OCCIDENTALISM

Images of the West

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Maussian Occidentalism: Gift and Commodity Systems

James G. Carrier

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said criticizes what he calls the 'textual attitude' (1978: 92) in Oriental studies, the reliance on texts to define what is authentic and worthy of attention. One corollary of this attitude is that the past and the present collapse into each other in a timeless essence. Said puts it thus:

> [A]n observation about a tenth-century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia. Similarly, a verse from the Koran would be considered the best evidence of an ineradicable Muslim sensuality. (1978: 96)

But what is critical sauce for the Muslim Oriental goose is likewise critical sauce for the capitalist Occidental gander. The same timeless, textual essentialism exists in some influential anthropological treatments of the West. In these, the capitalist West *is* autonomous possessive individuals. To rephrase Said, I put it thus:

> [A]n observation about seventeenth-century English political philosophers multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the commodity mentality in England or the United States. Similarly, a passage from Locke would be considered the best evidence of an ineradicable Western individuality.

Like all polemics, and like all essentialisms, this simplifies a complex reality. But I have found it useful for thinking about the ways that academics render social identities and relations in the West. I want to approach this issue by looking at common interpretations and invocations of the West as the land of impersonal transactions and the market. This construction of the West is rooted deeply in anthropology and sociology, and it has affected researchers working in many areas. However, its appearance is striking in Melanesian ethnography, where it springs in part from the distinction between gifts and commodities laid out in the work of Marcel Mauss, particularly his essay *The Gift*, but also his essay on the concept of the self (Mauss 1985).

While Mauss has long been important among Melanesianists, his influence grew markedly in the early 1980s, following the publication of C. A. Gregory's (1980, 1982) work on gift and commodity systems. However, it is important to remember that the Maussian model I describe here is only an exemplar of a more diffuse framework that draws on many sources, such as Marx (in the case of Gregory) and Steve Barnett and Martin Silverman (1979) in the case of Marilyn Strathern (1985*b*; 1988), whom I discuss at length later in this chapter. Other sources include Locke (see Strathern 1985*a*) and the theory of possessive individualism that is laid out by C. B. Macpherson (1962). Thus, although I refer to a Maussian model, it must be remembered that I use that model only as a convenient illustration of a more pervasive dualism that sees Melanesian societies as gift systems and Western societies as commodity systems. Further, I do not claim that the model I sketch represents a thorough, nuanced rendering of what Mauss wrote. That is why I call that model 'Maussian', rather than 'Mauss's'.

After sketching the core of the Maussian model I address three issues. The first is the way the model distorts and simplifies a complex Western reality. This Maussian occidentalism supports and is associated with the Maussian orientalism of the society of the gift. The second issue I address is the way that this orientalism affects anthropological renderings of village societies in Melanesia. As I will show, researchers use evidence shaped by the model to reflect on the difference between the West and the Rest, and so regenerate the very essentialisms that it contains. In Melanesia, the Maussian model comes full circle. Finally, I consider some of the reasons Maussian occidentalism is so attractive.

Gifts and commodities

The popular core of the Maussian model is the distinction between gifts and commodities, terms that can be applied to the social identity of objects, to forms of transactions, and to sorts of societies (see generally Carrier 1991). At one extreme are gift societies, dominated by kinship relations and groups that define individuals and their relations with and obligations to each other. In transactions in these societies, objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that defines and binds them. Consequently, objects and people are seen as defined by their locations in a web of social relationships. At the other extreme are the commodity systems of the modern West. Here, people are not defined by kin relationships and groups, but are independent

individuals who transact freely with each other. In transactions in these societies, objects are alienated commodities, separate from the giver and the recipient. Consequently, objects and people are defined by their autonomous identities.

In gift societies, the gift embodies all aspects of social life. In such societies 'all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time—religious, judicial, and moral, . . . likewise economic' (Mauss 1990: 3). This view is common among anthropologists studying societies in Melanesia. Thus, in their cross-cultural analysis of Highlands New Guinea societies, Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman (1978: 320) conclude that 'the structure of ceremonial exchange also organizes behaviour in other cultural domains, which is why it can be singled out as the dominant sphere'. This view is so widespread that one influential writer could say that 'exchange itself is the central dynamic' of Melanesian social organization (Whitehead 1986: 80) without feeling the need to argue the point.

The essence of modern Western commodity societies is alienation. People in Western societies are alienated from the people and the objects around them. Equally, transactions there are fragmented, both because transactors are alienated from each other and because the realm of transaction has become isolated from the rest of social life. As Mauss (1990: 46, 47) puts it, these are the societies 'of purely individual contract, of the market where money circulates, of sale proper, and above all of the notion of price reckoned in coinage', of the 'strict distinction' between 'things and persons'.

