

# **Value as the Importance of Actions**

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## Preface: Spring 2005

The theory of value presented in the next essay was developed in the 1980s (largely by anthropologists in the University of Chicago) and '90s (largely by myself) so it occurred to me, this being a new millennium and all, it might be helpful to the reader to provide something of an update. Something to demonstrate how this rather abstract theory can be useful for something. Since I am writing from America (just barely: I'm writing from New York, which is a little like America, but also a little like the world) shortly after the quite possibly legitimate reelection of George W. Bush, this seemed an obvious topic for reflection. How on earth could this have happened? All over the world, and certainly across the American left, people have been asking "what, exactly, were Bush voters thinking?" How could a demonstrable liar and idiot with the worst economic record of any American president since Herbert Hoover win the enthusiastic support of millions of Americans — and most excruciatingly, working class Americans, towards whose economic interests he is so openly hostile?

Obviously, this very puzzlement is something of an explanation: many on the left clearly have no idea what most Americans are thinking. I would like to demonstrate that value theory, of the rather unconventional variety I'm proposing here, might actually be useful here. Therefore, I'll start by setting out the problem in the starkest terms as possible. I will begin with an excursus on what I call the "political metaphysics of stupidity", then pose a political-economic explanation. It is, I think, a pretty good one. Still, I hope to show that the very logic of the explanation illuminates the limits of any purely political economic approach and pushes towards something beyond it, the understanding that both economic and political struggles are, always, ultimately, struggles over the nature of value.

### The Political Metaphysics of Stupidity

*Consider the intelligence of the average American. Then consider the fact that half of them aren't even that smart.*

—Mark Twain

*As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.*

—H.L. Mencken

For most of the American liberal intelligentsia, the thing that really left them reeling from the last election was the sneaking suspicion that all things they most hated about George Bush were exactly what so many Americans loved about him. It was not that "red state" Americans voted

for Bush despite the fact that he was stupid. They voted for him because he was stupid. Millions of Americans watched George Bush and John Kerry, two Yale-educated children of millionaires, lock horns and concluded that Kerry won the argument. Then they voted for Bush anyway. The horrified suspicion was that in the end, Kerry's articulate presentation, his skill with words and arguments, actually counted against him. Bush's stupidity on the other hand was perceived as a virtue. And I think this is substantially correct. Many Americans do genuinely admire Bush's stupidity.

Let me clarify what I mean by this. First of all, I take it for granted there is really no such thing as "intelligence". There are a million ways to be smart and no one's smart in all of them; everyone can be slow on the uptake, and most human beings, whether plumbers or professors, will be remarkably apt at some things and hopeless at others. But stupid isn't dumb. Stupidity is different. It involves an element of will. This is why no one ever talks about "militant dumbness" or "militant cluelessness", but they do talk about "militant stupidity".

The Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem once tried to imagine the stupidest possible computer. It could only do one problem,  $2+2$ , thought the answer was 5, and when anyone tried to tell it otherwise, it grew outraged and eventually, tried to kill them. It is in this sense that I we can call Bush stupid. He is a man used to deciding what he thinks is right, and then sticking to his guns no matter how insane, disastrous, or simply incorrect his premises turn out to have been. But of course this is precisely the core of what his supporters like about him. He's firm. Decisive. A strong leader. Not like those over-intellectual flip-floppers who are always going on about how many sides there are to a problem.

It sends liberals into spirals of despair. They can't understand why decisive leadership is equated with acting like an idiot. Neither can they understand how a man who comes from one of the most elite families in the country — George W. is as close as we have to royalty (according to some rumors, his family is so intermarried with actual royalty that only thirty or forty people would have to die for him to become king of England) — who attended Andover, Yale, and Harvard, whose signature facial expression is a self-satisfied smirk, could ever be taken as a "man of the people". I must admit I've puzzled over this kind of thing for many years myself. As a child of working class parents who won a scholarship to Andover and eventually, a job at Yale, I've spent much of my life in the presence of men like that: almost everywhere I went, the bright, hard-working kid from a modest background trying to make something of myself, there he was, the drunken, loutish, empty-headed child of privilege, all the time laughing at me, because he knew how matter how stupid he was, or hard I worked, in the end it made no difference at all, because he was going to be running the country and I wasn't. For me, the truly remarkable thing — the real quintessence of social class — is that it never even occurs to such characters to wonder if they actually deserved it. Anyway, the presence of such a sneering idiot in the Oval Office already felt like a personal affront. The fact that so many working-class Americans see him as one of them was, at first, well-nigh incomprehensible. I have grappled with it for some time. In the end, I was forced to the conclusion that it has to do with the role of the educational system in turning America into an increasingly caste-like society.

## A Political-Economic Hypothesis

The fact is that stories like mine — stories of dramatic class mobility through academic accomplishment — are increasingly unusual. For most of its citizens, America is no longer a land of opportunity. Increasingly, it is starting to look like a caste society. As the higher education system is no longer seen, at least by the white working class, as a plausible means of social mobility, class resentments have become grafted onto educational attainment. What I want to ultimately argue then that it's the very liberal elites who find Bush so repellent have to bear much of the blame for this. Bush-style populism is the final result of their own stacking of the deck in favor of their own children.

America of course continues to see itself as a land of opportunity. (It also continues to represent itself as a beacon of democracy, despite the fact that by now, most countries have far more democratic constitutions). It is clear that, from the perspective of an immigrant from Haiti or Bangladesh, America certainly continues to be a land of opportunity. It's probably true that, in terms of overall social mobility, we still compare favorably to countries like Bolivia or France. But America has always been a country built on the promise of *unlimited* upward mobility. The working class condition had been traditionally seen as a way station: something one's family passes through on the road to something better. 'What makes American democracy possible', Abraham Lincoln used to stress, 'is that we lack a class of permanent wage laborers.' At the very least, one passes through a stage of wage labor to eventually buy some land and become a homesteader on the frontier. What matters is not so much how much this was really true, as whether it seemed plausible... Every time that road is broadly perceived to be clogged, profound unrest ensues. The closing of the frontier led to bitter labor struggles, and over the course of the twentieth century, the steady and rapid expansion of the American university system could be seen as a kind of substitute. Particularly after World War II, huge resources were poured into expanding the university system, which grew very rapidly, and all this quite developed quite intentionally as a means of social mobility. The Cold War social contract was not just a matter of offering a comfortable life to the working classes, it was also a matter of offering at least a plausible chance that their children would not be working class.

From the point of view of the governing elites, there are a couple obvious problems with this approach. First of all, a higher education system can't be expanded forever. Second of all, there quickly comes a point where you end up with far more educated people than you can employ — that is, unless you want to have thousands of extraordinarily literate receptionists and garbage collectors. At a certain point one ends up with a significant portion of the population unable to find work even remotely in line with their qualifications, who have every reason to be angry about their situation, and with access to the entire history of radical thought. During the twentieth century, this was precisely the situation most likely to spark urban revolts and insurrections — revolutionary heroes in the global South, from Chairman Mao to Fidel Castro, almost invariably turn out to be children of poor parents who scrimped and saved to get their children a bourgeois education, only to discover that a bourgeois education does not, in itself, allow entry into the bourgeoisie. In the US, we've never had the problem of hundreds of unemployed doctors and lawyers, but it's clear something analogous began happening in the '60s and early '70s. Campus unrest began at exactly the point where the expansion of the university system hit a dead end.

What we see afterwards, it seems to me, is best considered as a kind of settlement. On the one hand, most campus radicals were reabsorbed into the university (in the late '70s and early

'80s it often seemed all liberal disciplines were dominated by self-proclaimed radicals). On the other, what those radicals ended up actually doing was largely a work of class reproduction. As the cost of education skyrocketed, financial aid and student loan programs were cut back or eliminated, the prospect of social mobility through education gradually declined. The number of working class kids in college, which had been steadily growing until the late '60s or even '70s, began declining, and has been declining ever since. This is true even if we consider the matter in purely economic terms. It is all the more true when one considers that class mobility was never primarily a matter of income. Class mobility was about the attainment of a certain sort of gentility. Consider, here, the phenomenon of unpaid (or effectively unpaid) internships. It has become a fact of life in the United States that if one chooses a career for any reason other than the money — if one wishes to become part of the world of books, or charities, the art world, to be an idealist working for an NGO an activist, an investigative reporter — for the first year or two, they won't pay you. This effectively seals off any such career for the vast majority of poor kids who actually do make it through college. Such structures of exclusion had always existed of course, especially at the top, but in recent years fences have become fortresses.

I think it's impossible to understand the "culture wars" outside of this framework. The identities being celebrated in "identity politics" correspond almost exclusively to those groups whose members still see the higher education system as a potential means of social advancement: African-Americans, various immigrant groups, Queers, Native-Americans. (One might even add women, since by now women are attending universities at far higher rates than men — almost to 2 by some counts.) These are also the groups that most reliably vote Democratic. Dramatically lacking in debates about identity politics are identities like, say, "Baptist", or "Redneck" — that is, those that encompass the bulk of the American working class, who are made to vanish rhetorically at the same time as their children are, in fact, largely excluded from college campuses and all the social and cultural worlds college opens up.

The reaction is, predictably, a tendency to see social class as largely a matter of education, and an indignant rejection of the very values from which one is effectively excluded. As Tom Frank has recently reminded us, the hard right in the US is largely a working class movement, full of explicit class resentment. Most working class Bush fans don't have a lot good to say about corporate executives, but to the frustration of progressives everywhere, corporate executives never seem to become the principal targets of their rage. Instead, their hatred is directed above all at the "liberal elite" (with its various branches: the "Hollywood elite", the "journalistic elite", "university elite", "fancy lawyers", "the medical establishment"). The sort of people who live in big coastal cities, watch PBS or listen to NPR or even more, who might be involved in appearing in or producing programming on PBS or NPR. It seems to me there are two perceptions that lie behind this resentment:

1. the perception that members of this elite see ordinary working people as a bunch of knuckle-dragging cavemen, and
2. the perception that these elites constitute an increasingly closed, caste-like group; one which the children of the white working class would actually have more difficulty breaking into than the class of Enron executives

It seems to me that both these perceptions are, largely, true. Let me take each in turn:

1. The first thing to be said about this perception is that it is largely true. Members of what passes for an intellectual elite in America do see their fellow citizens as idiots.

It is a peculiar feature of American democracy that we have never had much in the way of an intellectual class. America has never really produced figures like Camus, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell or even George Bernard Shaw: that is, genuine thinkers whose works are widely read and argued about by ordinary, literate citizens. The equivalent role tends to be filled, instead, by journalists. Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken are probably the archetypal figures in this respect: men of modest origins who rose through the world of newspapers and popular magazines, and who throughout their lives continued to earn their livelihoods, essentially, in the entertainment industry. Not surprising, then, that both tended to see the public as an irrational herd, or bunch of gullible simpletons. Journalists always tend to think that way. It has certainly been my own experience: it is hard to talk about politics with a professional journalist – even, often, relatively “progressive” journalists – without hearing some cynical tirade about the ignorance or stupidity of the American public.

It might seem surprising to see such attitudes reproduced – as in the quotes above – just as much among folksy populists like Twain as unapologetic snobs like Mencken, but actually, it is a strange paradox of the American spirit that elitism itself can be a populist attitude. We have always seen ourselves as a country of hucksters and salesmen; market democracy means that everyone is free to at least try to bilk, scam and rip each other off. It doesn't cause resentment as long as people feel that anyone can play the game: that one can rise from obscurity. It's when that is no longer the case that the sneering attitude becomes genuinely insufferable. When leads us to observation #2:

2. Consider, here, the current condition of Hollywood. Hollywood used to represent for many the quintessence of the American dream: a simple farm girl goes to the big city, is discovered, becomes a big star. For present purposes, it doesn't really matter how often this actually happened (it clearly did now and then); the point is in the '40s, say, people largely saw the fable as not entirely implausible. Look at the lead actors of a major motion picture nowadays and you are likely to find not a single name that can't boast a genealogy with at least two generations of Hollywood actors, writers, producers and directors. The film industry is dominated by an in-marrying caste. Is it surprising, then, that Hollywood celebrities' pretensions to populist politics tends to ring a bit hollow in the ears of most working class Americans? In all this, Hollywood is not an exception. It's emblematic. Almost the same thing is happening with lawyers, professors, even journalists.

Bush voters, I would suggest, tend to resent intellectuals as a class more than rich people, largely because they can imagine a scenario in which they might become rich, but cannot possibly imagine one in which they or any of their children would become a member of the liberal intelligentsia. If you think about it that's not an unreasonable assessment. A truck driver's son from Wyoming might not have very much chance of becoming a millionaire, but it could happen. Certainly, it's much more likely than his ever becoming an international human rights lawyer, or drama critic for the New York Times. Such jobs go almost exclusively to children of privilege. Insofar as there are not quite enough children of privilege to go around – since elites almost never produce enough offspring to reproduce themselves demographically – the jobs are likely to go to the most remarkable children of immigrants. Executives with Bank of America, or Enron, when facing a similar demographic problem, are much more likely to recruit from poorer white folk like themselves. This is partly because of racism; partly, too, because corporations tend to

encourage a broadly anti-intellectual climate themselves. It is well known at Yale, where I work, that executive recruiters tend to prefer to hire Yale's "B" students, since they are more likely to be people "they'll feel comfortable with."

Here we come on what's the most difficult and divisive aspect of this conflict: the racism, the homophobia, the fundamentalism. Obviously none of these things have been brought into being by current directions in educational policy; they have all been around for a long time. The question is why at this particular moment so many people are using as a basis for voting, even if it means voting against their own economic interests. Here I might ask a parallel question. Why does one not see a similar antiintellectual politics among, say, African Americans, or in immigrant communities? I can't myself think of a single elected Black official who got into office by appealing to this sort of sentiment. To the contrary, over the last year, we have recently been seeing an outpouring of debate, from the African-American cultural and political leadership, about what to do with the problem of "black anti-intellectualism". When investigated, the phenomenon in question seems to come down to little more than the fact that black high-school students to mock those who study too hard as 'trying to be white' — in other words, that like any other American teenager, they tend to make fun of people they consider nerds. The very fact that in Black America this is considered a crisis is telling in itself, considering the complete absence of any parallel debate about white anti-intellectualism. Anyway, it's hard to think of a single African-American, or Asian or Latino politician who actually panders to anti-intellectualism in the manner of George W. Bush. Clearly, because these are populations who continue to see the higher education system as a plausible means of social advancement. Poor white folk, meanwhile, see a rapidly shrinking pie of public funds and innumerable barriers, and for the most part, their understandable reaction is to say that the sorts of knowledge and attainment higher education offers isn't all its cracked up to be anyway — that religious wisdom, or commercial savvy, patriotism or moral virtues are really worth a thousand times more. Religion in particular offers an explicit critique of dominant forms of knowledge: a radical challenge to assumptions about what's really important or valuable in life and what sort of people have to right to make judgments on such matters. If people vote against their obvious economic interests, then, it can only be because one cannot, really, separate the economic issues from social and cultural ones.

We are, in other words, in the domain of values. The Right would be the first to acknowledge this.

## **Family Values**

In progressive circles in the United States left the big debate after the election was the relative importance of "bread and butter" issues, or what was called "the culture wars". Did Kerry lose because he was not able to offer to spell out any plausible economic alternatives, or did Bush win because he successfully mobilized his base of conservative Christians around the issue of gay marriage? A case could be made either way. I however want to draw attention to the division. It is of course in the nature of capitalism that we assume there is something called "the economy", which operates by its own logic, and that it can be set against pretty much everything else. The American left works almost entirely within this framework, even if it generally suggests that the economy should not be run in quite such a cut-throat fashion.



