

# Property, Substance and Effect

*Anthropological Essays on Persons  
and Things*

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THE ATHLONE PRESS  
LONDON & NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ

one another, that one description is always interpreted in the company of others and nothing is in that sense by itself. Social anthropologists make the question explicit: they work openly through other people's descriptions. Those descriptions invariably include people referring to fellow people as thinking and feeling beings, and attribute what they say and do to how they think and feel, but that is not the same as studying how people think and feel and this is not intended to be such a study. As on other occasions, the present work remains agnostic as to the emotions, states of mind or mental processes of the people mentioned here.

Getting the description right (a matter at once of accuracy, faithfulness and aesthetic alignment) applies anywhere. So that goes for the 'Euro-American' features I summon quite as much as the 'Melanesian' ones. These essays are certainly concerned with getting the Euro-American right, but, with one or two exceptions, they do so in an indirect sense. Euro-American is there, so to speak, in the analytical and theoretical turns. One way or another, what gets into the writer's vocabulary matters.

Cambridge, March 1998

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## Chapter 1

### The Ethnographic Effect I

If at the end of the twentieth century one were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist's ethnographic practice.

The practice has always had a double location, both in what for a century now it has been the tradition to call 'the field' and in the study, at the desk or on the lap. In the 1990s, it hardly need be added that it does not matter where the fieldworker's 'field' is geographically located nor how many sites it is spread across, nor even if sites are accessible through the laptop. Indeed, time rather than space has become the crucial axis of isolation or separation. I shall argue that it does matter that the ethnographic moment is moment of immersion. But it is a moment of immersion that is simultaneously total and partial, a totalising activity which is not the only activity in which the person is engaged.

Insofar as the ethnographer's locations can be seen as alternating, then each offers a perspective on the other. One of the elements which makes fieldwork challenging is that it is carried out with a quite different activity (writing) in mind. And what makes the study which follows in its own way equally challenging is that it turns out in fact to be much more than a matter of writing-up – for the writing only works, as the student discovers, as an imaginative re-creation of some of the effects of fieldwork itself. While any would-be author may find his or her account thronging with the words of other authors, for the returned field-worker these companions sit side by side with a whole other society of people. At the same time, the ideas and narratives which made sense of everyday field experience have to be rearranged to make sense in the context of arguments and analyses

addressed to another audience. Far from being a derivative or residual activity, as one might think of a report or of reportage, ethnographic writing creates a second field. The relationship between the two fields can thus be described as 'complex' in that each is an order of engagement which partly inhabits or touches upon but does not encompass the other. Indeed, either may seem to spin off on its own trajectory. Each point of engagement is thus a replacement or a reordering of elements located in a separate field of activity and observation altogether. And the sense of loss or incompleteness which accompanies this, the realisation that neither can ever match up to the other, is common anthropological experience. So it becomes a kind of premonition perhaps to take loss with one. The members of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait took a great sense of loss with them, although as they saw it it was the Melanesians who were suffering loss, loss of population and loss of culture. They were certainly anxious to record, as fully as possible, activities they thought were bound to diminish even further. It was the organiser, Alfred Haddon, who is credited with borrowing from natural history the term 'fieldwork' itself.

One kind of complexity lies, then, in the relationship between ethnography's double fields: each creates the other, but each also has its own dynamic or trajectory. The field ethnographer often learns the trajectory effect the hard way. What back at home had made sense as a field proposal can lose its motivating force; the preoccupations of the people on the spot take over. Yet for all sorts of reasons, they cannot take over completely. The fieldworker has to manage and thus inhabit both fields at the same time: to recall the theoretical conditions under which the work was proposed, and thus the reason for being there, while yielding to the flow of events and ideas which present themselves. To 'return from the field' means throwing those orientations into reverse.

All this is very familiar to social anthropologists; equally familiar is critical scrutiny of such practice. Some of the implications of moving between fields have been the subject of contentious debate over the last decade, if not longer, a debate addressed to the politics of writing anthropology and specifically to literary renderings of fieldwork experience. Social anthropologists have become sensitive to the image of movement, both because it mimics the kind of travelling that fieldwork and return often but not invariably imply, and because of its politically troubling

connotations of intrusion and of freedoms taken at other people's expense. In turn, the fact that the intellectual journey traditionally required total immersement has become either a platitude or an embarrassment. Yet it is by contrast with the traveller's expectations of novelty that immersement yields what is often unlooked-for; it yields precisely the *facility and thus a method* for 'finding' the unlooked-for. This should be of considerable interest to students of complex phenomena.

### UNPREDICTABILITY

The juxtaposition of different orders of phenomena, the linking of trajectories, as between observation and analysis, makes for complexity of the kind Lévi-Strauss adumbrates in the idea of complex structures in kinship (by contrast with other kinds of comprehensive arrangements which mesh kinship and marriage together, complex structures define who is related but leave open to completely different criteria who should marry whom). Such structures contain different orders or dimensions of existence, and any set of human dealings can be seen to be complex in this sense. Juxtaposing orders of data as part of its overt mode of collecting and analysing information simply renders the ethnographic method a highly visible case. When one thinks of different parts of a social system as having their own trajectories, one can see that the system is going to change through time in uneven and unpredictable ways. Here is another connotation of complexity. Over the same period as social anthropology has confronted the 'complex' effects of writing in the knowledge of new perceptions of the relationship between writing and fieldwork, outside anthropology ideas about complex systems – derived in the first place from mathematics, as well as biology and other natural sciences – have been applied to the study of human organisations. One consequence of this is of interest in the present context: it renews a long-standing challenge to the very idea of data collection.