I said that this model of the distinction between societies of the gift and of the commodity is common in anthropology, and especially among Melanesianists, and that the model draws selectively on many sources without necessarily being true to any of them. Certainly it simplifies Mauss's own rendering of the West somewhat, for he states at a number of points that gift relations do exist in Western industrial societies. Thus, in the introduction to *The Gift* he says that gift relations 'still function in our own societies, in unchanging fashion'. However, he does go on to say that these relations are 'hidden, below the surface' (1990: 4). This uncertainty recurs, as when he says that 'societies immediately preceding our own' have 'traces' of gift systems (1990: 47). Likewise, he refers to the 'victory of rationalism and mercantilism' in the West (1990: 76; but also see the contrary points he makes on the same page). Mauss describes the existence of gifts in the West at greatest length in the book's conclusion. However, many of his illustrations are reports of decaying practices among French peasantry or of laws that are not enforced (1990: 66–7, 154 n. 5).

Where he asserts the existence of gift relations in more central parts of modern society, the uncertainty is clearest and most poignant. Often he seems to be straining to see signs of a resurgence of gift relations in reforms that are always 'laboriously in gestation' but have not yet borne fruit (e.g. 1990: 67–8, 78).

In the model that I have sketched, gift and commodity systems are inseparable. They define each other dialectically, in that they are generated as opposites of each other. Nicholas Thomas raises this point when he questions 'whether . . . the gift is anything other than the inversion of the commodity' (Thomas 1991: 15; see also Biersack 1991, and her invocation of Kirby 1989). Gift societies show the embeddedness of economic activities in a web of social relations that is significant precisely because, in the modern West, the economy supposedly is no longer so embedded.

I want now to address an issue anthropologists rarely consider, the occidentalism of the Maussian model. I shall do so by suggesting ways in which its rendering of the West as the land of commodity systems populated by what Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1986) call the *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism* is likely to hide as much as it reveals.

Commodity systems

Certainly the modern West contains an elaborate system of alienated market transactions. However, the Maussian model occidentalizes the West by using the sheer existence of this system, however elaborate, as the basis for an essentialist typification of the whole of Western society that requires that 'we ignore exchanges and productive activities concerned with non-commodities' (Davis 1973: 166; see Friedland and Robertson 1990). I will question this typification by showing the sorts of relations and areas of social life that it calls upon us to ignore.

The most obvious of these areas is the family. While relations within the family are influenced by capitalist employment relations outside it (e.g. Lamphere 1986), influence has not meant displacement. Instead, people conceive of household relations in ways that resemble Mauss's gift relations. As David Schneider (1980: 46) summarizes the beliefs of the Americans he studied, family relations are based on the enduring bonds of love that are themselves based on shared biogenetic substance, and the transactions within the family are expressions of those relations, rather than of the alienation of the market.

Likewise, many people in their marriages see themselves not as individuals, but as 'moral persons' (Parry 1986: 456; see Mauss 1985), defined

by their positions in a structure of social relations that encompasses them. For such people, building a marriage entails creating such communal identities. For example, in their study of newly married couples, Penny Mansfield and Jean Collard (1988: 113, 151) found this underlay much of what people said about their joint efforts to set up a home, and it appeared as well when working husbands came to see their work in terms of their obligation to contribute to their marriage. Even among settled married couples, people often experience the things they do as part of the creation and maintenance of a group and a communal existence. As one woman described her housework to Peter Willmott and Michael Young (1960: 132):

> I often feel at the end of the day that all my efforts have been of no avail. I remember all the polishing and cleaning, washing and ironing, that will have to be done all over again, and like many other housewives I wish that my life could be a bit more exciting sometimes. But when the evening fire glows, when the house becomes a home, then it seems to me that this is perhaps the path to true happiness.

Although mundane family transactions may not have the visibility of large-scale, public transactions in the market, they are important for the survival of family members as individuals and for the survival of the family as a group. The mothers that Diana Barker (1972) describes who cooked and kept house for their children, like those that Peter Corrigan (1989) describes who bought clothing for their children, are giving labour and objects that are necessary for their recipients' survival and for the regeneration of relations within the household, just as they are expressions of the moral and religious values of the giver, and the values and indeed the judicial rules of the society at large. The importance of these transactions as embodiments of social relations is apparent when the giver refuses to give or the recipient to accept, the sort of circumstance described by Rhian Ellis (1983) in her analysis of meals in the violent breakdown of marriage.

Appropriately, many of the objects transacted in such relationships are not alienated commodities. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, who studied the ways Americans think of valued objects, say (1981: 86) that people's talk about objects is marked by the theme of 'kinship; of the ties that bind people to each other—that provide continuity in one's life and across generations', a theme that was marked by the intensity of the way people talked: 'It is the cumulative effect of hearing people talk about their parents, spouses, and children, the depth of their

emotion in doing so, that is impressive.' As one woman explained what it meant to have a quilt that her relatives had made and given: 'It means my whole family, that we all enjoy receiving these things . . . And if somebody makes it and puts so much time in it, to me it's love that's been put into the object' (1981: 143, ellipses in original). Because such objects embody the relationship of giver and recipient, they cannot be discarded freely in the way that commodities can. This is illustrated by the way a householder explained to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 66, emphasis added) the reason why the painting was there above the sofa. 'My parents gave it . . . to us. They saw the empty space above the sofa and one day they brought us this picture to fill it. *It's not my style, but they gave it to us so I keep it.*'