Actually, any market system does something like this — capitalism just takes the logic the furthest. As soon as one marks off one domain of human activity where everyone is expected to behave in a rational, calculating fashion to try to get as much as possible for themselves, other areas of human activity come to be seen as the domain of irrational emotions and ideals, or uncalculating altruism. One becomes the mirror image of the other. It's important to emphasize that this is not inevitable. Anthropologists have documented any number of societies where this kind of distinction simply did not exist. As Marcel Mauss long since pointed out, in "gift economies" one can't really speak either of pure egoism or pure altruism; instead, for example, economic transactions often operate on a far more complex and often set of motivations, like, for instance, putting one's services permanently at the disposal of those who have provided one with a wife, or showering wealth on rivals to make them feel small. The interesting thing is that historically, markets, and world religions (with their doctrines of purely altruistic behavior) tend to crop up at exactly the same time. Even today, Christian missionaries working in parts of the world where gift economies still exist, or where market logic is little developed, see their work as a matter of both teaching "the natives" both rational economic behavior, work discipline and the arts of saving and investment at work, and selfless devotion to others when operating within the sphere of church affairs. In other words, they are trying to create both spheres at the same time, separate motives that are in fact entirely entangled in traditional life, give each a space and habitation of its own.

Right wing political strategies, it seems to me, follow an analogous logic. In the US, for example, the Republican Party, it's always said, is divided between the libertarians and fundamentalists. On the one hand, free-market fundamentalists of one sort or another, who believe that democracy itself is (or should be) a matter of consumer choice. On the other, the religious right: Christian fundamentalists suspicious of democracy of any sort but very much in favor of biblical injunctions and "family values". In many ways their positions are quite contradictory (one need only think about the issue of abortion). Still, there is a sense in which they are clearly complementary, since this same division has recurred in one form or another, in rightwing alliance, for generations — even centuries. Essentially, one might say that the conservative approach has been to release the dogs of the market on the one hand, throwing everyone's world into a tumult of insecurity and all traditional verities into disarray; and then, with the other, to offer themselves up as the last bastion of order and authority, the stalwart defenders of the authority of churches and fathers against the barbarians one has oneself unleashed. One result is that — as liberal pundits periodically complain — the right seems to have a monopoly on value. They wish, in other words, to occupy both positions, on either side of the market: extreme egoism and extreme altruism.

Still, there are other ways to parse this division, that I think might tell us a little more. Note how the split also corresponds to the division between "value" and "values". In a capitalist system, "the economy" refers mainly to those domains in which labor is commoditized. The domain of self-interest, therefore, operates under the 'law of value'. Value in this sense is also a quantifiable abstraction. One might have more or one might have less of it, but otherwise it is exactly the same. This is of course because value in this sense comes into being through, and is realized in the form of, money — the ultimate abstract and quantifiable medium. The fact that one unit of money is exactly the same as any other means that one unit of work can be seen as the same as any other. As soon as one leaves the area where labor is bought and sold, however, one immediately enters into the realm of "values": especially "family values" (since far the most common form of unpaid labor in most industrial societies is childrearing and housework), but also, but also

religious values, political ideals, the values that attach themselves to art or patriotism, or for that matter loyalty to a football team. All are seen as principles that ought to be uncorrupted by the market, but at the same time, as unique and profoundly different from one another. Beauty, devotion, integrity — these things are inherently incommensurable. In other words, where there is no abstract medium to reduce value to a uniform, fluid form, one is left with concrete, particular crystallizations.

In this light, I think one can return to those unpaid internships — the ones which so effectively freeze working class kids out of the best or most fulfilling jobs — and understand a little better what's really going on. Earlier, I said these policies lock the vast majority of Americans out from jobs one would want for “any reason other than the money.” We can perhaps rephrase this now. What we are really talking about are jobs that open the way to the (legitimate, professional) pursuit of any forms of value other than the economic. Whether it's the art world, or charity, or political engagement (as in, say, journalism, or activism) we are speaking of ways that one can dedicate oneself to something other than the pursuit of money — and compensatory consumerism. If one does not possess a certain degree of wealth to start out with, or at the very least the right kind of social networks and cultural capital, one is simply not allowed to break into this world.

Critical social thinkers interested in understanding such structures of exclusion tend to use the theoretical terms developed by Pierre Bourdieu, and speak of different social fields (the economic, the political, the academic field, the art world...), and the way social actors deploy economic, social, and cultural capital to move within and between them. I think Bourdieu's theories are very useful here. At the same time, I think they have their limits. By reducing everything to forms of capital, Bourdieu ends up arguing that all fields are organized, at least tacitly, in the same way as the economic field: as an arena of struggle between a collection of maximizing individuals. The only thing that really sets the economic field apart is that there's no work of euphemization: in it, all the selfish motives and maximizing strategies that are covered up in other fields become utterly explicit. But all fields are not fields of competition. Some areas valued precisely because they are not. Neither can this simply be reduced to the fact that — as Bourdieu sometimes rather cynically suggests — those best able to play such games are those who manage to convince themselves they are actually sincere. To the contrary, what we are seeing here, in many cases, is a battle over access to the right to behave altruistically. Selflessness is not the strategy, it's the prize. (Catherine Lutz for example, who has been studying US overseas bases, makes the fascinating observation that all US bases have projects where soldiers provide free medical services for local people. This usually has almost no effect, she says, on local opinion about the US presence; instead, it's done almost entirely for the sake of the soldiers, who invariably tell her that providing this sort of service is what their job is really all about. Without allowing them to behave altruistically, there apparently would be no way to convince them to re-enlist.

In value terms, the question becomes: who has the right to translate their money into what sorts of meaning? Who controls the medium through which, and the institutions through which, our actions become meaningful to ourselves, by the very act of being publicly recognized in some kind of public arena? It seems to me that while if one is trying to understand the strategies by which people can move back and forth between “fields”, and especially, by which some are excluded from them, Bourdieu's models are pretty much indispensable, they do little to tell us why anyone wishes to enter certain fields to begin with.

The latter is the promise of value theory: to understand that the ultimate stakes of politics are the ability to define what's important in life to begin with. "The economy", after all, is ultimately a gigantic system of means and not of ends. Neoclassical economics has in fact only been able to make a successful claim to being a science since it has effectively vanished the analysis of ends — of values, of why people want the things they do — entirely from its purview. It can thus reduce human life to a series of strategies by which rational actors try to accumulate different forms of value: while exiling the study of value itself to other, inferior, disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on. (What this comes down to in practice is an insistence on treating all human behavior with total cynicism, and then treating the ability to do so as a value in itself. Hence, students learning rational choice analysis are endlessly told that one should not look at, say, idealists who sacrifice themselves for a cause as acting selflessly, but rather, as maximizing the feelings of self-satisfaction they get out of the knowledge that they are sacrificing themselves; while the obvious question — "why is it that anyone can get such feelings of self-satisfaction out of self-sacrifice in the first place?" — is treated as irrelevant.) The moment we refuse to sever these things, however, we realize that what on a personal level is a battle for access to the right to behave altruistically becomes, on a political level, a battle over control of the apparatus for the creation of people.

## **The Production of Human Beings and Social Relations**

Let's arrange the pieces in a slightly different way, again. The formal distinction between "the economy" and domestic sphere is also represented, in political-economy terms, as the domain of production, and that of consumption. Obviously, this is only true if one thinks what is really significant in the world is the history of manufactured objects, but this has become, over the last two hundred years, the favored way of looking at societies. We are, in other words, in that strange fetishized world Marx described where we continually forget that the point of life is actually the creation of certain sorts of people, and that the same system — even if we look at it in the starkest, Dickensian terms mainly as an opposition of factories (and shops and offices) and private households (and schools and poorhouses) — can be seen as consisting of a sphere for the making of human beings, that are then in effect consumed again in the workplace. One can hardly underestimate how deep this fetishism runs. In Africa and Asia, for example, it's perfectly unexceptional to hear government officials remarking that HIV infection rates are a serious crisis in their country, because the fact that in certain regions half the population is dying of AIDS is going to have devastating consequences for the economy. Not long ago, "the economy" was recognized mainly as the means by which people are provided with their material needs so that they stay alive. Now the best reason to object to their all dying is that it might interfere with economic growth rates. The thing to ask, it seems to me, is what it takes to put us in a place where public officials can make statements like this without being immediately put away as psychotics. Ultimately life is about the production of people — and not just in the physical sense of "reproduction", especially if that's reduced to pregnancy and childbirth (though, of course, pregnancy and childbirth often end up becoming concrete symbols for the process as a whole) — but in the sense that human beings are constantly shaping and fashioning one another, training and socializing one another for new roles, educating and healing and befriending and rivaling and courting one another. This is what life is actually about, and it can never, by definition, be

reduced to a simple utilitarian calculus. In most human societies, the forms of labor entailed in all this are recognized to be the most important ones. The production of material necessities, or material wealth, is usually seen as at best a subordinate moment in the overall process of creating the right sort of human beings. Hence the most important value forms in most societies are those that emerge from the process. Certainly, this might involve all sorts of fetishism in their own right, as tokens of honor not only inspire, but come to seem the source of, honorable behavior; tokens of piety inspire religious devotion; tokens of wisdom inspire learning, and so on. But it seems to me these forms of fetishism are relatively minor — at least, in comparison with the kind of grandiose, ultimate fetishism of capitalism, which places the world of objects as a whole above that of human beings and social relations.

In America, though, if one looks at the matter institutionally, one begins to notice something very interesting. America is by no means a deindustrialized society, but factory labor has increasingly been relegated to immigrants and pushed away from the centers of major cities. At the same time, as Michael Denning has pointed out, any number of such cities are in the process of being reorganized, economically, around hospitals and universities. This is not only true of longstanding university towns like Ann Arbor or New Haven but major cities like Baltimore. In other words, as commodity production increasingly moves overseas, we are seeing communities organized around what are, effectively, factories for the production of persons: divided, in good Cartesian fashion, into those which aim at mind, and those which aim at the body.

Both hospitals and universities were, once, institutions largely insulated from market logic. Now both are increasingly being forced to reorganize themselves on corporate lines. Both are sites of intense social struggle. For the Left, they have become the major new centers for labor organizing in recent decades. For the populist Right, they have been the special targets of rage and resentment. Right wing populists see universities (accurately enough) as the very locus for the production of the “liberal elite”, and tend to wage specific campaigns — most obviously, the campaign against the theory of evolution — to undermine the basis of their claims to having any special purchase on Truth. Radical anti-abortionists see the medical establishment, in turn, as the very locus of evil — an engine not of the creation of health but for the mass murder of babies. In a broader sense, what the right is waging is a broad assault on the ability of the liberal elite — from which their constituents have been so effectively excluded — to control what in classic Marxist terms would be called the terms of social reproduction. Bush won, many point out, largely because the Republican Party was so effective in mobilizing his base; it did so by ensuring that so many swing states had referendums on the ballot concerning a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. The gay marriage issue is a perfect illustration of the real stakes. Ultimately, the battle is over the apparatus for the creation of persons, and the forms of value created in the process. Even beyond the question of whether universities and hospitals are to be forced to submit to the profit motive — that is, whether they themselves will be forced to abandon any notion that they represent autonomous domains of value — there is the question of whether they can maintain their role as the primary institutions regulating the self-creation of human beings, or whether they are ultimately to be replaced by churches (already slowly taking over welfare functions abandoned by government in poor communities across America) prisons, and the military. The battle is lopsided in many ways. Left populists stand little chance of radically changing the nature of US nationalism; right populists stand little chance of having any say in determining what is art — though in either case not for lack of trying. (This is why both sides detest institutions like the New York Times as the bastion of the other.) The point is that the

economic structures and strategies are not an autonomous domain here, but are part and parcel of the way each side protects its ability to control the legitimation of different forms of publicly recognized value.

If the Left is going to launch a realistic offensive in the United States, it can only happen, it seems to me, if we start taking this notion of self-creation seriously, and understand that no one is going to look at members of caste-like, self-reproducing elites that try to monopolize the power to determine what's important in human life, and accept them as genuine agents of human liberation. Ultimately, a free society can only be one in which everyone has an equal power to determine for themselves what they believe to be important. The only legitimate economic question, it seems to me, is what sort of system for the distribution of material goods will best put people in a position to do so.

# Value As The Importance of Actions

What if one did try to create a theory of value starting from the assumption that what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions? What might a broader social theory that starts from this assumption look like? In this chapter, I'd like to explore this possibility in greater detail.

I ended the last chapter with the work of Nancy Munn, one of the few anthropologists who has taken this direction. Munn is not quite the only one. Another is Terence Turner, who has developed some of the same ideas, not so much in the phenomenological tradition, but with an eye to adopting Marx's labor theory of value for anthropological use. Turner's work, however, has found even less broad an audience. There are many reasons for this. Many of his most important essays (1980a, 1984, 1987, 1988) remain unpublished; others are either scattered in obscure venues (1979c, 1985a...) or written in a language so highly technical it is often very difficult for the non-adept to make head or tail of them (consider, for example, 1979a:171, or 1985b:52). Hence, while there are a handful of anthropologists who have been strongly influenced by his ideas (Jane Fajans, Fred Myers, Stephen Sangren...), the vast majority has never even been exposed to them. Before outlining Turner's approach, though (or anyway my own idiosyncratic version of it) some groundwork is probably in order.

## the underside of the Western tradition

At the end of the last chapter I suggested that one reason Nancy Munn's work has been so little taken up is that theories that start from action fall so far outside the main currents of the Western intellectual tradition that it's hard for most scholars to figure out exactly what to do with them. They belong, one might say, to the Heraclitean tradition, which in Western thought has always been somewhat marginal. Western philosophy, after all, really begins with the quarrel between Heraclitus and Parmenides; a quarrel that Parmenides won. As a result, from almost the very start, the Western tradition marked itself by imagining objects that exist, as it were, outside of time and transformation. So much so that the obvious reality of change has always been something of a problem.

It might be useful to review that quarrel, however quickly.

Heraclitus saw the apparent fixity of objects of ordinary perception as largely an illusion; their ultimate reality was one of constant flux and transformation. What we assume to be objects are actually patterns of change. A river (this is his most famous example) is not simply a body of water; in fact, if one steps in the same river twice, the water flowing through it is likely to be entirely different. What endures over time is simply the pattern of its flow.<sup>1</sup> Parmenides on the

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<sup>1</sup> It's been a bit difficult for modern scholarship to figure out precisely what Heraclitus' position actually was; his ideas have to be pieced together through fragments or summaries preserved in the work of later authors who disagreed with them. It's not entirely clear whether Heraclitus ever actually said "you can't step into the same river

other hand took precisely the opposite view: he held that it was change that was illusion. For objects to be comprehensible, they must exist to some degree outside of time and change. There is a level of reality, perhaps one that we humans can never fully perceive, at which forms are fixed and perfect. From Parmenides, of course, one can trace a direct line both to Pythagoras (and thus to Western math and science) and to Plato (with his ideal forms), and hence to just about any subsequent school of Western philosophy.