#### *The ethnographic moment*

Now, from several points of view, the idea of data collection has come to seem suspect in recent years – both the collecting

(because of its political connotations) and the data (because of its epistemological ones). The former, it seems, appropriates other people's possessions, while the latter mystifies social effect as fact. Indeed the pair of terms carries colonising resonances one would not necessarily wish to shrug off; the critiques do an important job in their utilisation of Euro-American views of what is appropriate to relations between persons in respect of things (in short, property relations). However, these challenges are not what I have in mind. The challenge is rather to the kind of breadth of information one might eventually wish to have. In a world which thinks of itself as information-driven, there is always too much and too little data. For where there seems to be more and more data in circulation, and in multiple formats, old questions about provenance need to be asked, repeatedly, again. These may turn into questions about authorship or proprietorship, or about forms of ownership or attachment that do not necessarily entail property, such as dispositional control. There are certainly issues over distribution and access. There are also, and quite separately, questions of responsibility. Taking responsibility for circulating data turns it already into information (about its provenance) for the users of it. This leads to the question of content. One also has to take responsibility for the object of study, and in the case of anthropologists this consists in elucidating and describing the contours of social life. More than that, social anthropology is committed to a certain view of social life as complex: it is a relational phenomenon and by its nature cannot be reduced to elementary principles or axioms. This has always been a problematic in the act of description. The challenge is indeed to the breadth of information one wishes for. It is renewed in challenges posed by new perceptions of complexity.

Any social organisation can be thought of as a complex evolving system insofar as it generates behaviour that is unpredictable, non-linear and capable of producing multiple outcomes. Because of the overlapping and dove-tailing nature of multiple factors working upon one another, systems generally show a sensitivity to their initial conditions. Events do not unfold with regularity, and small changes can produce major outcomes in quite unpredictable ways. Translated into the need to generate information (about outcomes), this means that conditions may be overlooked because they are too small to be or are simply not recognised as initial conditions in the first place. The challenge is

apparent: how does one argue back from an unforeseen event, an unpredictable outcome, to the circumstances of its development?

While models of complex systems may well appeal to management practices which have to be able to predict outcomes, or to ways of seeking to be innovative within an institutional framework, they also hold an obvious interest for the study of social change or of evolution in human behaviour. However, looking to innovation or development gives a secondary, superfluous dynamic to the primary activity of describing social processes; there is a dynamism already built into the activity of description itself. When it comes to building up *knowledge* about any complex organisational system, with its diverse outcomes, it is the initial conditions themselves that emerge as unpredictable – they are unpredictable from the point of view of the observer or whoever is striving to describe the social processes at issue. After all, what must be taken into account is what has been overlooked. The investigator does not know at the outset the full range of factors which are going to be relevant to the end-analysis, nor indeed the full range of analyses which are going to be relevant to comprehending material already filling notes and papers.

One social science strategy is deliberate selection through coupling specific methods with the expectation of specific types of data. But since there will have been factors at the beginning whose influences and effects were unpredictable, or which only came into operation when other conditions subsequently arose, how does one deliberately factor those in? One answer is that we can always try working backwards with our archaeologies. Closer to hand, however, is the conundrum posed by fieldwork undertaken over an isolated stretch of time. Has it not always been a problem to encompass enough to include material which cannot be seen at the time, let alone be specified in advance, but which could well be useful later? If it did not exist, we might have to be inventing the anthropologist's ethnographic method and its strategies of immerge-*ment*. Immerge-*ment* itself is a complex phenomenon, as we shall see.

It is significant that field immerge-*ment* is repeated in the subsequent study away from the field. Ethnographers set themselves the task not just of comprehending the effect that certain practices and artefacts have in people's lives, but of re-creating some of those effects in the context of writing about them. Of course analysis ('writing') begins 'in the field' as much as the ethnogra-

pher's hosts continue to exert a pull on the direction of his or her energies long after. Now the division between the two fields creates two kinds of (interrelated) relationships. There is the acute awareness of the pull of divergent paths of knowledge, and the anthropologist may well regard one of these trajectories as pertaining to observation and the other to analysis. But there is also the effect of engaging the fields together, and this we might call the *ethnographic moment*. The ethnographic moment is a relation in the same way as a linguistic sign can be thought of as a relation (joining signifier and signified). We could say that the ethnographic moment works as an example of a relation which joins the understood (what is analysed at the moment of observation) to the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis). The relationship between what is already apprehended and what seems to demand apprehension is of course infinitely regressive, that is, slips across any manner of scale (minimally, observation and analysis each contains within itself the relation between them both). Any ethnographic moment, which is a moment of knowledge or insight, denotes a relation between immersion and movement.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot avoid a personal note about my particular understanding of my first fieldwork field, Hagen in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. I am not referring to the products of discourse, to dialogic interchange or mutual authorship, important as these can become both to relationships with persons and to the writing of anthropology. Nor to the reader over my shoulder: to the fact that while I might think I am organising my account of Hageners' doings, they are also organising my writing of the account. I want rather to find a way of acknowledging the fact that my attention has been transfixed at certain (ethnographic) moments I have never been able – wanted – to shake off.