It is not just within households that people carry out transactions of economic significance within durable, personal relationships. In his study of a residential area in Toronto, Barry Wellman found substantial giving and getting among friends, relatives, and neighbours (e.g. Wellman and Wortley 1990). The resources that people transact in these relationships can be substantial. Those who dig a friend's garden, who look after a neighbour's child every other day, who help a relative repair a house, are engaged in transactions that affect the subsistence of the recipient and provide things that would cost significant amounts of money if purchased in commercial transactions. Likewise, Edwina Uehara (1990) studied poor mothers in Chicago who had recently lost their paying jobs and were facing financial crisis. She found that many of these women received substantial amounts of money, services, and material objects from neighbours, friends, and kin. Whether it was a Thanksgiving turkey, rent money, or a bag of groceries, and whether it was given without being asked, loaned freely and without much concern for repayment, or only loaned grudgingly, these things had a significant impact on these women's basic subsistence. Together, these studies demonstrate that the separation of economic from social relations, the disembedding of economy from society, does not appear to be all that clear.

Even outside these more clearly social relationships, commodity relations are not all-pervasive. This is apparent, and perhaps to be anticipated, in the black economy. An example is the petty dealing of stolen goods in London's East End, which may seem a colourful distraction from real commerce, but is important socially and economically for those involved. Here, transactions are not the impersonal exchange of material equivalents. Instead, as Gerald Mars describes it, frequently the thing given is seen as a 'favour'. It 'has to be repaid, but only when the

opportunity arises and only with whatever comes to hand. And "whatever is at hand" may not be material at all.' These transactions, then, entail diffuse, open-ended personal obligations, with the consequence that the 'goods that were given have been dematerialized and the transaction has been personalized' (Mars 1982: 173). While these transactions are important for people's economic survival, transactors often do not seek maximum economic advantage, and in fact 'money is only a part, and rarely the most important part' of these deals (Mars 1982: 171; see also Henry 1976).

This is because such dealings are not impersonal. Instead, they are usually between people who are linked through ties of kinship, neighbourhood, and extensive personal experience, people for whom these transactions are part of the development and maintenance of social relations with others. And it is this that makes these transactions obligatory in a way that gift transactions are, but legal market transactions are not. People need to offer to transact in order to maintain their social reputations as fully competent members of the community. Indeed, one of the points that Dick Hobbs makes in his study of the East End is that people there who are entrepreneurs, ready to buy and sell anything, cannot be understood in terms of commodity logic, as rational actors in an impersonal market. Instead, they are enacting a moral value.

> For example, when Barry was approached by Vince and offered several hundred yards of high-quality stolen carpet, Barry was not interested, yet promised to attempt to find a buyer. Barry could have refused to buy the carpet and left it at that; however it was important that Vince's entrepreneurial abilities be acknowledged, thereby reaffirming the mechanisms and language of exchange as a core organizational device of the indigenous order. (Hobbs 1989: 142)

Here, commodity logic is not some residual propensity to truck and barter that finds expression when it is liberated from social constraint. Rather, it is a social value that binds and obligates potential transactors to each other. It is a way that people maintain personal identities that reflect as much adherence to a set of moral values about 'doing the business' (Hobbs 1989) as they do the desire to maintain personal repute or secure the economic means of survival. And beyond this, the entrepreneurial pose, ever ready to do a deal, helps people identify themselves as 'trusted insiders as against the threatening outside' (Mars 1982: 175), and so maintain the distinctive social and cultural identity of the group itself.

More mundane and more pervasive than shady deals struck in pubs in

the East End is retail trade. This is the realm of supermarkets full of anonymous commodities and customers and cheerily impersonal staff (Carrier 1990). However, even here many people buy and sell as part of enduring personal relations. This is apparent in the widespread use of credit in small shops until at least the middle of the twentieth century (e.g. Johnson 1985: ch. 6). This credit was as much a social as a financial relationship. It was based on the decision to enter into a personal relationship of trust, and shopkeeper and customer were expected to support each other in good times as well as bad.

This is most obvious from the perspective of the customers, who expected that the shopkeeper would not simply give credit, but would carry them through bad times: through bouts of illness, injury, or unemployment, through strikes or bad harvests, through times of extraordinary expenses like medical bills or funeral costs. In short, they expected the shopkeeper to trust them to repay when times got better. Equally, the shopkeeper expected the customer to be loyal to the shop, buying there when times were good and purchases could be paid for in cash, even though a more impersonal store near by might have the same goods for less. In such a relationship, buying a tin of milk was not the impersonal exchange of equivalents, but was the recreation of a durable personal relationship, harking back to previous transactions and anticipating future ones. This appears to have been marked commonly by the fact that customers never quite paid off their debt, the small balance remaining marking the continuation of the relationship of trust between shopkeeper and customer. This is illustrated by what Gerald Mars (1982: 173) says of practices from the time of his youth:

> [W]hen a trust relationship does break up the debt *has* to be paid off—precisely and immediately. The open-ended transaction is closed, and the method of final settlement reverts to normal market exchange. The transaction is, in effect, depersonalised . . . as it was among working-class families in the north of England where I grew up. The credit account at the local store would be broken through dispute. Then the bill was paid and the family's custom removed to another shop.