Parmenides' position was obviously absurd; and indeed, science has since shown that Heraclitus was more right than he could possibly have known. The elements that make up solid objects are, in fact, in constant motion.<sup>2</sup> But a fairly strong case can be made that had Western philosophy not rejected his position for Parmenides' false one, we would never have been able to discover this. The problem with his dynamic approach is that while obviously true it makes it impossible to draw precise borders and thus to make precise measurements. If objects are really processes, we no longer know their true dimensions — at least, if they still exist — because we don't know how long they will last. If objects are in constant flux, even precise spatial measures are impossible. One can take an object's measure at a particular moment and then treat that as representative, but even this is something of an imaginary construct, because even such "moments" (in the sense of points in time, of no duration, infinitely small) do not exist — they, too, are imaginary constructs. It has been precisely such imaginary constructs ("models") that have made modern science possible. As Paul Ricoeur has noted:

It is striking that Plato contributed to the construction of Euclidian geometry through his work of denominating such concepts as line, surface, equality, and the similarity of figures, etc., which strictly forbade all recourse and all allusion to manipulations, to physical transformation of figures. This asceticism of mathematical language, to which we owe, in the last analysis, all our machines since the dawn of the mechanical age, would have been impossible without the logical heroism of Parmenides denying the entirety of the world of becoming and of *praxis* in the name of the self-identity of significations. It is to this denial of movement and work that we owe the achievements of Euclid, of Galileo, modern mechanism, and all our devices and apparatus (Ricoeur 1970:201–202; also in Sahlins 1976:81-82n.21)

There is obviously something very ironic about all this. What Ricoeur is suggesting is that we have been able to create a technology capable of giving us hitherto unimaginable power to transform the world, largely because we were first able to imagine a world without powers or transformations. It may well be true. The crucial thing, though, is that in doing so, we have also

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twice" — Kirk (1962) suggested he didn't; Vlastos (1970) and Guthrie (1971:488-92) that he did, and that the phrase "on those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow" does not reflect his original words. However, as Jonathan Barnes observes (1982:65-69, cf. Guthrie 1971:449- 50) the debate rather misses the point, since this later gloss is in fact an accurate description of Heraclitus' position, as it can be reconstructed from comparison other fragments (notably his observation that the "barley drink," which was made up of wine, barley and honey, "existed only when it was stirred."). Heraclitus did not deny that objects exist continually over time; he emphasized that all such objects are ultimately patterns of change and transformation. It appears to have been Plato, in his *Cratylus*, who popularized the former interpretation, suggesting that if Heraclitus were correct, it would be impossible to give things names because the things in question would have no ongoing existence (McKirahan 1994:143).

<sup>2</sup> Heraclitus of course was the intellectual ancestor of Democritus, founder of atomic theory, who argued that all objects can be broken down into indivisible particles that existed in constant motion. Marx, who harked back to this same tradition via Hegel, wrote his doctoral thesis on Democritus.

lost something. Because once one is accustomed to a basic apparatus for looking at the world that starts from an imaginary, static, Parmenidean world outside of it, connecting the two becomes an overwhelming problem. One might well say that the last couple thousand years of Western philosophy and social thought have been an endless series of ever more complicated attempts to deal with the consequences. Always you get the same assumption of fixed forms and the same failure to know where you actually find them. As a result, knowledge itself has become the great problem. Roy Bhaskar has been arguing for some years now that since Parmenides, Western philosophy has been suffering from what he calls an “epistemic fallacy”: a tendency to confuse the question of how we can know things with the question of whether those things exist.<sup>3</sup>

At its most extreme, this tendency opens into Positivism: the assumption that given sufficient time and sufficiently accurate instruments, it should be possible to make models and reality correspond entirely. According to its most extreme avatars, one should not only be able to produce a complete description of any object in the physical world, but — given the predictable nature of physical “laws” — be able to predict precisely what would happen to it under equally precisely understood conditions. Since no one has ever been able to do anything of the sort, the position has a tendency to generate its opposite: a kind of aggressive nihilism (nowadays most often identified with various species of post-structuralism) which at its most extreme argues that since one cannot come up with such perfect descriptions, it is impossible to talk about “reality” at all.

All this is a fine illustration of why most of us ordinary mortals find philosophical debates so pointless. The logic is in direct contradiction with that of ordinary life experience. Most of us are accustomed to describe things as “realities” precisely because we *can’t* completely understand them, *can’t* completely control them, *don’t* know exactly how they are going to affect us, but nonetheless *can’t* just wish them away. It’s what we *don’t* know about them that brings home the fact that they are real.

As I say, an alternative, Heraclitean strain has always existed — one that sees objects as processes, as defined by their potentials, and society as constituted primarily by actions. Its best-known manifestation is no doubt the dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx. But whatever form it takes, it has always been almost impossible to integrate with more conventional philosophy. It has tended to be seen as existing somewhat off to the side, as odd or somewhat mystical. Certainly, it has seemed that way in comparison with what seemed like the hard-headed realism of more positivist approaches — rather ironically, considering that if one manages to get past the often convoluted language, one usually finds perspectives a lot more in tune with commonsense perceptions of reality.<sup>4</sup>

Roy Bhaskar and those who have since taken up some version of his “critical realist” approach (Bhaskar 1979, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Collier 1990, 1994; Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson and Norrie 1998) have been trying for some years now to develop a more reasonable ontology. The resulting arguments are notoriously difficult, but it might help to set out some of his conclusions, in shamelessly abbreviated form, before continuing:

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<sup>3</sup> This “epistemic fallacy,” he argues, underlies most Western approaches to philosophy: Descartes and Hume are two principal culprits.

<sup>4</sup> One reason, perhaps, why Marx’s dialectic, in however bowdlerized a form, proved to have such popular appeal. At any rate, Hegel’s approach was to see models as always relatively “abstract,” and hence “one-sided” and incomplete, compared with the “concrete totalities” of actual reality. All of the dialectical tradition assumes that objects are always more complex than any description we could make of them.



1. **Realism.** Bhaskar argues for a “transcendental realism”: that is, rather than limiting reality to what can be observed by the senses, one must ask instead “what would have to be the case” in order to explain what we do experience. In particular, he seeks to explain “why are scientific experiments possible?,” and also, at the same time “why are scientific experiments necessary?”
2. **Potentiality.** His conclusion: while our experiences are of events in the real world, reality is not limited to what we can experience (“the empirical”), or even, to the sum total of events that can be said to have taken place (“the actual”). Rather, Bhaskar proposes a third level (“the real”). To understand it, one must also take account of “powers” — that is, one that defines things in part in terms of their potentials or capacities. Science largely proceeds by hypothesizing what “mechanisms” must exist in order to explain such powers, and then by looking for them. The search is probably endless, because there are always deeper and more fundamental levels (i.e., from atoms to electrons, electrons to quarks, and so on...), but the fact that there’s no end to the pursuit does not mean reality doesn’t exist; rather, it simply means one will never to be able to understand it completely.
3. **Freedom.** Reality can be divided into emergent stratum: just as chemistry presupposes but cannot be entirely reduced to physics, so biology presupposes but cannot be reduced to chemistry, or the human sciences to biology. Different sorts of mechanisms are operating on each. Each, furthermore, achieves a certain autonomy from those below; it would be impossible even to talk about human freedom were this not the case, since our actions would simply be determined by chemical or biological processes.
4. **Open Systems.** Another element of indeterminacy comes from the fact that realworld events occur in “open systems”; that is, there are always different sorts of mechanisms, derived from different emergent strata of reality, at play in any one of them. As a result, one can never predict precisely how any real-world event will turn out. This is why scientific experiments are necessary: experiment are ways of creating temporary “closed systems” in which the effects of all other mechanisms are, as far as possible, nullified, so that one can actually examine a single mechanism in action.
5. **Tendencies.** As a result, it is better not to refer to unbreakable scientific “laws” but rather of “tendencies,” which interact in unpredictable ways. Of course, the higher the emergent strata one is dealing with, the less predictable things become, the involvement of human beings of course being the most unpredictable factor of all.<sup>5</sup>

For our purposes, the details are not as important as the overall thrust: that the Heraclitean position, which looks at things in terms of their dynamic potentials, is not a matter of abandoning science but is, rather, the only hope of giving science a solid ontological basis. But it also means that in order to do so, those who wish to make claims to science will have to abandon some of their most ambitious — one is tempted to say, totalitarian, paranoid — dreams of absolute or total knowledge, and accept a certain degree of humility about what it is possible to know. Reality is what one can never know completely. If an object is real, any description we make of it will

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<sup>5</sup> This does not, incidentally, imply that such events cannot be explained ex post facto; Bhaskar also objects to the positivist assumption that explanation and prediction are ultimately, or should ultimately be, the same thing.

necessarily be partial and incomplete. That is, indeed, how we can tell it is real. The only things we can hope to know perfectly are ones that exist entirely in our imaginations.

What is true of natural science is all the more true of social science. While Bhaskar has acquired a reputation mainly as a philosopher of science, his ultimate interest is social; he is trying to come up with the philosophical ground for a theory of human emancipation, a way of squaring scientific knowledge with the idea of human freedom. Here, too, the ultimate message is one of humility: Critical Realists hold that it *is* possible to preserve the notion of a social reality and, therefore, of a science able to make true statements about it — but only if one abandons the sort of positivist numbercrunching that passes for science among most current sociologists or economists, and gives up on the idea that social science will ever be able to establish predictive laws.

A last word on the Heracleitian perspective before passing on to Marx. This concerns the notion of materialism. In the Marxist tradition as elsewhere, the assumption has usually been that a materialist analysis is one that privileges certain spheres over others. There are material infrastructures and ideological superstructures; the production of food, shelter, or machine tools is considered more fundamentally material than the production of sermons or soap operas or zoning laws. This is either because they answer more fundamental, or immediate, human needs; or else, because (as with law, religion, art, even the state) they are concerned with the production of abstractions. But it has always seemed to me that to treat law, or religion, as “about” abstractions is to define them very much as they define themselves. If one were to insist on seeing all such spheres primarily as domains of human action, it quickly becomes obvious that just as much as the production of food requires thinking, art and literature are really a set of material processes. Literature, from this kind of materialist perspective, would no longer be so much about “texts” (usually thought of as abstractions that can then seem to float apart from time or space) but about the writing and reading of them. This is obviously in every way material: actual, flesh-and-blood people have to write them, they have to have the leisure and resources, they need pens or typewriters or computers, there are practical constraints of every sort entailed in the circulation of literature, and so on.

This might seem a weak, compromised version of “materialism,” but if applied consistently, it would really be quite radical. Something of the power of the approach might be judged by how much it tends to annoy people. Most scholars consider acknowledgment of the material medium of their production as somehow impertinent. Even a discipline like anthropology tends to present itself as floating over material realities, except, perhaps, when describing the immediate experience of fieldwork; certainly it would be considered rude to point out, while discussing the merits of an anthropological monograph, that it was written by an author who was well aware that almost everyone who would eventually be reading it would be doing so not because they chose to but because some professor forced them to, or even, that financial constraints in the academic publishing industry ensured that it could not exceed 300 pages. But obviously all this is relevant to the kind of books we write. At any rate, this is the sort of materialism I’ll be adopting in this book: one that sees society as arising from creative action, but creative action as something that can never be separated from its concrete, material medium.

## Marx's theory of value

The first thing one should probably say about Marx's labor theory of value is that it's not the same as David Ricardo's. People often confuse them. Ricardo argued that the value of a commodity in a market system can be calculated in terms of the "manhours" that went into making it, and therefore it should be theoretically possible to calculate precisely how many people worked how long in the process of making it (and, presumably, making the raw materials, shipping them from place to place, and so on.) In fact, Marx felt Ricardo's approach was inadequate. What makes capitalism unique, he argued, is that it is the only system in which labor — a human being's capacity to transform the world, their powers of physical and mental creativity — can itself be bought and sold. After all, when an employer hires workers, he does not usually pay them by the task completed: he pays them by the hour, thus purchasing their ability to do whatever he tells them to do during that period of time.<sup>6</sup> Hence, in a wage-labor economy, in which most people have to sell their capacity to work in this way, one can make calculations that would be impossible in a non-capitalist society: that is, one look at the amount of labor invested in a given object as a specific *proportion* of the total amount of labor in the system as a whole. This is its value.<sup>7</sup>

The concept makes much better sense if one bears in mind that Marx's theory of value was not meant to be a theory of prices. Marx was not particularly interested in coming up with a model that would predict price fluctuations, understand pricing mechanisms, and so on. Almost all other economists have been, since they are ultimately trying to write something that would be of use to those operating within a market system. Marx was writing something that would be of use for those trying to overthrow such a system. Therefore, he by no means assumed that price paid for something was an accurate reflection of its worth. It might be better, then, to think of the word "value" as meaning something more like "importance." Imagine a pie chart, representing the U.S. economy. If one were to determine that the U.S. economy devotes, say, 19 percent of its GDP to health care, 16 percent to the auto industry, 7 percent to TV and Hollywood, and .2 percent to the fine arts, one can say this is a measure of how important these areas are to us as a society. Marx is proposing we simply substitute labor as a better measure: if Americans spend percent of their creative energies in a given year producing automobiles, this is the ultimate measure of how important it is to us to have cars. One can then extend the argument: if Americans have spent, say, .00000000007 percent or some similarly infinitesimal proportion of their creative energies in a given year on *this* car, then that represents its value. This is basically Marx's argument, except that he was speaking of a total market system, which would by now go beyond any particular national economy to include the world.

As a first approximation then, one might say that the value a given product — or, for that matter, institution — has is the proportion of a society's creative energy it sinks into producing and maintaining it. If an objective measure is possible, it would have to be something like this. But obviously this can never be a *precise* measure. "Creative energies," however they're defined,

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, having bought the worker's capacity to work, what the capitalist actually gets is their "concrete labor"—whatever it is he actually makes his workers do—and this is how he makes his profit, because in the end workers are able to produce much more than the mere cost of reproducing their capacity to work, but for the present point this is inessential.

<sup>7</sup> Note all of this is made possible by the existence of standards of what Marx calls the "socially necessary labor time" required to produce a certain thing: i.e., cultural understandings of what degree of exertion, organization, and so on that can determine what is considered a reasonable amount of time within which to complete a given job. All of this is spelled out very clearly on page 39 of *Capital* (1967 edition).

are not the sort of thing that can be quantified.<sup>8</sup> The only reason Marx felt one could make such calculations — however approximate — within a capitalist system was because of the existence of a market in labor. For labor — in effect, human capacities for action, since what you are selling to your boss is your ability to work — to be bought and sold, there had to be a system for calculating its price. This in turn meant an elaborate cultural apparatus involving such things as time cards, clock-punching, and weekly or biweekly paychecks, not to mention recognized standards about the pace and intensity of labor expected of any particular task (people are rarely, even in the most exploitative conditions, expected to work to the absolute limits of their physical and mental capacities), which enables Marx to refer to “socially necessary labor time”. There are cultural standards, then, by which labor can be reduced to units of time, which can then be counted, added, and compared to one another. It is important to stress the apparatus through which this is done is at the same time material and symbolic: there have to be real, physical clocks to punch, but also, symbolic media of representation, such as money and hours.

Of course, even where most people are wage laborers, it’s not as if all creativity is on the market. Even in our own market-ridden society there are all sorts of domains — ranging from housework to hobbies, political action, personal projects of any sort — where is no such homogenizing apparatus. But it is probably no coincidence that it’s precisely here where one hears about “values” in the plural sense: family values, religious virtues, the aesthetic values of art, and so on. Where there is no single system of value, one is left with a whole series of heterogeneous, disparate ones.

What, then, does one do where there is no market in labor at all, or none that is especially important? Does the same thing happen? That is, is it possible to apply anything like Marx’s value analysis to the vast majority of human societies — or to any one that existed prior to the eighteenth century? For anthropologists (or for that matter, those who would like to think about an alternative to capitalism) this is obviously one of the most important questions.

