of foreign value,” adorned with crisp bank bills in her hair, silver bracelets on her wrists, and layers of newly purchased cloth on her body. Besides, the bride’s people bring an array of foreign wealth including antique porcelain from China, Europe, and Japan, more silver bracelets forged from colonial coins, store-bought plates, textiles, and cash (Rutherford 1998: 268–69). Later, when the brother of the bride bestows foreign valuables through her to her children, these things will distinguish the latter as individuals of talent, value, and reproductive virtue, and perhaps even put them in the honored status of “foreigner” (*amber*) themselves—a title also attributed to the Biak elite of pastors, civil servants, and village chiefs. In olden times, prominent Biak could affect titles bestowed by the Sultan of Tidore in

the Moluccas, one of the signs and means of power they acquired in adventurous voyages of raid and trade, ostensibly bringing “tribute” to the Sultan but returning with foreign valuables that testified to their own prowess. At least as important as the cloth, beads, porcelain, and other wealth bestowed by the Sultan was the *barak* they absorbed from being in his presence—the Islamic/Arabic version of an Indonesian invisible power (*semangat*), akin to *mana*. Returning home, the voyagers conveyed this potency by handshake to their relatives, who promptly rubbed it on their faces. In her brilliant ethnography of all this, *Raiding the land of the foreigners*, Danilyn Rutherford (2003: 117) writes of Tidore: “This distant place provided the currency of value in both its functions: in the form of objects that represent a person’s past achievements, and in the form of an invisible substance that conveyed the capacity to act.”

I take Viveiros de Castro’s (1992: 118) observations on the cosmography of power for Tupi-Guarani peoples to be a very general, if not universal, human condition: viz., “the symbolic attributes of the positions linked to alterity encompass hierarchically the material dimensions of society.” It follows, as he says, that “authority is founded on alterity;” and that “the internal aspect of leadership is subordinated to those aspects pointing towards the extrasocial” (*ibid.*). The politics of the appropriation of external life-values of course vary. They range from a totemic division of labor through shamanism, vision quests, trade and plunder, head-hunting and cannibalism, to stranger-kings whose cosmocratic powers bring fertility and prosperity to indigenous agriculturalists. Varied as they are, all these forms alike testify to the integration of alterity as a condition of the possibility of authority, not to mention the very existence of society.¹¹

In this connection, recall Michael Rowlands’ (1987) observations on the acquisition of external means of internal order by the rulers of Cameroon grassfield polities. Many of these are stranger-king formations. Indeed Rowlands’ summary of the foundational charters of Bamileke chiefdoms offers a classic stranger-king tradition—of the kind that could be duplicated in narratives from medieval Ireland to the Fiji Islands, not to mention many other African societies or the great New World states of the Aztecs, Maya, and Inkas:

The dynastic founding ancestor is always an immigrant who has left another established chiefdom after a quarrel over succession. He is an accomplished hunter (note the association with the forest and sorcery) who comes to a place where the indigenous population are farmers and their chiefs own the land and ensure agricultural success. . . . The immigrant hunter establishes himself through gifts of wild game and takes local women as wives in counter-gifts. He attracts people to him

11. This ethnographic variety is among other aspects of the value of external riches and the modes of their appropriation ignored in the otherwise interesting thesis of Bruno Theret (1999) that money develops as a symbolic substitute for the “natural resources”—people, animals, material wealth—used in sacrifices in the attempt, always vain, to repay the “primordial debt” owed the cosmic powers of the invisible world for their bestowal of life. But when human sovereigns claiming to represent the cosmos appeared, they coined money which, returning to the ruler in taxes, finally allowed life to be sustained without payments in death (*ibid.*: 60-61). Ethnographic and historical simplifications notwithstanding, the “life” part is indeed interesting.

through his generosity and finally, by a ruse, drives out the indigenous chiefs or converts them into subchief status (*ibid.*: 57).