One of the reasons that retail trade is distinctive is that it is the point where different forms of transaction intersect, that of the household and that of the firm. This intersection is more pronounced in forms of direct selling. The neighbourhood children who knock on the door to sell Girl Scout cookies, chocolates, or Christmas wrap are carrying out retail trade within a pre-existing set of social relationships between seller and customer. This intersection and overlap appear as well in what John Davis

(1973: 167–71) describes as 'party selling', perhaps most familiar in the United States as the 'Tupperware party'. Such selling takes place within a number of social, as distinct from purely economic, frames. It takes place in a party organized for the purpose; the woman, typically, who organizes the party with the help of a company agent is a 'hostess'; the people she invites are friends and neighbours; those invited are urged to buy in order to help their friend and neighbour. Here too, then, economy and society overlap, and a form of retail trade that supports a number of large corporations does not conform to the cultural understanding of 'the economy' and market exchange.

Durable personal relationships seem to exist as well at times in the heart of capitalism. Ronald Dore's analysis of relations between large firms, primarily in Japan but also in Britain, shows that manufacturing firms and their suppliers, for example, often see themselves as bound by durable obligations in a way that resembles the credit relationship between shopkeeper and customer that I have described. In other words, these firms are not wholly alienated and independent transactors; rather, they are linked in 'social relations . . . [that] take on a moral quality and become regulated by criteria of fairness' (Dore 1983: 479; see also Creighton 1991). Moreover, evidence of these sorts of relatively durable relationships is not restricted to the level of the firm. Studying relations among agents and employees of various American firms, Mark Granovetter found that 'continuing economic relations [between agents of different firms] often become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust and abstention from opportunism' (Granovetter 1985: 490; see also Gambetta 1988; Prus 1989: ch. 4). Stewart Macaulay (1963) suggests that allegiance to these moral values is one reason why relatively few firms use formal contracts in their dealings with each other.

Further, occidentalist renderings of the West as a commodity system do not seem to apply in any straightforward way to people who work in firms. For example, much of the New England fishing fleet recruits crew and investment capital among family members rather than through impersonal markets, a pattern that has been expanding over the past few decades at the expense of ships organized in terms of commodity relations (Doeringer, Moss, and Terkla 1986). David Halle (1984: 5–6) found that the American blue-collar chemical workers he studied were frequently linked to their co-workers not just by virtue of common ties to their employer but by kin and affinal ties with one another. Here Halle confirms in the context of American working-class life of the 1970s what Young and Willmott (1986: 73–6) argued for English working-class

life of the 1950s: when there is competition for work, a person on the job can help a relative get into the firm. In such a situation, co-workers are likely to be kin, and social relations are likely to pervade the impersonal relations that are supposed to exist in the firm. Furthermore, as Margaret Grieco (1987: 37–41) argues, this is not a subversion of economic rationality. Rather, in many circumstances firms prefer to recruit the kin of their existing workers for good commercial relations. Finally, Karen Sacks (1984) shows that employees who normally keep their work and personal lives separate may merge the two when they strike or agitate for changes at work. In this extraordinary circumstance, the hospital workers she studied activated pre-existing social relationships with each other and forged new ones in order to increase their solidarity and resolve.

But even to see work relations among strangers as being impersonal relations between autonomous individuals can be misleading, for transactions among co-workers allow little autonomy in any straightforward sense. Sid the maintenance worker does not freely decide to adjust the machinery of Doris the production worker because Doris will give something valuable in return in the manner of a market transaction. Instead, Sid is the occupant of a position in a structure that defines his relationship with Doris and their obligations toward each other. The fact that Sid and Doris may have decided autonomously to become maintenance and production workers, and may have got their jobs through the impersonal labour market, does not mean that their identities and relationships with each other at work resemble the autonomous individuals who are supposed to populate the commodity realm.

Thus it appears that, in different areas of life in industrial capitalist society, identities, relations, and transactions depart from the commodity model, and instead resemble what exists in gift systems in important ways (though this assertion of resemblance is not an assertion of identity). Impersonal commodity relations and transactions clearly are important in the modern West. But equally important is the distinction between saying that commodity relations are important in the West on the one hand, and on the other casting the West as a society in which commodity relations are so essential that we can ignore the existence of other sorts of relations. To return to a point made earlier, this occidentalism makes sense only when it is juxtaposed with its matching orientalism, the society of the gift. Compared to such societies, the West *is* the society of the commodity—these two essentializations defining and justifying each other dialectically.