#### *On being dazzled*

Movement between fields is only part of the flexibility of the ethnographic method – the paradox is that flexibility of a kind lies also in the very state of immersion, in the totalising as well as the partial nature of commitment. In yielding to the preoccupations of others, the fieldworker enters into relationships with people for which no amount of imagining or speculating can serve as advance preparation. It is not just that fieldwork, or

writing for that matter, is full of surprises, but that there is a point of method here crucial to the fieldwork side of the double field(s). To comment on an obvious aspect of this: people are more than respondents answering questions; they are informants in the fullest sense, in control of the information they offer. I mean this in the sense that the ethnographer is often led to receive it as information, that is, as data which has become meaningful, by putting it into the context of general knowledge about these people's lives and situations and thus the context of its production. This in turn encourages, even forces, the ethnographer into the position of collecting data that is not yet information and thus whose relevance to anything may not be immediately obvious at all.

One of the rubrics under which Haddon and his colleagues worked in the Torres Strait was to gather as much material as possible. The accompanying sense of urgency was in part an outcome of Haddon's solo visit as a marine biologist ten years previously; he had not been prepared for the impact which the islanders had upon him, and he had returned with all kinds of observations about what he saw as the effects of colonial rule on them.

But how could such an imperative about gathering material be sustained beyond the initial rescue reaction in the face of what appeared then, a hundred years ago, to be vanishing cultures and disintegrating societies (we know now that they refused to disappear)?<sup>2</sup> Collecting data before it became information had to be made interesting to do for its own sake. Here reflective practice ('writing') had its role to play. One of the motivations that galvanised a good part of twentieth-century social anthropology in Britain was known by the analytical shorthand 'holism'. This had a multiple reference – drawing anything and everything interesting within the focus of enquiry, regardless of scale; rooting this in the supposition that societies and cultures have an internal coherence, so that all would in the end connect up; developing this in a theory of the functional interrelations of social phenomena, at the very least in order that different parts of the data could serve as a context for understanding other parts; and evincing this coherence and interconnection in a battery of constructs such as 'organisation', 'order', 'structure', 'pattern'. No matter that latterday commentators have argued that the coherence was largely an artefact of anthropological writing itself, that all the mid-century

metaphors of social order gave way to processual ones, and that structure, coherence and interconnection came to be regarded as suspicious rhetorical tools. The project of holism was the project of imagining an encompassing social field to which any aspect of social life, however apparently 'small', would contribute; it was also the project of imagining that any information might be relevant to a larger account. As a methodological axiom for the field-worker, it meant therefore that a larger accounting was necessarily and always waiting future elucidation. It became a trivial point whether or not such an encompassment proved attainable.

For it was of course pointless to imagine that one could gather everything: items of knowledge multiply and divide under one's eyes. Rather, the enterprise of field anthropology, at once modestly and scandalously, endorsed the possibility that one could gather *anything*. Perhaps this reconciled the fieldworker to the directions in which his or her hosts might be pulling – it certainly gave licence to curiosity and to following up paths that at the outset simply could not have got on the map.

On my part, I shall never forget my first sight of mounted pearlshells in Mt Hagen, in 1964, heavy in their resin boards, slung like pigs from a pole being carried between two men, who were hurrying with them because of the weight, a gift of some kind. It was only a glimpse; the men were half-running and their path was almost out of my field of vision. But it belongs to a set of images which have mesmerised me ever since. In those early days, time was divided between walking around gardens, getting some idea of the settlement pattern, doing rudimentary genealogical work and acquiring a sense of relations between political groups (clans and, as they were called in the emergent Highlands literature of the time, tribes). The original proposal that I investigate the effect of sibling order on cash cropping success, stimulated by recent reports of Highlands entrepreneurial activity, was put on hold. My supervisor, Esther Goody, might now be amused to think that although the question of sibling order did not prove to be a particularly interesting one, the effect of cash cropping and the property relations it had introduced most certainly did – although it has taken thirty years to loop that back through the visual display that diverted me off the path. A report of sorts can be found in Chapter 5. Some of the other chapters also attempt to work out by what kind of ethnographic

account one might render the role that the pervasive market relations of capitalism play in people's lives when there are new objects and desires (cash crops were an early example) at their disposal. As we shall also see, Papua New Guineans, let alone Hageners, are by no means the only people to whom that question applies.

It was impossible to anticipate the role that prestations were to play in my understanding of Papua New Guinea Highlands social life, as it was impossible to anticipate the significance I was to put on the gendered nature of the event (one would never see women carrying shells like that). Not to know what one is going to discover is self-evidently true of discovery. But, in addition, one also does not know what is going to prove in retrospect to be significant by the very fact that significance is acquired through the subsequent writing, through composing the ethnography as an account after the event.