I have elsewhere (Sahlins 2008; 2010a; 2010b; 2012) discoursed at length on the structure of these dual polities of foreign rulers and indigenous “owners.” Of concern here is the paradigmatic association of sovereignty with the provision of prestigious goods of foreign provenance. The stranger-king, in one way or another, is a rain-maker, both in the Frazerian sense that he fertilizes the bearing earth of the aboriginal people and in the colloquial sense that, by contrast to their identification with the land, he is a main source of the society’s “magical property,” its mobile and transmissible wealth or money-forms, including the life-enhancing foreign valuables distributed in kingly largesse or manipulated as royal regalia. As it is said in the famous Annals (*Sejarah Melayu*) of Melaka, “Where there is sovereignty, there is gold” (Brown 1952: 187). Providing foreign wealth and ritually fertilizing the land are parallel sovereign functions insofar as both convey the vitality of alterity and comprise a necessary complement of active means for realizing the fixed earthly powers of the indigenous people—thus typically and respectively, masculine and feminine wealth. Yet stranger-kingship is only a developed political form of the acquisition of external life powers. In such respects, head-hunting is much the same thing, if in reverse.

The head-hunting famously practiced by hinterland peoples of Southeast Asia—indeed from Assam to western New Guinea—has the same dynamic of foreign value as stranger-kingship, if here it is the local hero who captures foreign power rather than the foreign prince who captures local power, and whose own power is then captured locally (among others, see: Hoskins 1993; McKinley 1976; Downs 1955). Characteristically, the potency of the victims whose heads are ritually domesticated in the sacrifices and head-feasts of hinterland Southeast Asia are thereby turned to sustaining the lives and livelihood of the victors. By such means, Kayan people of Kalimantan (Borneo) say “those who were once our enemies become our guardians, our friends, our benefactors”: the benefits, here as elsewhere, including bountiful harvests, immunity to illness, and human fertility (McKinley 1976: 115, *et passim*). Indeed, success in head-hunting gave the warrior himself reproductive virtue. It was said of Iban of Sarawak that young men could not marry until they had taken a head. But I invoke the Iban particularly to illustrate the convertibility between raid and trade, hence the possibility of objectifying the same life-potency in the capture of certain foreign goods. Nineteenth-century accounts already indicate that acquiring heirloom wealth in the form of large Chinese jars during journeys abroad—the well-known Iban *bejalai*—was an acceptable substitute for heads (Low 1848: 215; Keppel 1848, 1: 35). Obtained violently by piracy or peacefully by trade, the jars could be equivalent to the heads insofar as they had analogous qualities of external subjectivity and agency. The historian John Walker (2002: 20) explains—in terms Marcel Mauss could have used:

Many of the goods obtained through *bejalai* were themselves sources of potency. Antique jars, for example, were credited with supernatural powers and healing virtues and would thereby contribute to the potency of the community to which they were taken. Moreover, the successful accumulation of prestige goods and other wealth would indicate, in itself, an increase in spiritual powers, status and strength.

Animated by the transcendent potencies of far-off beings, here is the kind of “magical property” that for Marcel Mauss was the origin of money. True that Mauss did not recognize the consistent externality of so-called “primitive money” forms. But then, he was spared the evident error in the common scholarly myth that money originated as a convenient means of external trade, inasmuch as it was presumed to be incompatible with kinship society. For on the one hand, as already noted of Iban, foreign wealth may as well be acquired by predation or exploitation as by exchange. On the other hand, money is not necessarily contradictory to kinship order, as Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (1989) have effectively argued. On the contrary, they say, “where the economy is ‘embedded’ in society and subject to its moral laws, monetary relations are rather unlikely to be represented as the antithesis of bonds of kinship and friendship, and there is consequently nothing inappropriate about making gifts of money to cement such bonds” (ibid.: 9). All the more so insofar as the gift conveys the being of the giver, thus is in effect kinship itself. Indeed such compatibility of money and kinship was already presupposed in Mauss’ treatments of the exchange of monies or treasures. In this regard, three aspects of Mauss’ reflections on riches seem to me still fundamental and credible:

First, that such riches have “a mystical value and are talismans or ‘life-givers’” (1954: 93, n25). Mauss made the point particularly in respect of Northwest Coast valuables:

Each of these precious things has a productive capacity within it. Each, as well as being a sign and surety of life, is also a sign and surety of wealth, a magico-religious guarantee of rank and prosperity. Ceremonial dishes and spoons decorated and carved with the clan totem or sign of rank are animate things. They are replicas of the never-ending supply of tools, the creators of food, which the spirits gave to the ancestors. They are supposedly miraculous. Objects are confounded with the spirits who made them, and eating utensils with food. (ibid.: 43)

Secondly, these life-giving powers are not extra-economic complements of material value. They *are* the material value. Mauss notably made the point that the indigenous monies are identified with spiritual forces. “For the Iroquois,” he wrote, “money is called ‘*orenda*’ or, for the Algonquins ‘*manitou*’; . . . among the Sioux, ‘*wakau*’; throughout Polynesia it is called ‘*mana*.’ Therefore, the question is decided” (1968, 2: 116). Or, if still undecided, consider the ethnographic report that “Wampum did not command regard because it was used as money. It was used as money because for other reasons it already commanded regard” (Laughlin in Einzig 1949: 407n).

Thirdly, rather than a disruption of the kinship order of these societies, such riches are means of their construction. More than merely compatible with kinship relations, money is often a necessity thereof. Used to effect alliances, compensate injuries, and establish hierarchies, the life-giving valuables thereby constitute and extend sociability—an aspect of money that only lately has been emphasized again by Keith Hart (2009). Especially, as we have seen, the larger organization of society is constructed through the disposition of foreign valuables: as in the payments of marital and military alliance; or the appropriations and distributions of wealth that constitute rank and rule—in potlatch, for example (Mauss 1954). Here is a testimony to an observation recently emphasized in Melanesian and Amazonian

studies to the effect that society is itself founded on otherness. Affirming the statement of a fellow ethnographer of a Pano (Amazonian) people that, “the internal social order requires the incorporation of the powers of the society of others,” Philippe Erikson (1996: 79; see also Viveiros de Castro 1992; Stasch 2009) says that this is not only true of all Pano groups but that,

One can go even farther, however, and affirm that the stranger is not only perceived as a sort of reservoir of brute power that needs to be socialized—or mastered for therapeutic or mystical ends . . . —but he is more precisely defined as the model, if not the guarantee, of the constitutive virtues of society. One thus understands why the Inca, the hyperbolic model of the *nawa* [‘stranger’], appears in most Pano mythologies as the culture hero from whom everything was learned, including how to ornament oneself, which is as much to say, to determine one’s identity.

Susan McKinnon (1991) relates a cosmogonic tradition of the Tanimbar Islands (Indonesia) that begins—as in Greek and Maori cosmogonies—with the shattering of an original union of heaven and earth, in this case by a foreign hero. Humans were then left to wander about in small groups, clashing with one another, while searching for access to the otherworldly powers that would allow them to create a fixed existence. They found these powers precisely in foreign valuables:

[This was the time] during which men searched the tokens of otherworldly powers that would help to anchor them once again and ensure their enduring place in the world. These tokens of power usually consisted of gold breastplates (*masa*) and gold earrings (*lonan*)—both ‘male’ valuables—that were obtained through exploits involving contact with beings from the heavens, the underworld, or from lands outside the horizon of the Tanimbarese archipelago. Ultimately these valuables would become the heirlooms whose possession is one of the signs of important, named houses and their continued connection to the otherworldly sources of power. Named heirloom valuables, acquired by the ancestors through actions that transcended the social order, became signs of the powers that lie before, beyond, outside and even against society, but also signs that underlie society and constitute the very basis of its possibility (ibid.: 62).