Dialectics and selective perception

The effects of this comparative approach can be particularly insidious when our constructions of alien societies become detached from the conception of the West to which they are opposed, and instead become treated as substantive concepts. Thus, in modern anthropology the notion of the society of the gift became detached from its conceptual dialectical opposition to modern Western society. Each became a positive, independent description of a distinct type of society.

These typifications have shaped the ways that anthropologists approach the societies they study, ways that maintain the purity of the categories themselves. So, few anthropologists study gifts in the modern West. Further, those who do so tend to treat them in ways that do not challenge the occidentalized construction of the West (e.g. Cheal 1988; Lévi-Strauss 1969: 56–7). This is manifest in the way researchers tend to see gifts as the gratuitous act of autonomous individuals, a rendering that echoes what Jonathan Parry (1986: 466) calls the 'elaborated ideology of the "pure gift" ', the idea that gifts are 'free and unconstrained'. Equally, this is manifest in the way researchers tend to reduce gifts to a relatively peripheral and insignificant realm: formal presents, displays of Christmas cards, and the like. But to restrict gift relations in Western societies to these levels is to ignore the ways that people are enmeshed in gift relationships that are more mundane but of greater economic import.

Equally, these typifications lead anthropologists to ignore commodity relations in village societies. In Melanesia, this means anthropologists commonly ignore the fact that many Melanesians and almost all Melanesian societies depend upon wage labour or commercial production for a good part of their survival. To ignore this is to ignore the ways that village societies articulate with the national economy and the way that articulation shapes village life, not to mention the perspectives of the individuals involved. Margaret Jolly (1992) makes this point in her criticism of Annette Weiner's (esp. 1977) discussion of women's wealth in the Trobriand Islands. Weiner sees women's exchange of their wealth as a token of their unchanging ability to control the cosmic order. Jolly, on the other hand, argues that the growing involvement of Trobriand people with the commodity economy has meant that the exchange of women's wealth takes on new meanings as it has come to be opposed to male involvement in commercial activities and the cash economy.

This orientalism means anthropologists commonly ignore the ways that forms of ceremonial transaction have begun to take on signs of

commodity exchange. David Boyd has described an instance of this in the Eastern Highlands province of Papua New Guinea. There, pig distributions have ceased to be just ceremonial gift transactions, but have become as well 'secular, commercialised dance festivals' (Boyd 1985: 325), where the sponsor charges admission at the gate and stallholders sell refreshments. Anthropologists also commonly ignore many of the mundane ways that Melanesians transact in both traditional and modern settings to gain their subsistence. As I have shown elsewhere (Carrier 1992*a*), many of the transactions by which Ponam Islanders, from Manus province in Papua New Guinea, gain their subsistence are not very much like gifts. Some of these take place in a modern institution, the village general store, but even those that occur in more venerable institutions like trade partnerships or local markets do not demonstrate the degree of obligation and mutual identification that characterize the society of the gift.[1]

Obviously, these more commodity-like transactions, relationships, and identities are not invisible to anthropologists in Melanesia. However, they tend to be ignored as inauthentic colonial introductions, or they become relegated to particular schools within the discipline. Transactions that appeared to be of commodities became the special interest only of Marxists (e.g. Godelier 1977), generally peripheral in Melanesian anthropology, or were presumed to appear only in circulation between societies, rather than within them (e.g. Sahlins 1974), and hence to be peripheral to understanding the basic organization and operation of these societies.

The construction of Melanesian societies as gift systems leads to a body of ethnography that is only a partial rendering of Melanesian social life. Further, the partiality of that ethnography is reflected in the more synthetic works that summarize and make use of it. An example of this is Marilyn Strathern's review essay 'Marriage Exchanges: A Melanesian Comment'. The topic itself is unexceptionable, for marriage exchange is important in many Melanesian societies. As Colin Filer (1985) has shown, many Papua New Guineans see contemporary marriage exchange, and particularly brideprice, as part of a complex field of salient economic, social, and political issues, including ethnic identity, family solidarity, divorce, prostitution, domestic violence, wage labour, remittances, and much more. However, like the writers whose work she reviewed, Strathern located marriage exchange in a highly orientalist context. She did so by focusing on a single, albeit complex, issue, 'the role of exchanges in items other than persons when these items are part of or move in conjunction with transactions (such as marriage) conceptualized as exchanges of

persons' (Strathern 1984: 42). Further, she ignored the issue of money, an item which pervades marriage exchange and which links that exchange to the wage labour and commodity production where so many Papua New Guineans get their cash.[2]

Thus it appears that influential anthropologists studying Melanesia have elevated the relative salience of gift transactions in the region from a distinguishing characteristic, albeit an important one, to a defining characterization. This in turn generates a key problem identified by the critics of anthropological orientalism, a distorted, exaggerated model of the alien society. The gift transactions that had, quite reasonably, been taken to distinguish life in the Trobriands and the Pacific North-West from life in Paris, London, or Chicago became something very different. They became an absolute, rather than relative, description of a type of society that denies or elides similarities between the village and the West.