The fieldwork exercise is an anticipatory one, then, being open to what is to come later. In the meanwhile the would-be ethnographer gathers material whose use cannot be foreseen, facts and issues collected with little knowledge as to their connections. The result is a 'field' of information to which it is possible to return, intellectually speaking, in order to ask questions about subsequent developments whose trajectory was not evident at the outset. These might be developments in the anthropologist's understanding generated by the writing process or they might be social and historical changes in the social life under study. One way of ensuring that at least there will be some resources to hand lies in an old axiom which once accompanied the rubric of holism, namely that data has to be collected 'for its own sake'. And one way of doing that is for the fieldworker to commit him or herself to the social relationships people wish to establish with him or her – for if they so wish it, the fieldworker then becomes part of their relationships with one another. It is back to front to imagine that this either can or should be undertaken in order to collect better data. The relationships must be valued for their own sake. Any resulting information is a residual – often initially unknown – product. This is what immersion means.

Much information is amassed, hopefully, by the field ethnographer with specific intentions in mind. But, at the same time, knowing that one cannot completely know what is going to be germane to any subsequent re-organisation of material demanded

by the process of writing can have its own effect. It may create an expectation of surprise, for instance; one looks for the untoward, for small revelations. The expectation of surprise reappears in the ethnographic text as a revelation of a different kind. The diverse ways in which social anthropologists 'make sense' of bizarre materials, or put events into a wider context, or uncover ideology or demonstrate – an analytical preoccupation for a while – that there is a relationship to be explored between the real and the ideal: these are all analytical moves which pass on the effect of surprise. As it has often been pointed out, material is managed so as to divide the less evident from the more evident and thus show up the work of elucidation. Sometimes it is assumed that the anthropologist is making claims to know 'more' than those he or she works with, although I do not know any practising fieldworker who would ever put it that way. Yet to pass this off by saying that really the anthropologist knows differently, to my mind misses an important point. Rather, the anthropologist is equally trying to know in the *same* way – that is, recover some of the anticipation of fieldwork, some of the revelations that came from the personal relationships established there, and even perhaps some of the surprises which people keep in store for one another.

Indeed there is a form of revelatory knowledge bound up in the antinomies by which much anthropology has proceeded in the second half of this century: norm and deviance, ideology and practice; structure and process; system and agent; representation and evocation: each creates the possibility of escaping from the other, and thus relies on its trajectory being tied at some point into the other in order to emphasise its own path of flight. Its counterpart remains (half) hidden. The expectation of surprise becomes further routinised in the adage that one is never content with what is on the surface and looks behind or looks underneath or otherwise questions what seems taken for granted.

Perhaps it is to conserve some of the original effect of surprise, then, that ethnographers have been drawn to those arenas of social life where people appear to be reflecting on their practices and often seem to be 'revealing' to themselves facts about themselves not always immediately apparent. This can lead to an emphasis on the interpretation of ceremonial or myth, or other esoteric material, which brings in turn the problems of special knowledge to which Maurice Bloch has consistently, and importantly, pointed. It is worth remarking, however, that special

knowledge which inheres, say, in theological or scientific expertise has never held quite the place in anthropological accounts as materials which appear esoteric because they require revealing (beg immediate interpretation). An initial surprise becomes a suspension, a dazzle, and some kinds of 'special knowledge' are more likely to dazzle than others. One is held, as it were, on the threshold of understanding. I referred to having been mesmerised; it is the dazzle effect of certain revelatory practices which occupies me here.

## REIFICATIONS

Why should the Highlands of Papua New Guinea have dominated analytical forms influential now in the social anthropology of Melanesia for more than three decades? While their saliency is periodically contested, displacing one regional view with another seems no solution. We might instead address that influence through some of the forms which knowledge takes in this region. I would suggest that there has been a powerful fusion between the 'expository' practices of anthropologists and the 'display' practices of certain Highlanders. Their effects are both revelatory.

### *A comment on regulatory practices*

The impact of Highlands display on anthropological expositions of group dynamics is widely known. Men in general and big men in particular seem to organise the people around them in the same way as the anthropologist would like to organise his or her account. Yet there is more to this impact than the question of those dominant social forms and the public visibility of men's (by contrast with women's) affairs which have been the subject of thorough-going theoretical attention. Part of the fascination lies I think with the way in which the unfolding of these practices themselves mimics the kind of discoveries ethnographers make through analysis; they invite one to consider what is hidden and concealed behind the acts of revelation. (Is it partly because of this very invitation that such acts may be dubbed 'ceremonial' or 'ritual', as in 'ceremonial exchange' or 'initiation rituals')? Highlands men and women alike have their own answers to what can or cannot be seen in these ceremonial and ritual events. In being

shown what is concealed, however, the ethnographer may well conclude that, among other things, he or she is dealing with knowledge practices, and the different kinds of knowledge that become appropriate on different occasions. It may thus seem that people themselves are managing what is to be known, and to whom when.

For the anthropologist that knowledge will be distributed between the work of observation (what is already understood) and the work of analysis (what needs understanding). I believe I am here speaking for more than myself, though indubitably I am speaking for myself. I have come to realise<sup>3</sup> the extent to which certain Hagen practices have had enduring effect on my anthropology. These include the gestures and practices of ceremonial exchange by which men, as donors and recipients, alternate their perspectives on one another. What is revealed to the audience on the occasion are the signs of capacity – the properties of persons and things, the substance of body and mind – to which people lay claim; what is simultaneously revealed (to whomever might be paying attention) is the already known fact of the origin of these capacities in other people.