## **the “praxiological approach”**

It would have been easier if Marx had given us more of a clue in his own writings. The closest Marx himself ever came to writing general social theory was in some of his earliest theoretical writings: his *Theses on Feuerbach*, *1844 Manuscripts*, and especially *The German Ideology*, co-written with Engels between 1845 and 1846. This was the period when Marx was living in Paris and making a broad accounting with the radical philosophical circles in which he’d spent his intellectual youth in Germany. In doing so, these works map out a synthesis of two very different intellectual traditions: the German idealism of the Hegelian school, and the materialism of the French Enlightenment. The advantage of Hegel’s dialectical approach to history, Marx felt, was that it was inherently dynamic; rather than starting from some fixed notion of what a human being, or the physical world, is like, it was the story of how humanity effectively created itself through interacting with the world around it. It was, in effect, an attempt to see what the

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<sup>8</sup> This is true even if one tries to work with some notion like “labor” (a culture-bound notion anyway); certainly it’s true if one adopts a more abstract term like “creative energies,” which are intrinsically unquantifiable. One cannot even say that a society has a fixed sum of these, which it then must apportion—in the familiar economic sense of “economizing” scarce resources—since the amount of creative potential floating around is never fully realized; it would be hard even to imagine a society in which everyone was always producing to the limit of their mental and physical capacities; certainly none of us would volunteer to live there.

history would look like if one assumed from the start that Heraclitus had been right. Not only was it about action: ultimately, what Hegel's philosophy was about was the history of how humanity becomes fully self-conscious through its own actions; it was its final achievement of true self-understanding (which Hegel, modestly, believed to have been achieved in himself) which laid open the possibility of human freedom. The problem was that neither the conservative Hegel nor the radical Young Hegelians (who argued the process had not been completed, and more drastic measures, such as an attack on religion, were required) started from real, flesh-and-blood human beings. Instead, their active subjects were always abstractions like "Mind," "Reason," "Spirit," "Humanity," or "the Nation". Marx proposed a materialist alternative. But neither was Marx especially happy with the materialism of his day, which was mainly a product of French Enlightenment philosophers like Helvetius. The problem with "all previous materialism," he noted in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, is that it did not see human beings as driven by self-conscious projects at all. It saw them as virtually passive: driven by a fixed set of basic, physical needs, simply "adapting" to their environment in such a way as to best satisfy them. What he proposed, instead, was a synthesis: in which human beings are seen as active, intentional, imaginative creatures, but at the same time, physical ones that exist in the real world. That (as he put it elsewhere) "men" make their own histories, but not under conditions of their own choosing.

It's certainly true that Marx's work often seems to pull in several different directions at once. Take for example his famous description of the four "moments" in *The German Ideology* in which he and Engels set out the basic material realities that have to be taken into account before one can talk about humans to be able to "make history" (1846 [1970:48–51]). What separates humans from animals is that humans *produce* their means of livelihood. He also notes that human beings, in order to exist, not only (1) need to produce basic requirements, like food and shelter; but that (2) the act of producing in order to meet such needs will always create new needs; that (3) in order to continue to exist human beings need to produce other human beings, which entails procreation, child-rearing, the family... and that (4) since humans never produce any of these things in isolation, every society must also have relations of cooperation. It is only after this has been taken into account, Marx notes, that one can begin to talk about "consciousness," which, he emphasizes, "here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language" (1846:50–51), which in turn arises from people's needs to talk to each other rather than independently in the minds of individual human beings.

This certainly sounds like it's moving towards the sort of division between material infrastructure and ideological superstructure laid out, most explicitly, in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). But this also moves away from Marx's central inspiration: which is that consciousness is not the icing on the cake of production, but rather, fundamental to production itself. For Marx, what sets humans from animals was precisely that humans produce things in a *self-conscious* manner. What makes us human is not so much "reason" (at least in the modern, problem-solving sense) as imagination:

We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (Capital I: 178) Humans envision what they would like to have before they make it; as a result, we can also imagine alternatives. Human in-

telligence is thus inherently critical, which, in turn, is crucial to Marx's conception of history because this which for the possibility of revolution.

If one turns back to the original four moments with this in mind, however, one has the basis (with, perhaps, a tiny a bit of refinement and rearrangement) for a very powerful theory of action (Turner 1984:11; Fajans 1993:3). The result would look something like this. In any society, one might say, production entails:

1. An effort to fulfill perceived needs on the part of the producer (these, as Marx notes, must always include basic necessities like food and shelter, but are never limited to this.). It also includes the key insight that "objects" exist in two senses: not just as physical objects that actually exist in the world, but also, insofar as they are present in someone's (some subject's) consciousness, as objects of that subject's action in some sense or another — even if this is only in the minimal sense of active observation and study. (This is what he argued Feuerbach's materialism overlooked.)
2. Humans being social creatures, this also means producing a system of social relations (families, clans, guilds, secret societies, government ministries...) within which people coordinate their productive actions with one another. In part this also means that production also entails
3. producing the producer as a specific sort of person (seamstress, harem eunuch, movie star...). In cooperating with others, a person defines herself in a certain way — this can be referred to as the "reflexive" element in action. It also usually means being ascribed certain sorts of power or agency, or actually acquiring them.<sup>9</sup>
4. The process is always open-ended, producing new needs as a result of (1), (2) and (3) and thus bearing within it the potential for its own transformation.

So we start with a notion of intentional action, productive action aimed certain goal. This action produces social relations and in doing so transforms the producers themselves. Stated this way, the model seems straightforward enough. There's no element in it that's not pretty self-evident in itself. But to apply it consistently, one would have to rethink all sorts of accepted elements of social theory. Take for example the notion of "social structure". If one starts from this broad notion of production, "social structures" — like any other sort of structure — are really just patterns of action. But they are very complicated patterns: they not only coordinate all sorts of intentional human action, they are also the means through which actors are continually redefining and even remaking themselves at the same time as they are reproducing (and also inevitably, changing) the larger context through which all this takes place. Even for an outside observer, it is not easy to keep track of all of this. There are certain points — for example, the precise boundaries between individual and collective creativity — that we can probably never fully understand. From inside the system, it is well nigh impossible.

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<sup>9</sup> Actually, either by dint of identity or simply by dint of learning, or otherwise acquiring certain powers through the process of action itself. "By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature" (Capital page 177).

In fact, individual actors tend to be aware of only the first of the four moments (the specific thing they are making or doing, the specific end they have in mind);<sup>10</sup> it is much harder to keep track of the other three. One could well argue that all the great problems of social theory emerge from this single difficulty — whether it be Durkheim’s famous observation that even though “society” is just a collection of individuals, every one of those individuals sees it as an alien force constraining them, or Marx’s, about the way in which our own creations come to seem alien entities with power over us (cf. Taussig 1993).

Imagination, then, may be essential to the nature of productive action, but imagination also has its limits. Or, to put it another way, human action is selfconscious by nature, but it is never entirely so.

One might say there are two orders of critical theory. The first simply serves to demonstrate that our normal way of looking at the world — or of some phenomena within it — is flawed: incomplete or mistaken, and to explain how things really work. The second, more powerful not only explains how things actually work, but does so in such a way as to account for why people did not perceive it that way to begin with. Marxist approaches hold out the promise of doing precisely that.<sup>11</sup> But if one considers the overall thrust of Marx’s writings, from his earlier “philosophical” works to the theory of fetishism in *Capital*, one finds that what he produced was less a theory of false consciousness than a theory of *partial* consciousness:<sup>12</sup> one in which actors find it almost impossible to distinguish their own particular vantage on a situation from the overall structure of the situation itself. Before setting it out, though, I must make a brief detour on the problem of structure.

## dynamic structures

Anthropological ideas of structure, of course, largely came out of Saussurean linguistics. I have already described Saussure’s conception of language as a system of signs that exists in a state of equilibrium, each element contributing to the definition of the others. Applying this to anthropology created notorious dilemmas. Where, exactly, was this abstract system to be found? How was one to relate *langue* and *parole*, synchrony and diachrony, the abstract system, seen as existing outside of time, and the real events — people speaking, writing, and so on, none of them fully aware of the principles that guide their own practice, even though their practice is the only way we have of getting at those principles in the first place? By now it should be apparent that this is just another variation of the same Parmenidean problem: how does one relate the models to reality?

Anthropological wisdom to the contrary, however, Saussurean structuralism was never the only one around. There is a Heraclitean alternative: the structuralism developed by French psychologist Jean Piaget (see Piaget 1970; Turner 1973) — which starts from action, and views “structure” as the coordination of activity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, in many forms of everyday action, one is hardly aware even of that. But Turner, like Marx, is concentrating on the sorts of action in which one is most self-conscious, so as to examine their limits.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, Freudian ones as well; one reason, perhaps, they are so often paired as critical tools of unusual power.

<sup>12</sup> Though false insofar as those who have this partial consciousness do not recognize its partiality.

<sup>13</sup> Piaget in fact argues that structuralism in the social sciences made a profound mistake in taking Saussurean linguistics for its model, since language, practically alone among social forms, is based on an utterly arbitrary code

Anthropologists, however, have rarely found much use for Piaget's structuralism. When they mention it at all, it's usually to dismiss it as lacking in cultural depth and sensitivity.<sup>14</sup> Applied to Piaget's own writings, this is certainly true. Saussure was interested in the different ways different languages define reality; Piaget, in the intellectual development of children. It's not hard to see why anthropologists were drawn to one and not the other. But it also seems to me the accusation is somewhat self-fulfilling. After all, if Piagetian models lack cultural depth, it's in part because anthropologists have never seen fit to develop them.

Piaget's specific arguments about stages of child development are now considered outmoded; what's important here, though, are not the particulars, but the overall approach. Above all his premise: that "it is always and everywhere the case that elementary forms of intelligence originate from action."<sup>15</sup> Children interact with their environment; they develop basic schemas of action (grabbing, pulling...), and ways of coordinating them. Next, children start to develop more complex and generalized modes of thought through a process Piaget calls "reflexive abstraction," in which they begin to understand the logical principles immanent in their own interaction with the world, and these same schemes of coordination — which themselves, in turn, become more refined and more effective as a result. (This allows for further processes of reflexive abstraction, and so on.) There's no need here to launch into details: but there are a few points that will be crucial to bear in mind. The first is that Piaget insists that the basis of any system of knowledge is always a set of practices: mathematics, for example, is not derived from the "idea of number" but from the practice of counting. The abstract categories, however important, never come first. The second, that a structure can always be seen as a set of transformations, based on certain invariant principles (this can be as simple as a matter of moving pieces across a board, which stays the same): the defining feature of such transformations being that they are reversible (the pieces can be moved back again).

The crucial thing point is that what we call structure is not something that exists prior to action. Ultimately, "structure" is identical with the process of its own construction. Complex abstract systems are simply the way actors come to understand the logic of their own interactions with the world. It's also crucial to bear in mind that the process of "reflexive abstraction" is openended. Piaget does not believe that development is simply a matter of achieving a certain level and then stopping; there are always new and more complex levels one could generate. Here Piaget invokes the German mathematician Kurt Gödel, who managed to show not only that no logical system (such as, say, mathematics) could demonstrate its own internal consistency; in order to do so, one has to generate a more sophisticated, higher level that presumes it. Since that level will no be able to demonstrate its own principles either, one then has to go on to generate another level after that, and so on ad infinitum.

Gödel showed that the construction of a demonstrably consistent... theory requires not simply an "analysis" of its "presuppositions," but the construction of the next

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that can therefore be seen to stand entirely apart from practice. It is this that allows Saussure's famous distinction between *langue* and *parole*. In almost every other domain of human activity it would be impossible to even talk about a "code" except in terms of practice (Piaget 1970:77-78).

<sup>14</sup> So Sahllins 1976:121n49; Bloch (1989:115-16) is only a tad more generous.

<sup>15</sup> "...first in sensory-motor action and then practical and technical intelligence, while advanced forms of thought rediscover this active nature in the constitution of operations which between them form efficacious and objective structures. (1965 [1995]:282). As with so many such authors, Piaget develops his own unique terminology, which requires no little study to master fully.



“higher” theory! Previously, it was possible to view theories as layers of a pyramid, each resting on the one below, the theory at ground level being the most secure because constituted by the simplest means, and the whole firmly poised on a self-sufficient base. Now, however, “simplicity” becomes a sign of weakness and the “fastening” of any story in the edifice of human knowledge calls for the construction of the next higher story. To revert our earlier image, the pyramid of knowledge no longer rests on foundations but hangs on its vertex, and ideal point never reached, and, more curious, constantly rising! (Piaget 1970:34)

Just as with Bhaskar’s conception of scientific inquiry, perfectly content to discover ever more basic levels of reality without ever hitting bedrock, we are dealing with an open-ended system. One can always construct a more sophisticated point of view.

This might seem all very abstract, but it suggests new ways to look at any number of long-standing problems in anthropology. Take, for example, Pierre Bourdieu’s work on habitus (1979, etc.). Bourdieu has long drawn attention to the fact — always a matter of frustration to anthropologists — that a truly artful social actor is almost guaranteed not to be able to offer a clear explanation of the principles underlying her own artistry. According to the Gödelian/Piagetian perspective, it’s easy to see why this should be. The logical level on which one is operating is always at least one level higher than that which one can explain or understand — what the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978:79–91) referred to as the “proximal level” of development.<sup>16</sup> In fact, one could argue this must necessarily be the case, since (explanation itself being a form of action) in order to explain or understand one’s actions fully, one has to generate a more sophisticated (“stronger,” more encompassing) level of operations, whose principles, in turn, one would not be fully able to explain; and in order to explain that one, yet another; and so on without end.

Or consider, again, the phenomenon of rites of passage, a classic issue in anthropology since Arnold Van Gennep’s essay of 1909. Van Gennep argued that all such rituals, across the world, always contain at least three stages. They begin with rites of separation, in which, say, a boy undergoing initiation is separated from his old identity, as a child, and end with rites of reintegration, in which he is reintegrated into the social order in his new identity, as a man. The liminal stage is the one that falls in between, when the boy is as it were suspended between identities, not quite one thing, not quite another. As Victor Turner noted (1967), this stage has a tendency to take on some very strange, “anti-structural” qualities: those who pass through it are at once sacred and polluting, creative and destructive, divine and monstrous, and ultimately beyond anything that can be explained by the order of normal life. But as Terence Turner has observed (1977; see 1993:22–26): according to the Piagetian approach, this is, again, much as should be. Because here too there is a difference of logical levels. To maintain a system of classification — i.e., one that divides males into children, adolescents, adults, and so on — requires a certain level of logical operations; it is, like any set of categories, the “other side” of a set of activities. To operate on the level where you can transform one category into the other implies entering into a higher, encompassing level; or, to put it another way, with powers of a fundamentally different nature

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<sup>16</sup> This is actually derived a theory of education that assumes that children are always capable of learning tasks and generally operating on a level one step more advanced than they can explain, or in fact, have fully internalized. But one could easily adopt the idea to adult operations as well.

than those which operate in ordinary life, in which people “are” one thing or another.<sup>17</sup> Here too, the highest level of operations is one that cannot be represented or fully accounted for — at least in social terms. Representing such powers becomes a problem. Everyday categories do not apply. Hence, the tendency to resort to mystery, paradox, unknowability, or systematic inversions of normal ways of doing things — a “world turned upside down”.