The process comes full circle in Melanesia. Not only do the distortions of the initial, dialectical construction of gift and commodity systems become embodied in the ethnography of the region. In addition, anthropologists use that ethnography to reconstruct the initial construction. But they appear to do so unknowingly, for they seem to base their reflections on the empirical evidence of the ethnographic record, which they contrast with their image of the West. Thus, by using evidence shaped by the model, they can construct on what appears as an empirical foundation the very model that generated the distortion in the first place. Again, Marilyn Strathern's work illustrates this process, this time *The Gender of the Gift*.[3]

Drawing on the extensive ethnographic evidence that she invokes to support her argument, Strathern paints a picture of Melanesian societies that contains the core elements of the society of the gift. Melanesians are not autonomous, but 'dividuals', 'the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them' (1988: 13). And as people are the nexus of social relationships, so are things. A pig or a sweet potato is not a discrete object. Rather, just as a child contains the identity of its parents, so the object 'exists as a specific combination of other identities', the identities of those who produced it (1988: 159). People and things, then, are linked inalienably to their several creators and the social relations of their creation. In somewhat more analytical terms, people and things are not autonomous, but are defined by their position in a structure of identities and relations between identities. Strathern develops this point particularly in her discussion (1984: 148–65) of Lisette Josephides's work (1985) on the Kewa, of the New Guinea Highlands, in which Josephides

argued that men appropriate the products of women's labour through the cycle of ceremonial exchange.

Obviously, Strathern was not attempting a neutral, statistical summation of the evidence. Instead, she selected and interpreted the ethnographies she invoked in her argument. But one reason she could invoke such an impressive array of supporting evidence for her points is that the Maussian model has affected so many of the ethnographers who have worked in the region.

However, those less affected see and report a somewhat different picture. For example, in *Entangled Objects* Nicholas Thomas argues that in 'societies to the east and southeast of mainland New Guinea' a number of key types of transactions 'appear to have entailed . . . alienation' (Thomas 1991: 45), so that objects could be divorced from the circumstances of their creation in the way Josephides argued for the Kewa. Again, speaking this time specifically of certain important sorts of exchange goods in Fiji, Thomas says (1991: 65) that 'there is no sense in which the donors retain any control or "lien" over them. Nor is there much sense that there is any significant association of any other kind, any continuing memory of the donor in the thing.' Thomas (1991: 53–4) argues the same point with respect to the identity of people. It may be that a child in a patrilineal society has ties with the mother's kin, but this does not mean that maternal and paternal sides are equally embodied in the child. Instead, the degree of their authority is contingent upon the state of marriage exchange and the political relations between the two groups.

My point is not that Strathern is wrong to assert that Melanesians see people and objects in certain ways, just as my point earlier was not that those who adopt the dialectical model I have described are wrong to assert that Westerners see people and objects in certain ways. Rather, it is that she has not taken the next, and most necessary, step: she has not gone on to consider when and under what circumstances Melanesians see which people and what objects in those ways, just the sort of issue that Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1989) address. In neglecting to take this step, Strathern casts the whole of Melanesia as a unitary thing, her '"single" instance' (1988: 341) of gift logic. In other words, she reproduces the model's orientalism by the invocation of evidence itself silently framed in the very terms of that orientalism (an analogous point is in Paine 1969). And in her work, she invokes that orientalism to reproduce its twinned occidentalism. As Melanesia is the inalienable gift and the 'dividual', so the West is the commodity and the 'unitary self, the "possessive individual"' (Strathern 1988: 157).

Roots of the dialectic

I have described the occidentalist renderings of the West in the Maussian model, illustrating both how it distorts the nature of Western societies and how its twinned orientalism distorts the nature of Melanesian societies. Although the model is a fit subject for such an analysis, I said earlier that it is hardly unique. The distinction between societies of the gift and of the commodity is but a slight variation on the distinction between societies of status and contract, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, affective and instrumental rationality, mechanical and organic solidarity, feudalism and capitalism. This distinction is a coherent and powerful theme in the Western intellectual patrimony. It is embedded deeply in social thought, as well as common sense, and it is hard to escape.

Why, given the evidence that I have provided in this chapter, is the occidentalist rendering of the West held so firmly by Western scholars themselves? Nancy Hartsock suggests some reasons in her criticism (1985) of sociological models of social relations, and especially the predominance of the autonomous actor in these models. Put most simply, she argues that the autonomous actor is a reasonably accurate reflection of the experience of many of those in dominant positions in society (Ouroussoff 1993 illustrates this point and several others in this chapter nicely).

One pertinent dimension on which people can be dominant is that of the market, the home of the autonomous actor. However, Max Weber argued long ago that not all market actors are in a position to act autonomously. The ability to do so is, he said, generally restricted to the dominant, propertied classes, who are not driven to the market by sheer, insistent necessity. The propertyless, however, lack such resources and have no such leisure. They are obliged to transact, and particularly to sell their labour, 'in order barely to subsist' (Weber 1946: 182).