It was dazzling at the time. Exchange involved a whole nexus of activities including the creation of a public life, negotiations over the giving and receiving of items of wealth, as well as visible interaction and performances, and accompanied life-crisis events such as bridewealth and mortuary occasions, being epitomised in what exactly came in the literature to be known as ceremonial exchange (*moka*), and on which Andrew Strathern has written extensively. The dazzle effect (for me) endured in the analytical work that was done afterwards. The ethnographic moment, then, was necessarily also an artefact of analysis and of writing. Partly it was a result of realising the revelations behind the revelations; partly it was a result of these events creating the further effect of there being quite different dimensions of life to be uncovered. Thus what was to be further uncovered were the processes of production behind these transactions, the life of women which the public life of men seemed to conceal, and the cross-sex relations that lay athwart these same-sex ones.

Each ethnographic moment will belong to a field of such moments, and is in turn composed of others. In describing Hagen in relation to other societies and other materials, I have found myself repeatedly coming back to this particular 'moment', to the

way in which donors and recipients alternate their perspectives on one another, for explanatory purchase on the character not only of Hagen but of Melanesian sociality. (What took off from men's performances did not of course remain there.) Those mounted shells which I first glimpsed half-disappearing over the brow of a hill as the path took the men out of view were still in general circulation when anthropological investigation in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea began. Neither their historical absence since (shells have gone out of circulation) nor subsequent theoretical arguing and counter-arguing seem to have lessened their presence in my work. On the contrary, I have been taken aback by the extent to which they have reappeared in these essays. It is as though they have been summoned by the character of changes and developments – and not only in Papua New Guinea – which the essays also touch upon.

#### *Relational knowledge*

The argument can be put another way. It should be evident that this particular ethnographic moment has become for me a paradigm, a theoretical passage point which mobilises several issues: in short, it has become a category of knowledge. The moment objectifies a certain observation (the gift of wealth) and its accompanying analysis (the exchange of perspectives). To borrow back terms given a particular analytical emphasis in the context of Melanesian material,<sup>4</sup> the object (of knowledge) is here reified. By reification I simply intend to point to the manner in which entities are made into objects when they are seen to assume a particular form ('gift', 'exchange'). This form in turn indicates the properties by which they are known and, in being rendered knowable or graspable through such properties, entities appear (in Euro-American idiom) as 'things'. A parallel process of objectification lies in what in the Melanesian context I have needed to call personification. The Euro-American notion of humanising non-human entities is a special case and I mean more broadly the way in which entities are made into objects through the relations which people have with another.

These terms derive from an earlier elucidation of materials which there is no necessity to rehearse here (see note 4). A few more words about reification are, however, in order.

The focus on form comes from what has seemed to be a useful

contrast between Euro-American assumptions about the naturalness or givenness of the properties of things, and the way in which Melanesians sometimes think of themselves having to work to make things appear in their appropriate guise. A clan of men and women only appears as a 'clan', or a human child as 'human' rather than spirit, if the contours, the shapes, are right. In the past, making the right form appear included having to ensure proper growth – of persons, plants, pigs – hence the anxious application of magic as part of people's endeavours. Now Euro-Americans take the form of many things in their world for granted. It is when obvious intellectual effort is applied to them, as for instance in the theoretical decision as to what is to count as a clan, or these days how human a human embryo is, that the role which people's (intellectual) work plays in the construction of such 'things' becomes evident to them (Euro-Americans). Among scholars a special place is given to intellectual work, and again to the work it takes to understand that and thus to epistemological self-consciousness about ways of knowing. We should not lose sight of the fact, then, that the effort of 'knowing' which goes into making an analysis or model of the world 'appear' in a written account is a process which involves reification. It is a cultural curiosity that reification is of course frequently attacked for its very properties – for being an edifice of knowledge, and thus obviously artifice.

There are many already established and thus conventional reifications in social anthropology, in the recent past the most powerful being the concepts of 'culture' and 'society'. These things, consistently shown up not to be things at all while all along continuing to behave just like that in people's writings, condense into concrete images whole spectra of relations. They thus present themselves as (analytical) categories of knowledge; a universe of data is at once bound up in these terms and is organised by them so as to appear as certain kinds of information. One can as a consequence interrogate such categories, and use them to interrogate other categories. At what moments is it appropriate, for example, to label events as social or cultural? However, that question is not restricted to these particular categories alone. Anthropological models in general organise knowledge about human affairs in terms of social relations and the complexities of social life and thought. They determine the contours of what is recognisably relational in people's dealings with one another.

Those contours may be 'seen' in certain recurring images. When I write about exchange of perspectives, for instance, I have in mind the image of a Hagen man handing over an item (shells, pigs, money) with the expectation of a return gift and, thus, with the counterflow contained in that same gesture.<sup>5</sup> There is much more to my understanding of such an event, but the form which that gesture takes is durable: it reminds me that regardless of previous analysis there remains a moment to be understood. What I reify here is of course an understanding about sociality, and specifically about a rather particular, and particularly gendered, set of social relations. What I see in the gesture I then see over again in the wealth items themselves. These gifts had a further compelling effect on this ethnographer for the reason that they seemed to compel responses from people who saw them. They were generally handed over in a public context to critical and judgemental recipients before a critical and judgemental audience. The scrutiny of form drove home the fact that, *ipso facto*, a form can only appear with its appropriate properties – or else it has not appeared. A return gift is not a return gift if the items are too few or poor; prestige does not emerge from a display if the display fails. In that sense these entities have an aesthetic effect. In that sense, too, they hold something of the status of 'art objects' in Euro-American culture, minimally because whether or not an artefact is deemed art at all is a debate precisely about the appropriateness of form.