Otherness may be an internal value in another way, as it were in the relative form of oppositions in kind or in descent between groups of the same society. Consider Lévi-Strauss’ (1963) celebrated reanalysis of so-called “totemism” as a mode of representing and comprehending the differences between social groups by the differences between species respectively associated with them. Clan A is to Clan B as, say, Eaglehawks (hunters of meat) are to Crows (stealers of meat). Lévi-Strauss does not always emphasize it, insofar as he insists on the classificatory nature of the so-called totemism, but it is striking that persons or groups belonging to the same society should be as radically distinguished from one another as different natural species—and all the more so when, as is commonly the case, these groups are

related to their respective species by common substance.¹² More exactly, as Lévi-Strauss does recognize, the totem groups are often quite the same, as well as radically different from, each other—the way meat-hunters are the same and different from meat-stealers. Hence his conclusion that: “Totemism is thus reduced to a particular fashion of formulating a general problem, viz., how to make opposition, instead of being an obstacle to integration, serves rather to produce it” (ibid.: 89). Or, supposing the process is something like a cultural speciation (Schwartz 1995), perhaps one should say: how to create complementary opposition as a means of integration.¹³ In any event, for some peoples such as Australian Aboriginals—from whom the Eaglehawk and the Crow example comes—the effect is a magical division of labor and exchange, insofar as each group is responsible for the fertility of its totem which, however, it is prohibited from eating. Then again, to return momentarily to the Manambu, if we take the animism into account, as Harrison (1990: 48, 52) does, then:

There is a strong notion of consubstantiality between people and their totems, an idea that in allowing one another the use of their totemic resources they nourish each other with their own flesh. People often say, for instance, that when they eat yams they are eating human flesh and blood. Each group therefore expects the others to treat its totems, and particularly the edible ones, with respect and gratitude. . . . In offering one another these resources they represent themselves as giving away a part of their own substance, an aspect of their own identities. Although the values that Avatip groups transmit in ritual are immaterial, they represent in exactly the same way as material goods—pigs, pearlshells and other wealth—the social identities of their owners.

Here in (the still relevant) totemism is a major clue to a mode of production and exchange often enough reported ethnographically although it makes no utilitarian sense in terms of opportunity costs. (Or no more sense than the incest tabu, which is likewise an arbitrary restriction of reproduction—men foregoing their sisters or daughters, women their brothers or sons—in favor of the acquisition of external life sources.) I mean the equally nonutilitarian specializations of production, independently of the distribution of resources or skills, which thereby integrate people of the same or neighboring societies in the mutual transfer of objectified life-powers of alterity.

Commenting on the specialized productions of different “tribes” or exogamous groups in the Vaupes region of northwest Amazonia, Stephen Hugh-Jones (1992)

12. On the contrary, in discounting reports of descent from the totem animal as not essential to the phenomenon, Lévi-Strauss (1963: 31; but see Schwartz 1995, among others, for a demurral) insists that so-called totemic distinctions,

consist of metaphorical relations, the analysis of which belongs to an ‘ethnologic’ rather than an ‘ethno-biology’: to say that clan A is ‘descended’ from the bear and that clan B is ‘descended’ from the eagle is nothing more than a concrete and abbreviated way of stating the relationship between A and B is analogous to a relationship between species.

13. This creation of complementary opposition as a means of integration is how the process appears, for example, in Lévi-Strauss’ (1971) analysis of Mandan-Hidatsa relations.

indeed cannot decide whether the diversity is, as it were, economic or totemic in origin. While the Tukano were known for their wooden stools, the Desana for certain baskets, the Tuyuka for canoes, and other peoples for still other things, Hugh-Jones (*ibid.*: 60) allows that, “Whether this specialization was once part of a formalised system of inter-tribal trade . . . or whether it is simply a part of a wider ‘totemic’ system that allocated such things as language or varieties of cultivated plants between different groups, is now hard to tell.”