Basil Bernstein's studies of working-class families in Bethnal Green around 1960 (esp. Bernstein 1971; cf. Levine 1985: 198–9) address more directly the degree to which the autonomous actor reflects the perspective and experience of some classes rather than others. The families that Bernstein studied overwhelmingly were involved in the same sorts of occupation and their social and work lives tended to be restricted to their immediate and very densely populated area in Bethnal Green. The result, reminiscent of Durkheim's description of societies of mechanical solidarity, was a high degree of shared experience. This complex of factors produced what Bernstein called a 'positional orientation'. People with such an orientation identified themselves and others in terms of their

positions in an over-arching and encompassing web of social relations, reminiscent of Strathern's 'plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them'. Bernstein distinguished this from the 'personal orientation'. This, he said, was characteristic of the more mobile and wealthier members of English middle-class families, who identified themselves and each other as independent entities.[4]

Bernstein's argument finds support in the study by J. Bussey and his colleagues of the giving of presents by people in Bradford, England. The researchers found that higher-class respondents were more likely to account for the giving by saying it was the spontaneous expression of autonomous sentiment, emotion, and affection. Conversely, lower-class respondents were more likely to explain giving by reference to the expectations of others and the dictates of the situation in which they found themselves (Bussey *et al.* 1967: 61, 67). Class differences in orientation toward people are matched by class differences in orientation toward objects. Janet Holland (1981), a colleague of Bernstein's, found that children from middle-class families were more likely to categorize objects on the basis of what they saw as the objects' inherent and trans-situational properties, such as their physical constituents or category membership. Alternatively, working-class children were more likely to categorize in terms of the social context and relationships in which the objects were embedded in those children's lives.

Like Bernstein, Hartsock describes the link between people's experiences and the notion of the autonomous self, but using gender rather than class as an organizing variable. Hartsock says that women generally are compelled to work more than men. Not only do they labour for a wage, the prevailing division of labour by gender in the West means that they also maintain the household and reproduce humanity in their children. In addition to being obliged to work more, the work that women do is different from that of men. Particularly in their domestic labour women are involved in relationships that are more durable and complex, and that are less discretionary, than the 'simple cooperation with others for common goals' (Hartsock 1985: 64) that she says characterizes the work experience of men in the middle classes. As she summarizes her argument, women in their labours experience 'a complex, relational world' rather than one of autonomous individuals, and their interactions with others are not voluntary: '[T]hose in charge of small children have little choice' (1985: 65, 66).

Hartsock's point that men and women vary in their experience and

sense of autonomy is echoed in the way that men and women in Western societies are often oriented differently toward the realms of gift and commodity. For instance, kinship, the core area of gift relations in industrial societies, is the province of women rather than men, for it is they who arrange the visits, write the letters, and remember the relationships that those visits and letters mark and maintain (e.g. Firth 1956; Komarovsky 1987; Willmott and Young 1960; Young and Willmott 1986). Similarly, Christmas, probably the most important North American celebration of family and kinship, is largely women's work. They are the ones who draw up the lists, buy the presents, and cook the Christmas dinners (see e.g. Caplow 1984; Cheal 1987).

Given this gender difference, it is not surprising that women appear to think of the objects that surround them differently from the way men do, and do so in a way that situates objects in social relationships. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 61) found a consistent pattern of differences, even when husband and wife were talking about the same object. While men tended to talk about significant objects in more egocentric ways, in terms of 'personal accomplishment, or an ideal they strive to achieve', women were more likely to talk in terms of a 'concern for other people' and 'responsibility for maintaining a network of social ties'. (Analogous differences are in Dittmar 1992 and Livingstone 1992.) But to complicate matters, this gender difference depends upon age. It did not appear among the young, who all tended to see objects in terms of sensory pleasure. Equally, it disappeared among the old, who were more uniform in seeing objects in the way that adult women did.

Bernstein and Hartsock both indicate that the autonomous actor is not a fiction. Instead, that actor reflects at least the thinking and probably the experiences of those in particular social locations, which are treated deferentially in Western society and taken to define social identity and relationships in academic understandings of social exchange. Moreover, those in these locations tend to be more powerful than the sets of people whose experiences and identities are likely to depart from the model of the autonomous actor. With this power, people in the dominant locations are better able than others to put forward their experiences and values as definitive of the genius and the essence of the modern West. It is, then, the relatively privileged nature of these positions, values, and experiences, together with the relative power of those in these positions, that help maintain the dominance of the occidentalism that I have described.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have laid out an image of the West that exists in what I have, for convenience, called the Maussian model, and I have introduced evidence to show that this image occidentalizes the West. That is, the model treats certain sorts of cultural and social attributes of the West as embodying the essence of a relatively undifferentiated social entity, Western Society. While I have written of a Maussian model, its occidentalism is a common one, as I have noted. Equally, I have not disputed the importance of commodity relations in the West or gift relations in Melanesia, for example. Certainly they are important, even crucial for understanding these different social systems. However, their centrality is no warrant for treating commodity relations as all that is important in the West or gift relations as all that is important in Melanesia. Rather, these sorts of relations coexist and interact with other sorts of relationships in complex ways that it would be unwise to ignore.