Now I am self-conscious about this particular act of reification as an artefact of observation/analysis because that is how I also wish to describe the gesture from a Hagen perspective. It would be a mistake, however, to jump to the conclusion that, for Hagen people, shells and pigs and such are reifications (things) because they are objects. Rather, they become objects, in the sense of becoming an object of attention or of people's regard, by being grasped or apprehended as things. That I put it round this way must be understood in relation to the second mode of making objects, which also gives us the generic Hagen entity which is (so to speak) the object of objectification: social relations. Objects may also be grasped or apprehended as persons.

Wealth items (among other things in Hagen) objectify relations by giving them the form of things; they may also objectify relations by making persons, that is, positions from which people perceive one another. For these items separate persons from

persons. It is through the separation of persons from one another that specific relations are created, and through relations that persons are defined in respect of one another. The relationship between donor and recipient is my paradigm here, for it is in each distinguishing himself from his partner – in order to undertake the transaction – that the relationship between them becomes visible. Each acts with the other in mind. But note that relations are thus personified in the separation of persons to the extent that persons (continue to) (thereby) have an effect on one another. Those effects also have to be conveyed, and wealth items can convey them. We can now return to reification, and to the place which it holds in several of the chapters which follow.

Relations wither or flourish according to the properties seen to flow alongside them. The *effectiveness* of relationships thus depends on the form in which certain objects appear. What is reified, we may say, are capabilities and powers, that is, relations are reified, endowed with effect, in anticipation of – or in commemoration of – being activated. If Hagen people were to think of it this way, they might put it as follows. Wealth items, gifts, do not reify society or culture, which is an object of the anthropological analysis of social relations; they reify capacities contained in persons/relations. They are thus predicated on activity, and the direction of flow indicates the immediate source of agency.<sup>6</sup> In short, social relations are made manifest through action.

If the ethnographer has been more elaborate than is necessary with these definitions, it is because the dazzle of the ethnographic moment forces on her, or out of her/me, certain conceptualisations which I try to hold steady with these terms. The terms themselves belong to a much wider field of discourse – there are other, overlapping anthropological usages.

Alfred Gell has provided a wonderful example. The phrase ‘social relations are made manifest through action’ comes from his book *Art and Agency* (1998).<sup>7</sup> When Gell set out to delineate an anthropological theory of art, it was to be a theory which resembled others in social anthropology. That is, it (the theory) was to take as its subject the working of social relations. This was not to be an account of art as representation or a disquisition on cultural meaning or the exercise of putting art productions into a ‘social context’. It was to theorise art as operating within a nexus of agency. Agents cause events to happen. Art, he argues, may be

actor or acted upon, agent or patient, in a field of agents and patients which take diverse forms and have diverse effects on one another. As far as efficacy on others is concerned, one may thus see an art object in the same way as one may see a person. It embodies capacities. Euro-Americans often think agency inappropriately personified when it is applied to inanimate entities, but that is because they link agency to will or intention. Magnificently, Gell sweeps all that aside. In terms of the effects of entities upon one another, and it is the analysis of relational effect which in his view makes analysis anthropological, ‘things’ and ‘persons’ may be co-presences in a field of effectual actors.

From his perspective on art, Gell has his own battery of terms; apart from ‘agent’ which signals the effective source of an act, he uses the term ‘index’ in a rather similar way to my usage of reification (a thing), and his ‘patient’ overlaps with my person as a (personified) object of people’s regard. It is of course the concepts, not the terms as such, that matter. Although I do not pursue it very far here, the advantage of his vocabulary is that it frees our two otherwise troublesome constructs, thing and person, for their phenomenal apprehension in an ordinary language sense.

Social agency manifests and realises itself in the effects of actions. An agent thus requires a relational counterpart, that which shows the effect of another’s agency, hence Gell’s use of the term ‘patient’. He argues that primary agents and patients proliferate in secondary, artefactual, form. Artefacts may, in his words, be persons, things, animals. There is interest here for the sociologists’ actor network theory, briefly introduced in Chapter 9, which comes from the quite different theoretical stable of science and technology studies. Actor network theory pays attention to the way in which social relations, and their self-empowering manifestation in human skills, summon the properties of, and thus enroll the effectiveness of, artefacts and techniques regardless of whether these are (in the Euro-American ordinary language sense) persons, things, animals or, for that matter, events.