Philippe Descola (1996) provides an excellent Amazonian example wherein the specialization of trade goods derives from value of the foreign as such, rather than from local possibilities or advantages of production. People prefer trade for certain things that they could just as well produce themselves. Just so, the Achuar have a marked preference for foreign hunting dogs, for which they are prepared to give things of great value, although these dogs are not specially distinguished from their own. This circulation of hounds, observes Descola, cannot be justified objectively by the quality of the animals obtained from distant places. Rather, as is true of all Jivaro groups, the reason lies in “the fantastical value set on certain material or immaterial things—shamanistic powers for example—upon which a foreign origin is supposed to confer strength and qualities far superior to those of identical things that are obtainable locally” (*ibid.*: 82).¹⁴

Writing of the Admiralty Islands, Theodore Schwartz (1995) felicitously calls the phenomenon “cultural totemism,” noting its production as a mode of speciation by a process of schismogenesis. On the material plane, moreover, he highlights the “secondary specialization” of the kind commonly reported in Melanesia, whereby certain persons or groups have exclusive claims to produce important goods that in many cases could have been produced by others—who have thus been rendered dependent on them (*ibid.*: 19). Such ecologically arbitrary specializations in the Admiralties include pottery, fishnets, shell beads (used as the currency of affinal exchanges), carved and decorated utensils, beds, dance platforms, etc. It is as if the creation and integration of difference, and thus trans-cultural exchange, were a necessary condition of the existence of all concerned.

In a similar connection, Maurice Godelier (1972) makes the general and critical point that whereas the goods of the highest value—and the greatest competitive interest—are scarce in proportion, the scarcity itself may be “artificial.” Speaking of shells brought from distant places, pigs teeth grown in special shapes, Rossel Island money, and Northwest Coast coppers, “On this basis,” Godelier writes, “one could analyze theoretically the existence of scarcities that seem to be ‘artificial’ in certain societies. . . . Everything happens as though society had ‘instituted’ a scarcity by choosing unusual objects for certain exchanges” (*ibid.*: 288–89).

14. It is not clear whether Radcliffe-Brown (1948), in one of the earliest notices of intergroup exchange with no apparent utilitarian necessity, that is in the Andaman Islands, was talking of reciprocity of the same or different goods. This was his oft-cited passage on how individuals of different local groups exchanged things each could make on their own, “in order to produce a friendly feeling between the two persons concerned” (*ibid.*: 84). It is, however, worth considering that even exchanges of identical goods in such cases do have a differential value, namely their source and identification with the other—i.e., their “foreign” origin (cf. Foster 1995).

Insofar as the values in question necessarily embody the potencies of foreign being, the societies traditionally known to anthropology indeed subvert a major principle of market economics, for it follows that here scarcity is a function of value rather than value of scarcity. Nor is the value of these monies or riches fixed by exchange: clearly, it is *not* that “the value of a thing is exactly what it will bring.” Rather than developing from the terms of exchange, “the locus of value of long distance goods lies . . . in the inalienable qualities derived from association with a qualitatively defined distant place of origins” (Helms 1993: 99). Or in the words of the great A. M. Hocart (1970: 101), reflecting on the value of Fijian whale teeth: “A few ounces of divinity are worth pounds of gross matter.”

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Sur la culture de la valeur matérielle et la cosmographie des richesses

Résumé : Cet article est une discussion sur la valeur et la façon dont l’économie échoue comme science en bannissant la culture au rang de « facteur exogène ». L’argument est démontré par une étude ethnographiquement informée des origines externes des richesses. Parmi les conclusions: l’argent (« propriété magique ») est un moyen plutôt que l’antithèse de la parenté élargie; la rareté comme fonction de la valeur plutôt que la valeur de la rareté; entre autres contradictions de la sagesse trompée.

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