A final note. In discussing the occidentalism of the West as a system of autonomous actors, I presented evidence that indicates that this perception reflects the experiences of certain sorts of people in Western societies. I do not mean this to be another call for the scholarly recognition of 'diversity', for such calls are prone to rest on the same sort of essentializations that I have questioned here. This tendency to essentialism appears in an interesting collection of practical papers (McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano 1982) intended to help family therapists deal professionally with people from different cultural backgrounds. While the collection helps dispel the notion of the uniform West of commodity occidentalism, it also reveals a tendency to replace that unity with a set of relatively homogeneous ethnic groups: the Irish, the Jews, the British, and so on, in America. A similar point could be made about Andrew Greeley's work (e.g. Greeley 1989) plotting the differences between the beliefs and values of Protestants and Catholics in the United States.

In place of this sort of diversity of essentialized groups, I would substitute what I think Bernstein was trying to do. He was not concerned to present a picture of Bethnal Green and its residents that stresses some essential 'Bethnal Green-ness'. Rather, he points to a series of social variables that predispose people to think and act in certain ways in certain contexts, variables that take particular forms in particular places at particular times. He is not, in other words, pointing to a diversity of types of people, but to the way that different situations can lead to different ways of thinking and acting. I think it preferable to follow Bernstein's lead, to ask under what circumstances and for what reasons people in Western societies think and act in ways that resemble commodity relations, under what circumstances and for what reasons they think and act in ways that resemble gift relations. If we begin to take these questions seriously, we are more likely to be able to ask the same questions about people elsewhere.

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Notes

1 I omit consideration of the possibility that there will be disagreement among villagers themselves about whether an object or transaction resembles that of a gift or a commodity (see Carrier 1992*a*). Also, although I have described Melanesia here, my points apply more generally. Thus, Daniel Miller (1986) describes a similar mixture of gift and commodity transactions in India.

2 The ethnographies Strathern analyses focus resolutely on village life; Filer's account draws heavily from letters written by urban and peri-urban residents. As Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (1991) demonstrate, combining the urban and the village into a single analysis can be fruitful.

3 Strathern says that she is constructing a hypothetical model, in an effort to use 'the language that belongs to our own [social life] in order to create a contrast internal to it' (1988: 16). Two comments are in order here. First, the need Strathern sees to fall back on such hypothetical models to enable Westerners to understand Melanesian societies presupposes just the radical difference between types of societies that is at issue in this chapter. Second, to say that the book is a kind of thought experiment would seem to make empirical criticism inappropriate. However, the extensive use of ethnographic evidence inevitably gives her work a clear empirical cast, one that comes to the fore in her final chapter. There she summarizes one aspect of the book by saying that she has shown how various Melanesian societies are 'varieties of or versions of a "single" instance. These societies have their conventions in common' (1988: 341).

4 Bernstein's description of positional and personal orientations resembles what Ralph Turner (1976) calls the impulsive and the institutional selves.

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4

Occidentalism as a Cottage Industry: Representing the Autochthonous 'Other' in British and Irish Rural Studies

Jane Nadel-Klein

A cartoon appeared a couple of years ago in my local newspaper, purporting to explain ethnic violence in Eastern Europe. In it, a Western-suited man (Gorbachev) stands helplessly by as men in loose peasant blouses and cummerbunds (the 'Zugs') massacre each other in the street. 'Why do we kill each other?' reads the legend below, 'Because it's our nature!' In this cartoon, bloodshed is explained in terms of instinct, or 'nature', and the violent men are obviously denizens of a Europe that does not fit into the cartoonist's conception of Western civilization. They are peasants, rural folk who have not grasped modernity's message of reason.

This cartoon does not merely primitivize peasants and rural people. It says they are pre-cultural animals who act on instinct, and that only the men in suits can save them. The cartoonist has embodied modern, Western identity in the figure of an authoritative, rational male who participates in an international system of knowledge and goods. He stands for progress.[1] Extrapolating from this image, we can say further that this figure is both urban and urbane, that he is not limited by merely 'local knowledge'. He is, in fact, the truly cosmopolitan man whose perspective encompasses the globe and its history, the representative of the modern state that subordinates petty local grievances to the transcendent ideal of citizenship (see Nairn 1977: 16). The peasants, on the other hand, are not merely rural and untutored. Their Hobbesian 'state of nature' makes them dangerous. They stand for parochialism and the opposition to progress.

In this case it is the Balkans that are said to be backward and out of touch with the rest of us. But Eastern Europe is by no means the only region of Europe to have provided a site for Western beliefs in the existence of primitive, backward, or autochthonous others subsisting in