There is also interest here for the analysis of property relations. Property as a relation has long been central to anthropological theorising, with or without reference to theories of political economy, and the long-standing indigenous Euro-American critique of property forms as containing or concealing social relations. In fact property relations could have provided Gell with a secondary model for his analysis of art. Like ‘art’, property is a

specific cultural form whose counterparts elsewhere social anthropologists may demonstrate or deny. (They may either regard property as responding to an innate human disposition towards possession or else regard it as having emerged under certain, localised social conditions.) When they are being Euro-American, anthropologists may regard art and property as attached to persons in somewhat comparable (not necessarily similar) ways. Art already appears to be (has the phenomenal form of) the work of persons, so that the products of this work thus appear as a reification of their capacities. To Euro-Americans, art thus has visual or acoustic properties whereas there is nothing necessarily visual or acoustic about property. In comparison, where things already appear to exist in the world then establishing 'property' is a question of creating personal claims in them. Behind the thing, analysis may in turn uncover social relations, for instance – in fact especially – the social nature of production, either as a manufactured item or as a piece of the natural world made known by intellectual effort, routinised in the understanding of property as a bundle of rights. Property rights appear as at once the possession of persons and, by that act, as dividing persons off from one another.

These are of course only moments in the unfolding of comprehension. For Euro-Americans, the application of knowledge (analysis, the writing of an explanatory account) brings a further, recursive, comprehension of these entities. When the 'thing' which becomes property through the claims people make on it is then perceived as the product of social relations in the first place, that fresh perception may itself be perceived as a product of social effort, for it requires and constitutes knowledge. Knowledge may in turn be the subject of property rights, provided, that is, it assumes an appropriate form.

#### *The Reification of Social Relations*

Language can work against the user of it. One of the problems with the Euro-American-derived language on which anthropologists draw for making phenomena appear in their accounts is that it makes other, unwanted, things appear as well. There are intrusive evaluative overtones to many of the key terms in the analytical vocabulary. Sociality is frequently understood as implying sociability, reciprocity as altruism and relationship as solidarity,

not to speak of economic actions as economic motivations. Here terms can even carry insulting connotations, as 'object' and 'objectification' often do.<sup>8</sup> Thus reification can be regarded as making things abstract, artificial and depersonalised, personification as absurdly fetishist or mystical. As for my ethnographic moment, the recapitulated and recursive gesture of exchange, that can sound either too materialist or too sentimental for words. Dazzle, on the other hand, is likely to connote the fascination of enchantment.

In order to divest the dazzle effect of some of its positive overtones, I have included in these essays reference to the troubled nature of episodes quite difficult to think about. Head-hunting seems no more nor less barbaric than much human activity; but the image of the witch-child has a different effect (on me), more akin to some of the morally problematic issues raised by Euro-American interventions in human reproduction, and in particular the technical availability of choices which hold out the idea that one might select a child for particular characteristics. Although in the Papua New Guinean case to which I refer (see Chapter 3) men as well as women may hunt down witches, it is the actions of the female parent, the mother, that made me pause. The case bears directly on what people wish to make visible about themselves.

When Hagen men display shells and pigs (not heads), they present a version of themselves as they would like to be seen. Hagen women do not present themselves in the same way. If I think of a counterpart to the two men with their shells, I think of the women I would visit in the evenings, returned from the gardens, having washed their cull of sweet potatoes in a stream on their way. Or another meeting, in 1995, with a now elderly companion. What sticks in my mind is her retreating back, humped with a netbag full of tubers, digging stick clasped over the head, a steep path in front of her, hurrying home. This was not a display, any more than men have any particular desire to be seen when they are working in their gardens. It is an ethnographic moment, but one that disappears in what (misleadingly as it turned out) seems to have been already understood.

If one were to ask what is going on here, the chances are that one would focus on the evident effects of work, of daily rhythm, of obligation. No surprise that on the other side of ceremonial exchange lies the work of women and men in their gardens and

the daily grind of feeding people and pigs. And why is it no surprise? Perhaps because that image is likely to have been pre-empted by the counter-effect of certain Euro-American knowledge practices. These have many components, but they also share one crucial point of substance or content. Perhaps one could refer to it as auto-dazzle.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge involves creativity, effort, production; it loves to uncover creativity, effort, production! Specifically it uncovers effort applied to a given world (whether that world is social or natural), so that it (the effort) can be made visible apart from its origin and outcome. Like the hilly path, the arduousness of producing the necessities of life seems all too evident evidence. And the fact that in this case it involves gardening, and thus work akin to productive activity in Euro-American eyes, is likely to summon further Euro-American notions about the underlying reality of human intervention in natural or biological process. Moreover this reality is open to constant discovery and re-discovery; I am almost inclined to see the uncovering of the 'reality' of human intervention in such processes as having a counterpart dazzle to the revelatory practices of ceremonial exchange where what is revealed is the origin of one person's gift in another person.

The Euro-American reification of effort or productivity takes various forms. 'Property' once held the place of the self-evident/mystifying demonstration of human effort which had gone into the appropriation of nature; in the late twentieth century, it seems, 'technology' has become a new exemplar of human enterprise. Technology adds the further crucial element of 'knowledge', for technology embodies not just the modification of natural realities, and the recognition of the human handiwork that has gone into them, but evidence of the knowledge of how to do it.

It is the cultural place which technology has come to play in Euro-American perceptions of their place in the world which has in turn given an impetus to the concept of intellectual property – intellectual property rights (IPR) hold up a mirror to the dazzle of creativity. For 'intellectual property' points simultaneously to an item or technique made available to knowledge, authorising its use and circulation, and to the knowledge, on which claims are made, which has made it into an item or technique. Knowledge embedded in technology has already been productive in the manner that labour is productive, while knowledge rendered as a subject of property rights can be put into productive circulation

as commodities are. 'Intellectual property rights' takes its place as part of the current international language of commerce and human rights alike.