It’s easy to see how this perspective might have all sorts of important implications. Most Durkheimian ritual analyses turn, in one way or another, on the concept of “the sacred,” usually seen a point of transformation or metamorphosis that stands apart from profane existence, and that, for a Durkheimian, is the point where the individual comes into contact with the power of society itself — society being for Durkheim an emergent reality of its own, standing beyond and constraining the individual. As I have already remarked, the notion ultimately has much in common with Marx’s conception of alienation (which after all, also set off from a study of religion), the most dramatic difference between the two being one of attitude: unlike Marx, Durkheim didn’t see anything particularly wrong with the fact that society seemed to impose itself on individuals as an alien force, any more than he had any problem with the existence of social hierarchies. Marx, who objected to both, saw them as two sides of the same coin. To understand fully the parallels between Marx and Piaget, however, one must look a little more closely at Piaget’s notion of egocentrism.

## **egocentrism and partial consciousness**

One of Piaget’s more remarkable achievements was to take a fact that almost anyone knows — that children tend to see themselves as the center of the universe — and make it the basis for a systematic theory of intellectual and moral development. Egocentrism, according to Piaget, is a matter of assuming one’s own, subjective perspective on the world is identical with the nature of the world itself. Development, in turn, becomes a matter of internalizing the fact that other ones are possible; or, to put it a bit more technically, creating structures which are really the coordination of different possible perspectives. Very young children, for example, do not understand that objects continue to exist when they are no longer looking at them. If a ball rolls out of sight, it is simply gone. To understand that it is still there is to understand first of all that there are other angles from which one might be looking at it, from which one would still be able to see it. In older children, egocentrism might mean anything from a child’s inability to imagine that others might not understand what she’s telling them, to the difficulty (which often endures surprisingly late in life) in realizing that if I have a brother named Robert, then Robert also has a brother, who is me.

Egocentrism, then, involves first and foremost an inability to see things from other points of view. Even if it’s a matter of understanding the continual existence of objects, one is aware of them through potential perspectives: when one looks at a car, or a duck, or a mountain, the fact that there are other sides to it (other perspectives from which one could be looking at it) becomes internalized into the very nature of what one is perceiving. It would simply not look the same otherwise. Hence, for Piaget, achieving maturity is a matter of “decentering” oneself: of being

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<sup>17</sup> As Turner notes (1979c:32): in our own society, it is common at weddings to acknowledge that individual marriages are created by real-life men and women but assert that the institution of marriage was created by God.

able to see one's own interests or perspective as simply one part of a much larger totality not intrinsically more important than any other.

In matters social, however, one clearly cannot do this all the time. It is one thing bearing in mind, when one looks at a house, that it has more than one side to it; quite another to be continually aware of how a family must seem to every member of it, or how each member of a group of people working on some common project would see what was going on. In fact, human beings are notoriously incapable of doing so on a consistent basis. Here again, there appears to be a very concrete limit to the human imagination.

Of course, the more complex the social situation, the more difficult such imaginative feats become. Which brings us back to the original point derived from Marx: that it is almost impossible for someone engaged in a project of action, in shaping the world in some way, to understand fully how their actions simultaneously contribute to (a) re-creating the social system in which they are doing so (even if this is something so simple as a family or office), and thus (b) reflexively reshaping and redefining their own selves. In fact, according to Turner, it's really the same point: because in order to understand this fully, one would have to be able to coordinate the subjective points of view of everyone involved — to see how they all fit together (or, in the case of conflict, don't), and so on... That aspect which falls outside our comprehension, even though it is a product of our own actions, tends to seem something which stands alien, apart from us, something that constrains and controls us rather than the other way around. In early works like *The German Ideology*, Marx emphasized the paradoxical nature of the division of labor in modern society: that while it created a genuine common interest on the level of society as it a whole, since people need one another in order to survive, it does so by confining everyone to such limited interests and perspectives within it that none were really able to perceive it. It was precisely the fact that people are confined to these partial perspectives that, Marx argued, gave rise to alienation: the "consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us," the fact that our powers appear to us in strange, external forms (Ollman 1971). Commodity fetishism is really just another version of the same thing. It is the result, above all, of the fact that the market creates a vast rupture between the factories in which commodities are produced, and the private homes in which most are finally consumed. If a commodity — a futon, a video cassette, a box of talcum powder — fulfills a human need, it is because human beings have intentionally designed it in order to do so; they have taken raw materials and, by adding their strength and intelligence, shaped it to fulfill those needs. The object, then, embodies human intentions. This is why consumers want to buy it. But because of the peculiar, anonymous nature of a market system, that whole history becomes invisible from the consumer's point of view. From her perspective, then, it looks as if the value of the object — embodied in its ability to satisfy her wants — is an aspect of the product itself. All those intentions seem to be absorbed into the physical form of the object itself, this being all that she can see. In other words, she too is confusing her own (partial, subjective) perspective with the (total, objective) nature of the situation itself, and as a result, seeing objects as having human powers and properties. This is precisely the sort of thing — the attribution of subjective qualities to objects — that Piaget argues is typical of childhood egocentrism as well (cf. Turner and Fajans 1988).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Piaget himself never much elaborated on the similarities between Marx's ideas and his own (but cf. "Egocentric and Sociocentric Thought," 1965 [1995:276-86]), but he made it clear that he was working in the same dialectical tradition. That egocentrism tends to involve an inversion of subjects and objects similar to that which Marx thought typical of fetishism is a theme that recurs throughout his work. He makes the interesting observation, for example, that

The same logic is reproduced on every level of commercial life, where everyone tends to speak of products and money as propelling themselves along, selling themselves, flooding markets or fleeing from adverse investment climates; because, from their own particular, partial, interested perspective, all this might as well be true.

Which allows me to make a final observation about some of the most common objections to a Piagetian approach.

Anthropologists tend to be extremely suspicious of any general theory that even holds out the potential of arguing that certain people are more sane, more intelligent, or more rational than others. They are very right to be suspicious. It does seem that the moment such models are given any intellectual legitimacy, they are immediately snatched up by racists and chauvinists of one kind or another and used to support the most obnoxious political positions. The Piagetian case was no exception: one team of researchers, for example, administered Piagetian tests to Arundaspeakers in Australia, as a result of which they concluded that Arunda adults had not achieved “operational levels” of intelligence (see Piaget 1970:117–19). The result was another attempt to revive the notion, largely abandoned since the days Levy-Bruhl, of “primitive mentality” on Piagetian grounds (e.g., Hallpike 1979). Of course, for the anthropologist, the idea of the Arunda being simple-minded is pretty startling: after all, these are the same people otherwise famous for maintaining one of the most complicated kinship systems known to anthropological science – including an eightsection prescriptive marriage system so intricate it took Western scholars decades to unravel it. To argue that such people are incapable of sophisticated thought seems obviously ridiculous: even if, like people everywhere, they are unlikely to fully grasp the principles underlying their own most sophisticated forms of action.

Even when things are not this blatantly ethnocentric, the normal model for a mature, fully evolved individual is usually pretty culturally specific. It’s much the same as the model “Westerner”. One is, at least implicitly, thinking of some fortyish white guy in a suit, perhaps a banker or a stockbroker. The advantage of a Marxist take on Piaget of course is that said banker or stockbroker is no longer the model of someone who gets it right but of someone who gets it wrong: as he flips through the business section reading how gold is doing this and pork bellies doing that, he is engaging in the very paradigm of adult egocentrism. An Arunda speaker, one suspects, would be much less likely to be quite so naive.

## ***Das Kapital* as symbolic analysis**

The key to a broader Marxian theory of value, though, lies most of all in Marx’s analysis of money.

Economists of Marx’s day, like economists now, tended to speak of money as a “measure” and a “medium” of value. It is a measure because one can use it to compare the value of different things: e.g., to say that one steak frites is worth the same as five loaves of bread. In this capacity, the money can be a complete abstraction, there’s no need for physical coins or bills to play a part at all. When money acts as a medium of exchange – that is, to actually buy bread or pay for an

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children have a systematic tendency to describe almost every feature of the physical world as if it had been instituted by some benevolent intelligence for their benefit; though of course, from a Marxist perspective, this is not entirely untrue, as it is precisely the means by which everything in our environment has been designed for our convenience in one way or another that becomes disguised by the market, leading to very similar attitudes on the part of many adults.

order of steak — this is of course no longer true. In either case, money is simply a tool. Marx's innovation was to draw attention to a third aspect of money, what might be called its reflexive moment: money as a value in itself. A tool facilitates action; it is a means to an end. From the perspective of people actually engaged in many financial transactions, Marx observes, money is the end. It becomes the very embodiment of value, the ultimate object of desire.

One might think of this as the flip-side of commodity fetishism. When workers agree to work for wages, they place themselves in a position in which for them, money is the end of the whole process. They perform their creative, productive actions in order to get paid. But for Marx this is of special significance, because the value that the money represents is, in the last analysis, that of labor itself.<sup>19</sup>

What's happening here actually goes well beyond the fetishization of commodities. And it is even more fundamental to the nature of capitalism. What money measures and mediates, according to Marx, is ultimately the importance of certain forms of human action. In money, workers see the meaning or importance of their own creative energies, their own capacity to act, and by acting to transform the world, reflected back at them. Money represents the ultimate social significance of their actions, the means by which it is integrated in a total (market) system. But it can do so because it is also the *object* of their actions; that's why they are working: in order to receive a paycheck at the end of the week. Hence, it is a representation that plays a necessary role in bringing into being the very thing it represents.

Readers coming to *Capital* expecting to read the work of a "material determinist" are often rather surprised to discover that the book starts out with what can only be called a series of detailed symbolic analyses: of commodities, money, and fetishism. But what sort of theory of symbolism, exactly, is Marx working with? The best way to think about it, perhaps, is to say that, like his theory of productive action, it combines elements of two traditions: one that we would now see as essentially German, the other French. One might call them theories of meaning, and theories of signification. The first, which had its roots in Hegel but also gave rise to hermeneutics, sees meaning as essentially identical with intentionality. The meaning of a statement is what the speaker meant to say. One reads a text in order to understand the author's intent; it is this intentionality that unifies the parts of the text into a coherent whole. Hermeneutics first developed in biblical scholarship, where this would have to be true if one assumes (as biblical scholars did) that what the Bible ultimately conveys is the will of God. "Signification" — which later found its exponent in Ferdinand de Saussure — is based on a notion of contrast, the signification of a term being the way it is different from the other terms in a set (slicing the pie of reality again). What Marx is talking about combines elements of both. Money has meaning for the actors, then, because it sums up their intentions (or, the importance of their intentional actions, which comes down to pretty much the same thing). However, it can do so only by integrating them into a contrastive totality, the market, since it is only by means of money that my individual actions and capacities become integrated as a proportion of the totality of everyone's (see Turner 1979c:20–21).

As a first approximation:

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<sup>19</sup> Actually in this case, technically, "abstract labor" or the worker's capacity to labor— which is formed in the domestic sphere in ways that are effectively invisible from the sphere of production, just as much as the work that formed the product becomes invisible from the other side (see diagram below).

Money is a concrete token of value. Value is the way in which an individual actor's actions take on meaning, for the actor herself, by being incorporated into a larger social whole.

Obviously, Marx was no more drawing on the hermeneutic tradition itself than he was the Saussurean; his approach goes back, instead, to Hegel, who also insists on examining actions in terms of how they are integrated into larger "concrete totalities." Any particular action, or process, becomes meaningful (in Hegelian language, takes on "concrete, specific form") only by being integrated into some larger system of action; just as the parts of a watch, say, are coordinated in their motion by the overall structure of the whole (thus making the parts mere "abstract content," and the watch, "concrete form"). Of course, there is no end to how long one can continue this sort of analysis: the watch itself might well be integrated into some larger process, say, a race, whereby it too becomes merely the abstract content to a larger concrete form, and so on. So here too, the system is ultimately open-ended.

## **marketless societies**

At this point, armed with this Marxian view of structure, we can once again return to our original question: how to apply a Marxian theory of value to societies without a market.

What Turner suggests (1984) is that most Marxist anthropologists have ended up creating a slightly different version of Substantivism. That is, they too have simply examined the "way in which a society materially provisions itself," except that where mPolanyi's followers mainly examined different modes of exchange, Marxists shifted the focus to production. Starting from value on the other hand would mean asking: is material production of this sort really what is most important to this social system? If we limit ourselves to stateless societies — the ones that have up until now proved the least amenable to Marxist styles of analysis — it quickly becomes obvious that the sort of activities we would define as economic, particularly subsistence activity, are by no means that on which they spend the greater part of their time, or "creative energies" however defined (Turner 1979c; 1984). Most dedicate far more to what, broadly speaking, could be called socialization, at least if one defines the latter to include not only primary child care but all those other actions that go into shaping human beings. This would make socialization a continual process that does not simply stop with adolescence, or whatever arbitrary cut off point most people implicitly impose: over the course of one's life, one is almost always engaged in a constant process of changing their social position, roles and statuses, and doing so having to learn how to behave in it. Life is thus a constant educational process.

Myself, I suspect one of the main reason for this neglect is simple sexism. Primary child care is almost everywhere seen as quintessential woman's work; analysts tend to see socialization on the whole as being too close to nurture and too distant from the kind of strenuous and dramatic muscular activity — burly men hammering away at glowing iron, sparks flying everywhere — the term "production" brings most readily to mind. The model one would start from would have to be essentially feminine. But then, this only goes to underline that the most fundamental inequality in such societies is indeed that based on gender — something that in theory we already knew.

How does one then go on to analyze this kind of production? Well, in fact, the materials already exist. There is a huge, voluminous anthropological literature on the study of kinship. True, it does not start off from the same premises but it certainly provides plenty material from

which to work. And even a more traditional Marxist anthropologist like Eric Wolf (1983) has used the term “kinship mode of production” to describe such societies. While it is also true that Marxist anthropologists have usually insisted that kinship systems are ultimately determined by the production of material things, there’s no reason one can’t simply jettison this bit and keep as much as seems useful of the rest. The real point is how one would go about analyzing a kinship system, or some similar anthropological object, in the same way that Marx analyzed the market system in capitalism.

So in what way do the actions of shaping people become embodied in value-forms: that is, forms that reflect the meaning of my actions to myself in some tangible form as some object or action that I desire? And in what way does this process allow for fetishism – to people failing to recognize the degree to which they themselves are producing value – and for exploitation – a means by which some people appropriate the surplus value generated by others?

## **the Baining: production and realization**

A good place to start with might be Jane Fajans’ work on the Baining of Papua New Guinea (1993b, 1997; Turner and Fajans 1987). The Baining, a population of taro farmers who live in scattered hamlets in the mountainous interior of East New Britain, are somewhat notorious in the anthropological literature for their almost complete lack of any elaborate social structure. Fajans describes their society as a kind of “egalitarian anarchism” because of their lack of political structures; in fact, they lack enduring social structures of almost any kind whatever. Not only are there no chiefs or “big men,” but no clans, lineages, age grades, no initiation societies, ritual or exchange associations, or anything, really, that can be called a “ritual system”.<sup>20</sup> There was a time when anthropologists used the term “simple society” as a euphemism for “primitive”; normally, the term was an obvious misnomer, but the Baining appear as close as one is likely to find to a genuinely simple society. There are domestic groups and individual kindreds, and that’s about it. Perhaps as a result, Baining society also appears to be singularly lacking in mystification.

According to Fajans, Baining society is based on something very much like a labor theory of value. What distinguishes humans from animals is the fact that humans work; work, or “sweat,” is considered the quintessential human activity. It is conceived largely in terms of the generation of heat: fire or “sweat” in gardening, which is in turn seen as the quintessential form of work. Hence the basic schema of action, or what Munn would call value template, is one of the application of human labor to transform nature into culture, “socialization” in the broadest sense. It’s a template of value because the ability to do so is the main thing that brings one prestige in Baining life. While gardening work is the paradigm, raising children (literally, “feeding” them) is seen in the same terms. It is a matter of transforming infants, who are seen as relatively wild creatures when they are born, into fully formed social beings, humans whose humanity, in turn, is defined largely as a capacity for productive action. So even here, there is a sort of minimal hierarchy of spheres. Producing food is not simply a value in itself. The most prestigious act in Baining society is *giving* food, or other consumables. To be a parent, for example, is not considered so much a matter of procreation but of providing children with food (Fajans 1993b, 1997:75–78, 88–100) an attitude

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<sup>20</sup> The one exception are certain elaborate and beautiful masquerades, about which, however, they offer no exegesis, dismissing the whole business simply as “play”. I might remark in passing that as anarchist societies go, they fall about as far as one can go on the collectivist (as opposed to individualist) side of the spectrum.

reinforced by the very widespread habit of fostering, which ensures that almost every household where food is cooked has at least one child to feed in it.

Food-giving takes a more communal form as well. While the Baining lack elaborate, ceremonial forms of exchange like moka, people are in the constant habit of exchanging food, betel nut, and the like on a less formal basis. If two men meet each other on the road, for example, they will almost invariably both offer each other betel nut to chew, each then taking some of the others". Families often exchange food, here too almost always in egalitarian same-for-same transactions; for example, two neighbors will exchange equal amounts of taro with which to prepare their dinner. Hence, while giving food to children is seen as 'reproductive,' in the sense of producing production, the apparently pointless habit of continually exchanging food is a matter of the continual production of society. In the absence of enduring institutional structures which can be seen as existing apart from individual human action, "society" itself has to be re-created by individuals on a day to day basis. Yet that society has to be re-created, as it is the basis for the existence of any sorts of values at all.

Even in this remarkably minimal, stripped-down version, then, one finds one key distinction that always seems to recur; what in dialectical terms is usually referred to as the distinction between "production" and "realization". Productive labor creates value mainly in potentia. This is because value is inherently contrastive; thus it can only be made into a reality ("realized") in a relatively public context, as part of some larger social whole. Among the Baining, producing food through the labor of gardening is seen as the origin of value, but that value is only "realized" when one gives some of that food to someone else. Hence the most truly prestigious act is being a good provider to children, thereby turning them into social beings; but this in turn requires the existence of society. After all, without society, the socialization of children would not be prestigious; just as without the continual socialization of children as new producers, society itself would not continue to exist.

## **the Kayapo: the domestic cycle and village structure**

The Baining were, as I said, a useful place to start because they lack most of the institutions we normally associated with "social structure". This is not so of the Kayapo of Brazil, the object of Turner's own researches for the last thirty years. The Kayapo are one of the Ge/Bororo societies of Central Brazil, who, when they first became known to outsiders in mid-century, were considered remarkable for combining what seemed like an extremely simple technology with an almost bewilderingly complicated social system. Their great circular villages often consisted of several hundred houses, all arranged around a central plaza, normally replete with collective men's houses and other communal buildings. While the communal structures took different forms in different Central Brazilian societies, there was invariably some form of dual organization: the village was divided into two sides of the village (most often exogamous), there were two men's houses, identical in all respects, except that one was always for some reason considered superior. The life-cycle was divided into elaborate systems of initiation grades carried out in the village center.

In any structural analysis — and this includes any analysis of social structure — the key question is how to identify one's units of analysis. Here Turner again hearkens back to the dialectical



tradition,<sup>21</sup> in which the basic principle is that the most elementary unit of any system is the smallest one that still contains within it all the basic relations which constitute the whole. Let me explain what I mean by this. Take the example of a kinship system, of the sort normally studied by anthropologists. The minimal unit would clearly have to be a domestic unit of some sort — a family or household.<sup>22</sup> Families of course can take a wide variety of forms in different societies, but whether one is talking about a suburban family in Cleveland, an Iroquois longhouse, or a Nayar matrilineal stirp, there are certain things one can always expect. One can always count on there being a recognized model of what a properly constituted household should look like. And that properly constituted household will always contain within itself all of those relationships (mother-daughter, husband-wife, brother-brother, mother's brother-daughter's husband, whatever these may be) that are reworked to create the larger system of which it forms a part. The larger systems are just based on extrapolating certain of these relations and principles on a grander scale. A system of patrilineal clans, for example, is based on taking just one of those critical relations (between fathers and sons) and making it a universal principle that can then become the basis for organizations that not only regulate relations between families, but above all (by control of bridewealth, establishment of rules of exogamy, and so forth) regulate the continual process through which new families form and old ones dissolve.

This is really the same sort of relation of mutual dependence between levels that one finds in the Piagetian notion of structure: the higher, encompassing level is entirely presupposed by the lower; yet at the same time, the lower one is not viable without it — since real households are in constant flux, endlessly growing, declining, and dividing up to create new families, and it is the broader system that regulates the process. And here again one can, in principle at least, continually generate higher levels.

In the case of the Kayapo (Turner 1979b, 1980, 1984, 1985a, 1987), the domestic unit is an uxori-local extended family, usually three generations in depth. In a properly constituted village, there could be hundreds of these, in houses arranged in a vast circle, all opening on a central village plaza that is considered the quintessential social space. The men's and women's societies that dominate the life of the plaza are divided into moieties, though in the Kayapo case these are not exogamous. Rather, a boy needs members of the opposite moiety to provide the unrelated "substitute parents" (*krabdjuo*) who will initiate him into public life by sponsoring his entry into the men's society. Boys are removed from their natal families to live in the Men's House dormitory at about the age of eight, initiated to the next grade at about fourteen, and then, on the birth of their first child, move into their wives' households. They do so as very much junior partners: a husband is at first expected to be highly subservient to his wife's parents (there are all sorts of ritualized gestures of deference and nearavoidance), during the period when he and his wife are raising their own children. At the same time they gradually move upward in the collective organizations of the village center according to the point they have reached in their own domestic cycle (age grades include "fathers of one child," "fathers of many children," etc.). There is a parallel structure for girls: girls too are initiated into a series of age grades by "substitute parents"; however, they are never detached from their natal families in nearly so radical a way, are never

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<sup>21</sup> As for example in the debate in Russian psychology about the minimal units of analysis, starting with Vygotsky, and running through later "Activity Theory" (see Turner and Fajans 1987).

<sup>22</sup> He has been known to refer to it as a "minimal modular unit of articulation," which admittedly lacks a certain elegance. According to Turner this concern with the minimal unit of structure also helps explain Marx's approach to Capital, in which the factory fulfills a similar role.

dormed in the village center, and, while as elders they can achieve a dominant position alongside their husbands within their own extended families, never take on a dominant role in the plaza's political life.

In what way, then, are these communal institutions constructed out of relations that exist within the domestic unit? Turner argues that relations within the family fall into two broad groups. The first, and most important, are the very hierarchical sorts of relation that exist between parents and children, and in-marrying husbands and their wives' parents in particular. All these relations are marked by similar forms of deference: the subordinate party is "ashamed" in the presence of the dominant one, is obliged to refrain from any expression or often even reference to appetites for food or sex, the dominant party can express such appetites freely as well as generally telling the other what do to. The second set are the more solidary, comfortable relations of alliance that exist between, for example, grandparents and grandchildren, boys with their mothers' brothers, or girls with their fathers' sisters.

Each of these "complementary axes of the structure of the family" is the basis of recruitment for one of the two sets of communal organizations that dominate the village center. The first are the sets of men's and women's societies I have already partly described: societies which are themselves extremely hierarchical, as well being in principle divided into two ranked moieties. One might call this the political system. The second is the framework of Kayapo ceremonial organization (1987:25–28), which temporarily merges all such divisions together in collective dances and initiations, which culminate in the giving of "beautiful names" to certain privileged children, usually accompanied by certain pieces of heirloom jewelry called *nekretch*, the only real physical tokens of wealth that exist in traditional Kayapo society. Hence the two "complementary axes of the structure of the family" become the "complementary axes of the structure of society" as well. What's more, it is indeed through these larger, encompassing institutions that the minimal units are reproduced: regulating the dispersal of the children of old families and the creation of new ones in marriage. The communal institutions, in Turner's terms, "embody" certain aspects of the minimal units at the same time as they also serve as the necessary means for those units' continual reproduction.

The crucial thing here is that these two "axes" also correspond to the two key values of Kayapo society. Turner refers to them as "dominance" and "beauty" The first is not actually named in Kayapo, but it's exemplified in the sort of authority exerted by a father-in-law over his deferential sons-in-law, as well as that same sort of authority writ large within the age-graded institutions of the village center. The Kayapo notion of "beauty," on the other hand, implies "perfection, completion, and finesse";<sup>23</sup> it is evinced most of all in the harmony of grand ceremonial that unites an entire Kayapo community, of which the giving of "beautiful names" is perhaps the exemplary form. In the communal sphere, these two are combined in certain forms of public performance. These are, in ascending order of prestige, a kind of mournful keening performed by elder women at public events, the formal oratory with which senior men harangue the community on matters of collective import, and most all, a form of oratorical chanting, called *ben*, whose use is limited

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<sup>23</sup> "Beauty" is a quality which the Kayapo attribute to things or actions which are complete, in the sense of fully realizing their essential nature, potential, or intended goal. "Completeness" in this sense thus has the connotations of "perfection," and also, considered as action, of "finesse". Ceremonial activity, properly and fully performed, is "beautiful," but the capacity to perform certain of its most essential and specialized roles, like the distribution of its most prestigious valuables, is not evenly distributed in the society." (Turner 1987:42).

to chiefs.<sup>24</sup> These represent the pinnacles of social value in Kayapo society because they are seen as combining completely uninhibited self-expression (i.e., a complete lack of deference, hence, untrammled dominance) with the consummate mastery and fullness of style that is the epitome of “beauty”.

Now, all this might seem a far cry from the analysis of factory production in Marx’s *Capital*. But Turner argues (1984) that one can, in fact, carry out a similar value analysis because there is, indeed, a cultural system by which productive labor is divided up according to standardized units of time. This is the domestic cycle. One such cycle suffices to turn children into marriageable adults (i.e., to produce labor power, the capacity to reproduce the family), a second, to turn the former subordinated couple into the dominant heads of their own extended family. The critical thing, however, is that in that second cycle, the actual labor of socialization is no longer carried out by the couple themselves. Instead, it is their daughters’ and daughters’ husbands’ work that effectively propels them forward into their new status.<sup>25</sup> Hence, their labor produces, in effect, a surplus. The surplus, however, is not appropriated on the domestic level — or, better to say, not primarily so — but on the level of the society as a whole. A male elder, for instance, can behave in a dominant fashion in his own household; but even if he has no daughters of his own and hence can never become the head of an extended family household, the collective labors of the younger generation nonetheless propel him through the age grades to the point where he can take on the role of an elder in public life, and accede to the most eminent tokens of value in Kayapo society.

Value, then, is realized mainly in the public, communal sphere, in the forms of concrete circulating media of value — in part, the ceremonial valuables and roles mentioned above but mainly in the forms of access to the most prestigious forms of verbal performance in public (ritual and especially political) life: keening, formal oratory, chiefly chanting. These latter forms are refractions of the most basic forms of value created in the domestic sphere, at the same time as they are realized largely within institutions that are modeled on the key relations through which those forms of value are created. They are also realized in a distinctly unequal fashion; and that inequality is a direct result of the effective appropriation by some of the products of others’ labor.

The overall picture here is not all that entirely different than the sort of thing proposed by Dumont and his disciples. We have the same hierarchical arrangement of spheres, the same paired set of key values, one primarily concerned with individual assertion, the other, more encompassingly social (so power and purity in Dumont’s Hinduism, honor and *baraka* among Jamous’ Berbers, and so forth.) The same can be said of Fred Myers’ analysis of the values of “relatedness” and “differentiation” among the Pintupi (1986), which is inspired mainly by Turner, but draws on certain Dumontian themes as well. The most obvious differences between Turner and Dumont though are the infinitely more sophisticated theoretical apparatus Turner provides, and the fact that, coming out of the Marxian rather than Durkheimian tradition, Turner does not assume that alienation and hierarchy are simply natural and inevitable features of human life.

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<sup>24</sup> The term translated “chief” in fact literally means “those allowed to chant”.

<sup>25</sup> Their new status can be seen as a proportion of the totality of social labor time, as measured by those units, though in this case in an infinitely less complicated sense. This is because the young adults are the products of two consecutive cycles of social production, and the elders, of three.

## tokens of value

Now, treating a form of chiefly chanting as a “medium of value” might seem to be stretching the analogy with Marx beyond all reason. What does a genre of public performance really have in common with a dollar bill? If one examines the matter more closely, one finds they have quite a number of things in common. Here is a list of the most important qualities shared by all such “concrete media of circulation” in Turner’s terms:

1. they are **measures of value**, as they serve to mark a contrast between greater or lesser degrees of dominance, beauty, honor, prestige, or whatever the particular valued quality may be. This measurement can take any of three possible forms:
  - a. **presence/absence**. Even if one is dealing with unique and incommensurable values, there is still the difference between having them (or otherwise being identified with them) and not. Kayapo “beautiful names” and their associated regalia, for example, are not ranked — each is a value only unto itself — but every name-giving ceremony is organized around the distinction between “those with wealth,” who have them, “those with nothing,” who do not — even if all other social distinctions are effectively dissolved (Turner 1987:28).<sup>26</sup>
  - b. **ranking**, as with Gregory’s hierarchy of types of gift. Kayapo performance genres are ranked as well: men’s oratory is ordinarily seen as superior to women’s keening; chiefly chanting, as superior to both.
  - c. **proportionality**, as with money. In any of these what is ultimately being measured is the importance of the creative energies (in the Kayapo case, above all those spent in the creation of fully socialized human beings) required to produce them
2. they are **media of value**, as they are the concrete, material means by which that value is realized. In other words, it is not enough for tokens of value to provide a way of contrasting levels of value; there have to be material objects, or material performances, which either bring those values into being in a way that they are — at least potentially — perceptible to a larger audience (this audience, from the actor’s point of view, more or less constitutes “society”), or are translatable into things that do.
3. finally, these tokens almost inevitably come to be seen as **ends in themselves**. Actual people tend to see these material tokens not as “tools” through which value can be measured or mediated, but as embodiments of value in themselves; even, in classic fetishistic fashion, as the origins of those very values (Turner 1979c:31–34).

The last point is crucial, because this is what finally points the way towards reconciling social structure and individual desire, which is precisely what a value theory was *supposed* to do.

Most Kayapo, do, undoubtedly, feel that it is right their own society should continue to exist; in this they are like most people. But in the absence of great catastrophes, the question of the

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<sup>26</sup> Incidentally, this does not mean that all systems of value must be socially invidious: it just means a distinction must be made. The comparison could also be made, say, in temporal terms, between a previous state in which one did not have said value, or a future one in which one might not.

continued existence of one's society is not something to which many give a lot of thought. Reproducing society is not, normally, seen as an end in itself.<sup>27</sup> Rather, most people pursue social values in more or less concrete form: if they are Kayapo, they work their way towards socially dominant positions in the central, communal institutions (if only so that they will be in a position to express themselves freely and not to have to live in constant constraint and embarrassment), they hope to be able to play an important part in the performance a truly beautiful collective ritual, to give a "beautiful name" to their brother's daughter, to be the sort of person others listen to as a voice of moral authority, to ensure one's children might someday be. One is tempted to say that "society" is created as a side effect of such pursuits of value. But even this would not be quite right, because that would reify society. Really, society is not a thing at all: it is the total process through which all this activity is coordinated,<sup>28</sup> and value, in turn, the way that actors see their own activity as meaningful as part of it. Doing so always, necessarily, involves some sort of public recognition and comparison. This is why economic models, which see those actions as aimed primarily at individual gratification, fall so obviously short: they fail to see that in any society — even within a market system — solitary pleasures are relatively few. The most important ends are ones that can only be realized in the eyes of some collective audience. In fact, one might go so far as to say that while from an analytical perspective "society" is a notoriously fluid, open-ended set of processes, from the perspective of the actors, it is much more easily defined: "society" simply consists of that potential audience, of everyone whose opinion of you matters in some way, as opposed to those (say, a Chinese merchant, to a nineteenth century German peasant farmer, or vice versa, or most anthropologists to the janitors who clean their buildings, or vice versa) whose opinion of you, you would never think about at all. But (and this is what I think Strathern, for example, does not take fully into account) value is not *created* in that public recognition. Rather, what is being recognized is something that was, in a sense, already there.

All this I think has a definite bearing on the question of exploitation. Let me return for a moment to Mount Hagen and the argument about Melpa pig exchange. The reader will recall Josephides argued that behind the dramatic, public gestures of giftgiving between men lie hidden a whole history of less dramatic, more repetitive daily actions, largely carried out by women, by which the pigs are produced. Moka ceremonies make it seem as if the pigs' value is produced by exchange. In doing so, it disguises its real origins in women's labor. Strathern objects that such a notion presumes a certain attitude towards property, and the idea that carrying out productive labor should give one certain rights to the object produced, that Hageners just don't have. Hence it would never occur to them they are being exploited. But in fact, when Melpa women feed their pigs, they are not simply fattening animals. They are not even simply, as Strathern would have it, reproducing the relationship they have with their husbands. They are also contributing to reproducing a certain kind of social order: one organized, for example, around a distinction between the domestic sphere, in which pigs are raised, and the public one, in which they are exchanged; one that carries with it definitions of what a man is, what a woman is, what a family is, what a male reputation is, and why it is that the gift of a pig should be the most effective means by which the latter can be created. This social order is not some abstract set of categories

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<sup>27</sup> As in most societies, it's not even something that human beings feel they are themselves really responsible for.

<sup>28</sup> A process that, we have seen, tends to have emergent properties not entirely comprehensible to the actors involved. This is actually quite similar to Roy Bhaskar's "transformational model of social action" (1979:32-41), though the latter is formulated much more broadly.

that exists prior to action. Actions are what it is, what it primarily consists of. It is a process of constant creation. In this sense, it is not just the pigs but the male public sphere itself which is constructed in large part by female labor, even if it is also one from which women are largely excluded.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective one can indeed talk about exploitation. Strathern for example points out that if one claims that Melpa women are being exploited because men control the pigs they have helped produce, you would have to conclude that men are being exploited too, because women control the crops that men have contributed to producing. This sort of logic is inevitable, really, if one thinks of value only in terms of particular objects and particular transactions, refusing to consider any sort of larger social whole in which the production of both pigs and crops take on value in relation to one another. Now, there are good reasons why Strathern wants to avoid talking about “society”. First of all, like most current theorists she wants to emphasize the degree to which what we are used to calling “societies” are not bounded wholes, but open-ended networks. Second, the concept is alien to the Melpa themselves. But by doing so ends up paradoxically depriving her Hageners of almost all social creativity. A constructivist approach — such as I have been trying to develop — might help overcome some of these dilemmas. Such an approach assumes there does have to be some kind of whole;<sup>30</sup> but it is almost always going to be a shifting, provisional one, because it is always in the process of construction by actors pursuing forms of value — if only because those forms of value can only be realized on some sort of larger stage. If for the actor, “society” is simply the audience one would like to impress; for the analyst, it is all those actions that have gone into making it possible for that actor to make that impression; that have thus, in effect, produced the value realized in this way.

## value and values, fetishism

At this point one can return to the question of value versus values; that is, economic price-mechanisms versus the kind of “conceptions of the desirable” described by Kluckhohn: honor, purity, beauty, and the like. I’ve already noted that the latter tend to take on importance either in societies without a commercial market (e.g., the Kayapo) or, as in ours, in those contexts (church, home, museum...) relatively insulated from it. According to Turner (1984:56–58), both really are refractions of the same thing; to understand the differences, one has first of all to consider what they are being refracted through. That is, one has to consider the nature of the media through which social value is realized. The key question is the degree to which value can, as it were, be

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<sup>29</sup> Strathern does acknowledge this in a sense when she says that the “aesthetic” rules according to which some things are recognized as valuable and others not tend to become invisible in a gift economy. In this way, she suggests, it is the opposite of a commodity economy, in which the external forms of the objects are all that are stressed and the human relationships involved disappear. This is to my mind a fascinating suggestion, quite brilliant actually, but it does rather dodge the question of how that aesthetic code is produced and reproduced to begin with. Probably this is inevitable considering the British social anthropology tradition in which she is working: it has always insisted on a clear divide between “culture,” seen as a set of expressive meanings, and “society,” seen as a web of interpersonal relations—which in the American cultural anthropology tradition tend to be seen as two aspects of the same thing. Strathern has little use for either “society” or “culture” as explicit concepts; but she ends up reproducing the division between in her distinction between the social relations, which people are consciously trying to reproduce, and the hidden “conventions of reification” that determine which forms (a pig, a shell, a woman’s body) can embody certain types of social relations and which cannot (compare, e.g., Leach 1954).

<sup>30</sup> Or more likely, perhaps, different ones that exist on different social levels.

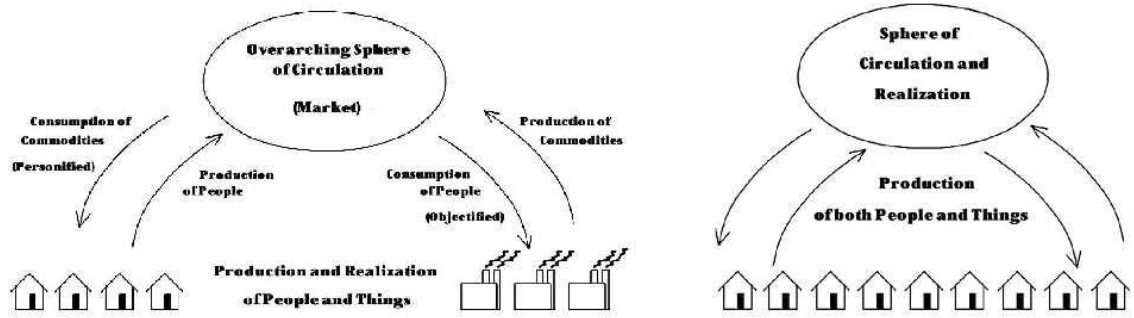
“stored”. Here money represents one logical extreme. Money is a durable physical object that can be stored, moved about, kept on reserve, taken from one context to another.<sup>31</sup> At the other extreme, one has performances like chiefly chanting, the deferential behavior of subordinates, and so on. A performance is obviously not something that can be stored and “consumed” later on. Hence, as he puts it, there can be no distinction here between the spheres of circulation, and realization. Both have to happen in the same place.

Here it might help to go back to Marx, who invented these particular terms. In a capitalist system, the typical product is made in a factory and passes from wholesaler to retailer, before finally being bought by a consumer and taken home to be consumed. In Marx’s terms it passes from the sphere of production, to that of circulation, to that of realization: the latter by providing the consumer some pleasure, fulfilling some purpose, or adding to its his or her prestige. In a society like the Kayapo, however, the spheres of circulation and realization coincide. Social value may be mainly produced in the domestic sphere, but it is realized by becoming absorbed into personal identities in the public, communal sphere, accessible to everyone.

Marx, of course, was writing mainly about political economy and was not especially concerned with what went on in the domestic sphere. But I think if one expands his ideas just a little, to include the issue of social production (the production of people, and of social relations outside the workplace), one might come up with the following formulation:

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<sup>31</sup> As the example should make clear, I am talking not merely about the physical properties of the media (though these do indeed make a great deal of difference), but also the ways in which they are used. “Abstraction” is not a physical quality.



market (left) and non-market (right)



In a capitalist system, then, there are two sets of minimal units — factories (or more realistically, workplaces), and households — with the market mediating relations between the two.<sup>32</sup> One primarily concerns itself with the creation of commodities; the other, with the creation (care and feeding, socialization, personal development...) of human beings. Neither could exist without the other. But the market that connects them also acts as a vast force of social amnesia: the anonymity of economic transactions ensures that with regard to specific products, each sphere remains effectively invisible to the other. The result is a double process of fetishization. From the perspective of those going about their business in the domestic sphere, using commodities, the history of how these commodities were produced is effectively invisible. Therefore, objects — as Marx so famously observed — appear to take on subjective qualities. Perhaps in part, too, because they are also turned there to the fashioning of people. Most commodities — as critics of Marx so often point out end up marking different sorts of identity, and this is the ultimate social “realization” of their value in the terms outlined above. All of this could simply be considered part of the overall process of “social production”: forming people both in their capacities, and, more publicly, in terms of their identities, of what sorts of person they are taken to be. But I would add: from the perspective of the workplace, everything is reversed. Here, it is the creative energies that went into producing labor power (actual human beings capable of doing whatever it is the boss wants them to do) that becomes invisible. Hence, instead of things taking on human qualities, real human beings end up taking on the qualities of things. It thus we have the “reification” that Gregory talks about, human beings or human powers reduced to commodities that can be bought and sold, and hence put to use in creating new commodities.

In a traditional society, of course, there is only one set of minimal units because the production of both people and things is centered on the household. Still, even in an extremely simple case like the Baining, there is still some kind of larger sphere in which values can be said to circulate and be realized. Still, in the Baining case, probably owing to the very minimal nature of the hierarchy, there is little that could justifiably be called fetishism or exploitation.

The Baining, however, are unusual. In most societies:

The values which the members of society struggle to attain and accumulate in their everyday lives are ultimately a symbolic expression of the concrete realization, in their own social system, of their capacity to produce the material and social where-withal of their own lives, to coordinate these productive activities in such a way that they form interdependent systems and thus acquire determinate values and meanings, and finally to reproduce the forms of this coordination. Although people created values and meanings through the forms of organized interdependence they assume to facilitate their own productive activity, they remain unaware that they do so. (Turner 1979c:34–35)

Just as higher-level processes, operating on that “proximal level” that tends to elude individual consciousness, tend to be seen as existing outside of human creativity, as something transcendent and immutable, so these tokens of value also tend to become fetishized. People tend to see them

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<sup>32</sup> Obviously this is a total simplification: I am, in effect, fusing all sorts of social organizations in which people realize themselves personally into the “domestic sphere,” ignoring the fact that formal education is separated from the home, and so on. But such simplifications can sometimes be useful, always provided one does not confuse them with reality.

as the origin of the values they embody and convey. Just as value seems to come from money, so fame and glory seems to emerge from the armshells and necklaces exchanged between kula partners, honor and nobility from possession of coats of arms and family heirlooms, kingship from the possession of a stool, ancestral wisdom from the forms of ancestral rhetoric, chiefly authority from a chief's authoritative speech.

Or, of course, "a name" from a Melpa pig — or, to be more precise, from the act of giving one. Because in fact, actions can be fetishized too. In an essay called "Exchanging Products, Producing Exchange" (1993), Jane Fajans argues that this is precisely what happens in dramatic acts of exchange like moka. Like Bloch and Josephides, she suggests that anthropologists — particularly those working in the Maussian tradition — often fall into the same trap. The way out, she suggests, is to make a consistent distinction between exchange and circulation. Exchange occurs when property of some sort passes from one person to another; circulation occurs when values or valued qualities are transferred. Within a commercial market, of course, these usually come down to pretty much the same thing. In other contexts they do not. In some, as we've seen, values circulate largely through modes of performance. Knowledge, rumors, and reputations circulate as well; hence, as Fajans notes, one might in some places be able to realize the value of an heirloom shell only by giving it away; in others, by displaying it in a public ritual; in yet others, by hiding it somewhere (but making sure others know that you have done this.) In either case, values circulate. Exchange, then, is just one of many possible forms circulation might take.

There are a number of reasons why such actions, or objects, are so often fetishized, and treated as the sources of value rather than simply the media through which value circulates. One is because it is often not entirely untrue. Exchange, or chiefly performance, *is* a form of creative action and does, indeed, play a certain role in producing these values — it's just not nearly so great a one as is normally attributed to them.<sup>33</sup> Another even more important reason, Fajans argues, is because both (actions and objects) often have a tendency to become models, representations in miniature, of the broader forms of creative action whose value they ultimately represent. If one examines the symbolic organization of a moka ceremony, or even, that of royal regalia or kula valuables or Hindu temples, one usually finds that they are in their own way microcosms of the total system of production of which they are a part, and that they encode a theory of creativity that is implicit on the everyday level as well, but is rarely quite brought into the open (cf. Turner 1977:59–60).

It's not hard to see how this might be. A great deal of anthropological analysis consists of unearthing just these sort of connections: for instance, finding the same symbolic patterns in the everyday habits of domestic life and the design of Gothic cathedrals (Bourdieu 1979). This is really just another way of reformulating the same observation, but here emphasizing the importance of creativity. I've already underlined that even the most workaday, least dramatic forms of social action (tending pigs and whatnot) are also forms of symbolic production: they play the main role in reproducing people's most basic definitions of what humans are, the difference between men and women, and so on. I have also emphasized that this overall process is always something that tends somewhat to escape the actors. Insofar as these fetishized objects really do embody total systems of meaning, they represent ones that are in fact produced largely offstage.

It might be useful here to return to Nancy Munn's notion of value templates. In Gawa, the most elementary cultural definitions of value are reproduced every time one gives a guest, or a child,

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<sup>33</sup> It does, as Strathern puts it, tend to "eclipse" all the other, less dramatic actions involved.

food. Implicit in even such a simple gesture lies a whole cosmology, a whole set of distinctions between the heaviness of gardening and garden products (owned by women), and the lightness and beauty of shells and other circulating valuables (which reproduce the fame of men), one that is, in practice, reproduced precisely through such gestures, which are the most basic means for converting the one into the other. This same structure of meaning is reproduced on ever-higher levels of what Munn calls “intersubjective space-time”; that is, new levels that are created by more dramatic and more broadly recognized forms of action. It is especially in the most spectacular of these: in the creation of elaborately decorated canoes for kula expeditions, the presentation of famous heirloom necklaces, or, for that matter, in the very design of the canoes and necklaces themselves — that something like a model of the whole process is presented to the actors in something like schematic form.

The same could be said for the Kayapo. The values of dominance and beauty are created, in their simplest forms, in the pettiest details of everyday life, particularly in the family: for instance, in the deferential attitudes children should take towards their parents, or the familiar ease they can adopt with certain other relatives. But also in more obviously creative forms: Kayapo women, for example, spend a great of their time painting the bodies of their children, as well as each other, as they do so, according to Turner’s essay “The Social Skin” (1980) endlessly re-encoding an implicit model of the human body and society, of the transformation of inner “libidinal” powers into visible social forms. As in the Gawan case, one can say this is itself a kind of theory of social creativity, but only so long as one always bears in mind that there is no way to separate such a “theory” from practice; we are not dealing with preexisting codes or principles to which people then feel they must conform, but rather a property of the structure of the actions themselves. In the Kayapo case too, of course, these elementary schemas are endlessly reproduced on the more encompassing levels of social action (men’s house politics, the ritual clowning of name-giving ceremonies, or for that matter in the structure of Kayapo myths...); this is the reason why the passing of the heirloom ornaments that accompany “beautiful names” can seem so significant, or chiefly chanting so powerfully expressive, to begin with.

I have earlier suggested that a materialist analysis need not be founded on some notion of determination, but rather, on never allowing oneself to forget that human action, or even human thought, can only take place through some kind of material medium and therefore can’t be understood without taking the qualities of that medium into account. Hence the importance in Turner’s analysis of the notion of material media of circulation. The media have qualities in and of themselves. For all the (often quite legitimate) criticisms of Jack Goody’s dichotomies between orality and literacy, for example, it is simply obvious that technologies of writing allow for possibilities that do not exist in speech (and equally, vice versa). If one memorializes the past by the performance of ritual dramas, that past will never look quite the same as one memorialized by the preservation of ancient buildings, which will not be the same as one memorialized by, say, the periodic reconstruction of ancient buildings, let alone one kept alive largely through the performances of spirit mediums. It is a fairly simple point. It should be obvious, perhaps. But it’s a point that those whose theory sets out with some Parmenidean notion of code (that is, most theoretically inclined anthropologists) often tend to forget.

## note one: Negative Value

Before discussing some of political implications of this kind of value theory, allow me two quasidigressions.

The last two chapters of Nancy Munn's *The Fame of Gawa* are dedicated to a detailed analysis of Gawan conceptions of "negative value," as exemplified in the way senior men talk about the threat posed to their communities by witchcraft. Gawans conceptions of witchcraft form an almost exact photo-negative version of the creation of positive value through exchange: where one involves growing and then giving away food so as to create links that will eventually make it possible to spread one's fame in all directions, witches are creatures driven by an insatiable appetite, sucking the life force from all those around them, but all in utter secrecy.

Combating the threat of such evil in turn requires a communal consensus: at public events, senior men are always inveighing against witchcraft and using their rhetorical powers to convince potential witches to desist from their evil plans. Gawa is, as Munn emphasizes, both a highly egalitarian and a highly individualistic society, and the two principles are necessarily somewhat in contradiction. The pursuit of fame itself tends to subvert equality. As a result, one of the principle ways in which a notion of communal value emerges, in Gawa, is through the negation of a negation. Witches, motivated by envy, attack those who have been too successful in rising above their fellows; in one sense, they represent the egalitarian ethos of the community, in another, absolute selfish individualism and hence, absolute evil. Communal value, what Gawans call the "fame of Gawa," is seen as directly tied to the ability of its senior men to suppress this destructive hyperindividualism and thus create a situation where everyone is free to enter into exchange relations, engage in *kula*, and thus, spread their own individual names in all directions.

Turner himself never takes up the notion of negative value; neither does Fajans; but this probably has something to do with the nature of the Kayapo and Baining societies. Certainly, the broader process Munn describes can be documented in many other places. Maurice Bloch (1982) has noted that in ritual, probably the most common way of representing a social value is by the very dramatic and tangible representation of its opposite: images of moral evil, of loss or decay, chaos and disorder and so on. Witchcraft is, at least in most times and places, another way of doing the same thing. It affirms certain moral values through a representation of utter immorality. And as authors such as Monica Wilson have shown (1970), these images vary a great deal between societies, in ways that have much to do with differences in their overall social structure.

The overall process Munn describes is quite similar to what I encountered in Madagascar (Graeber 1995): here too, the sense of communal solidarity was largely conceived in efforts to repress witchcraft, a witchcraft that was, however, seen as a perverse version of the very egalitarian ideals that were the basis of that same community. It could be that this will always be one of the most salient ways in which value manifests itself where one has a similar combination of egalitarianism and individualism.<sup>34</sup> Such questions could well bear future research.

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<sup>34</sup> The Baining, after all, seem to be remarkably nonindividualistic egalitarians; for the Kayapo, egalitarianism does not seem to be all that important a factor.

## note two: direct versus indirect appropriation

The reader might well be wondering whether there's any way to square all of this with more conventional Marxist anthropology, what I've called the "mode of production" approach (e.g., Meillassoux 1981; Godelier. 1977). There might not seem to be a lot of common ground. For the MoP approach, as developed by Althusser, everything turns on the appropriation of some kind of a material surplus. Any mode of production is based on the relation of two classes: one of primary producers, the other, which supports itself at least in part by appropriating some portion the product of the first. What makes MoPs different is *how* this extraction takes place: this is what makes the relation between master and slave different from that between feudal lord and manorial serf, or that between capitalist employer and proletarian laborer.

Since such extraction must always, in the end, be backed up by the threat of force, this is essentially a theory of the state. Hence, as I've noted, anthropologists have had a very difficult time trying to apply this model to societies without one. Here Turner's approach might seem the perfect compliment. It was created in order to understand the workings of exploitation within stateless societies; and, indeed, it's not entirely clear what a Turnerian theory of the state would be like.

Could the two then be integrated in some way? Quite possibly. After all, one can hardly deny that where one finds a state, one does also tend to find a material surplus, and a class of people who somehow contrive to get their hands on most of it, and that this is indeed ultimately backed up by the threat of force. Hence, one might suggest that there are two different ways in which a surplus can be appropriated: either directly, in material form, or indirectly, in the form of value. In this sense, the forms of exploitation that exist within societies like the Kayapo, organized around kinship, resemble capitalist ones much more than they do the kinds of direct, tangible, immediate forms of exploitation — driving chained slaves into the fields, collecting quitrent, having one's flunkies show up around harvest time to appropriate half a peasant's wheat crop — typical of precapitalist states.

This, in turn, has ramifications for any theory of ideology. In this chapter of course I've been emphasizing the notion of partial perspectives, of mistaking one's particular point of view within a complex social reality for the nature of reality itself, which typically gives rise to all sorts of fetishistic distortions. Conventional Marxist analysis has tended to favor a much simpler notion of material base and ideological superstructure, the latter consisting of institutions such as church and law, which mainly serve to validate the interests of the ruling class: priests to explain to slaves why they should endure their lot, jurists to tell peasants that their relations with their landlords are based on justice. The problem with these methods of ideological control, however, as authors like James Scott have extensively documented (1990) is that they don't usually work very well. The justifications are rarely taken very seriously by the people whose goods are being expropriated, or, even, for that matter, the ruling classes themselves. Such regimes really are based primarily on force. This does not appear to be nearly so much the case either for the forms of hierarchy that exist in stateless societies,<sup>35</sup> domestic inequalities that exist within state societies, or even for capitalism itself, which (at least when it does not entirely impoverish or brutalize its proletariat) tends to be far more effective at the ideological game than almost any previously known form of exploitation. In fact, insofar as state structures do succeed in legitimizing them-

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<sup>35</sup> Indeed, almost by definition, since states are normally defined by the systematic use of force.

selves, it's almost always by successfully appealing to the values which exist in the domestic sphere, which are, of course, rooted in those much more fundamental forms of inequality, and much more effective forms of ideological distortion — most obviously, gender.

## **conclusion: a thousand totalities**

The reader might find all this talk of totalities a bit odd. The chapter began by endorsing a general movement away from claims to absolute or total truth, an acceptance that human knowledge is always going to be incomplete. It winds up by saying that one cannot have any meaningful approach to value without some notion of totality. The constant reference to totality in Turner's works will certainly seem a bit unsettling to the modern reader; it flies in the face of most contemporary theory, which has been directed at deconstructing anything resembling a closed system. I must admit I'm not entirely comfortable with it myself. But it is an issue that opens up on all the most important questions about freedom, politics, and meaning, and therefore it seems to me that the best way to end this rather long and complicated chapter would be to take it up.

First of all, there is a difference between totalities the analyst is claiming exist in some kind of empirical sense — i.e., a pristine text, a clearly bounded “society,” a mythological “system” — and totalities that exist in the actors' imaginations. Social science has long since realized that the former do not really exist, at least not in any pristine form; any closed system is just a construct, and not necessarily a very useful one; nothing in real life is really so cut and dried. Social processes are complex and overlapping in an endless variety of ways. On the other hand, if there's one thing that almost all the classic traditions of the study of meaning agree on — dialectical, hermeneutic, and structuralist alike — it is that for human beings, meaning is a matter of comparison. Parts take on meaning in relation to each other, and that process always involves reference to some sort of whole: whether it be a matter of words in a language, episodes in a story, or “goods and services” on the market. So too for value. The realization of value is always, necessarily, a process of comparison; for this reason it always, necessarily, implies an at least imagined audience. As I've already suggested, for the actor, that's all that “society” usually is.

Turner's point, however, is that while such a totality does need to exist in actors' imaginations, this doesn't mean that anything that could be described as a totality necessarily exists on the ground. It might. But it might not. This is a matter for empirical observation (as is the question of the level on which the totality exists: a society, a community, a single ritual event...) Here the inspiration seems to be in part in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who made a distinction between the ideal closure of “chronotopes” — little universes of time and space constructed in the imagination — and an infinitely complex reality in which meaning is in fact established through openended dialogue.

The ideal picture a society has of itself, then, almost never corresponds with how that society actually works. The Kayapo villages discussed above actually provide a dramatic case in point. Turner generally describes Kayapo villages as if they were organized into two opposed moieties; this is because that's how Kayapo always describe them. In reality, however, no Kayapo village has contained two moieties since 1936. In every case, internal rivalries and dissension have long since caused such villages to split in two. Turner concludes this is due to an imbalance of values: while ideally, dominance and beauty should form a complementary set, in reality, dominance

is by far the more powerful of the two. The moiety structure is in fact supposed to represent the highest synthesis of these two complementary principles: while one moiety is considered “higher” than the other, they are in every other sense completely identical, and the ultimate harmony of a Kayapo village is seen to lie in its inhabitants’ ability to cooperate in “beautiful naming” ceremonies and other collective rites that transcend people’s particular allegiances to create a transcendent sense of unity. In reality, however, the lure of beauty is never quite enough. Personal rivalries between important political actors always generate rifts, tensions rise, and finally, one half ends up breaking off to found its own, rival community, normally with no love lost between the two (Turner 1987).

Still, the important thing is not just to ask why Kayapo villages lack moieties, but also why, sixty years later, when Kayapo describe how a community is organized, they invariably describe one that does not lack them. Dual-moiety communities do continue to exist, but only in imagination. As a result, they represent a permanent possibility: a vision of what Kayapo society really should be like, and possibly still might be like. Political projects of reuniting separated moieties are occasionally discussed, though until now they always seem to end up being overruled by the dangers of having too many people with historical grudges living in the same community (Turner 1979b:210). Still, there’s no reason to assume they will always be.

For Marx, of course, it is our imaginations that make us human. Hence production and revolution are for him the two quintessentially human acts. Imagination implies the possibility of doing things differently; hence when one looks at the existing world imaginatively, one is necessarily looking at it critically; when one tries to bring an imagined society into being, one is engaging in revolution. Of course, most historical change is not nearly so self-conscious: it is the fact that people are not, for the most part, self-consciously trying to reproduce their own societies but simply pursuing value that makes it so easy for them to end up transforming those same societies as a result. In times of crisis, though, this can change: a social order can be seen primarily as an arena in which certain types of value can be produced and realized; they can be defended on that basis (imagine any of the societies discussed in this chapter being forcibly incorporated into a modern state), or, alternately, they can be challenged by those who think these are not the sorts of value they would most like to pursue. In any real social situation, there are likely to be any number of such imaginary totalities at play, organized around different conceptions of value. They may be fragmentary, ephemeral, or they can just exist as dreamy projects or half-realized ones defiantly proclaimed by cultists or revolutionaries. How they knit together — or don’t — simply cannot be predicted in advance. The one thing one can be sure is that they will never knit together perfectly.

We are back, then, to a “politics of value”; but one very different from Appadurai’s neoliberal version. The ultimate stakes of politics, according to Turner, is not even the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value *is* (Turner 1978; 1979c; see Myers and Brenneis 1991:4–5). Similarly, the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living. In the end, then, politics is about the meaning of life. Any such project of constructing meanings necessarily involves imagining totalities (since this is the stuff of meaning), even if no such project can ever be completely translated into reality — reality being, by definition, that which is always more complicated than any construction we can put on it.

Theories do have political implications. This is as much true of those theorists who shun any notion of totalities as those who embrace them: if there is any difference, it’s that the latter feel

obliged to make their political positions explicit. So we have, on the one hand, Louis Dumont's "holism," with its self-consciously conservative politics,<sup>36</sup> and on the other, Terry Turner's equally self-conscious libertarian Marxism. Not that the work of those who reject totalities on principle lack such political implications, it seems to me; it's just that they rarely work them out to their logical conclusions. These political implications become most painfully obvious when one comes to those who argue not simply that totalizing theories are dangerous (which is of course true enough) but that we have already entered into some giddy new "postmodern" age in which no universal standards of evaluation any longer exist: that everything is endless transformation, fragmentation of previous solidarities, and incommensurable acts of creative self-fashioning. This was a very popular position among radical academics in the 1980s and '90s; in certain circles it still remains so. But as I remarked in the introduction, by now, at least, it is apparent to most people that when the 1980s and '90s are remembered, it will not be as the dawning of a new Postmodern Age (indeed, many are already beginning to find the term a bit embarrassing, not to mention their previous apocalyptic declarations about its significance), but rather as the era of the triumph of the World Market — one in which the most gigantic, totalizing, and allencompassingly universal system of evaluation known to human history came to be imposed on almost everything. If nothing else it makes it easier to understand why economics was one of the few things about which most postmodern theorists had almost nothing to say. Which is in turn what makes authors like Appadurai, who do address economics, so important: the neoliberal assumptions are all there, plain to see. Behind the imagery of most postmodernism is really nothing but the ideology of the market: not even the reality of the market, since actually existing markets are always regulated in the interests of the powerful, but the way market ideologists would like us to imagine the marketplace should work.

All this is not merely meant to poke fun at some self-proclaimed academic radicals but to make a broader point. Any notion of freedom, whether it's the more individualistic vision of creative consumption, or the notion of free cultural creativity and decentering (Turner 1996) I have been trying to develop here, demands *both* resistance against the imposition of any totalizing view of what society or value must be like, but also recognition that *some* kind of regulating mechanism will have to exist, and therefore, calls for serious thought about what sort will best ensure people are, in fact, free to conceive of value in whatever form they wish. If one does not, at least in the present day and age, one is simply going to end up reproducing the logic of the market without acknowledging it. And if we are going to try to think seriously about alternatives to the version of "freedom" currently being presented to us — one in which nation-states serve primarily as protectors of corporate property, unelected international institutions regulate an otherwise unbridled "free market" mainly to protect the interests of financiers, and personal freedom becomes limited to personal consumption choices — we had best stop thinking that these matters are going to take care of themselves and start thinking of what a more viable and hopefully, less coercive regulating mechanism might actually be like.

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<sup>36</sup> Dumont obviously likes hierarchy and feels that modern, individualistic/egalitarian societies are in some sense abnormal or even perverse—though he also seems to feel that it is impossible to get rid of them (see Robbins 1994, especially his amusing conclusion, "what does Dumont want?").



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