In its wake come all kinds of indigenous (Euro-American) critiques, including outright criticism of the saliency of property as the overwhelming legal response to claims which could be conceptualised in other ways (as in use rights, disposal, licence). This critique addresses the fact that the last twenty or thirty years has seen an unprecedented development not just of new things to own but of things which suggest that Euro-Americans need to devise new ways of laying claim. New reproductive technologies (NRT) are one area of interest. Questions about relations based on substance and relations based on intention or mental conception, questions that could not have been foreseen twenty years ago, come to influence the kinds of claims kin make on one another. Thus Euro-American ideas about the interrelation between different components of the procreative process, the place of biology and the nature of (re)productive 'substances', have become problematised by claims (made possible through technologies of assisted conception) arising from intellectual or conceptual work and invention. These add new complexities to relations. Indeed we could identify a double trajectory, each spinning off in its own orbit while making repeated contact with the other. For in debates over NRT, and the ideas of personhood caught up in them, Euro-Americans witness on the one hand an increasing emphasis on corporalisation (biology), and on the other hand an increasing value given to conceptual or mental effort. Thus what are constantly (re)created as the underlying realities of genetic makeup are counterbalanced by the accord given to human invention.

The essays which follow touch both on the claims people make through relations with others imagined as relations of body substance, and on the increasing visibility of intellectual work as a factor in property relations. They exploit one of the facilities of the ethnographic method: being able to re-describe something from another viewpoint not just as a view on it but from a new point of entirety or holism. I have of course written my own invitation when I say it invites one to return to earlier formulations with fresh intent.

The chapters in Part I are ethnographically heterogeneous. Chapter 2 draws attention to an explicit aesthetic effect as the aim

of Hagen body decoration. The effectiveness of a man's exchange relations with others are given form, reified, in the items he attaches to the body and of which it thus appears composed, and specific ceremonial exchange occasions entail the display of this form. A parallel with Euro-American notions of genetic composition is briefly explored through questions about the representation of individuality raised by a conference on portraiture. But reification can carry a penalty. The subject of Chapter 3 is the production of images in a world of excess. Excess of consumption (the body image of a greedy witch) finds a parallel in Euro-American perceptions of excess of meaning (analytical work run riot), and raises the question of how to hide or dispose of image/meaning. One 'solution' lies in alternating states of depletion and plenty. In Chapter 4, the penalty of reification is raised again by a different kind of excess: for some, no amount of theoretical arguing and counter-arguing can seemingly subdue the effect of biological knowledge. The role of knowledge in debates over procreative rights (here, the right of the child to know its biological parentage) is examined from two perspectives raised by a Canadian case. The approval with which information is gathered in order to make public opinion about the new reproductive technologies visible and explicit is contrasted with the ambiguous consequences on Euro-American ideas of kinship of data about ties of substance where parents may wish to hide the information it brings.

Part II turns to the vocabulary of analysis stimulated by changing configurations of property. It asserts the need of – and one which could be taken much further – a new conceptual repertoire for understanding traditional anthropological materials. Chapter 5 opens with the ways in which social relations appear to have expanded in Hagen over the last three decades; this is put down to an excess of sorts (inflation, new patterns of consumption). Not being able to detach relations from one another is in the 1990s, and under the impact of economic change, one effect of new kinds of interactions between the sexes. There are consequences here for ideas about reproduction once channelled through body payments. There are also new claims to ownership of resources and rights in persons. Property created by rights of invention has an explicitly 'hybrid' (complex) character, Chapter 7 argues, akin to that which Latour finds endogenous to Papua New Guinea. The issue is explored through reflections on cultural inventiveness and on some of the new candidates for proprietor-

ship of biogenetic material that appeal to intellectual property rights. The chapter criticises certain assumptions about the nature of Melanesian transactions, and touches on the Euro-American view of ownership (possessiveness) as attachment. In Chapter 8, the quandary of a modern Hagen parent is described in terms of a specifically local conundrum: the need to detach children from parents in a context where the old instruments of bridewealth exchange no longer operate with the same effect. At the same time, for the anthropologist, the quandary brings the Hagen parent nearer to rather than further away from her Euro-American counterparts concerned with new formulations of procreative rights.

Issues of form and substance behind many of the new formulations are brought together in relation to one area, signalled by the speculative essay on intellectual property rights which opens Part III. Chapter 9 draws connections between emergent forms of Euro-American property across several domains. Four candidates for potential ownership are identified: the products of collective life (cultural property), of usable knowledge (intellectual property), of the body (through the application of biotechnology) and of professional commitment (academic control). The essay comments on certain kinds of European rhetoric, notably the rush to personify the biotechnological development of human substance as the commercialisation of human beings or persons. There is an international community of commentary here. It was the elevation of a virus to human status that led an American-based non-governmental task force to draw attention to bioprospecting in Papua New Guinea; this lay behind a conference on intellectual property rights. Interpretations are brought to task when the anthropologist is asked to contribute. This is the subject of Chapter 9. Chapter 10 finds another locus for talking about concealment and revelation; this time it is related to questions about the scale of people's activities, and the manner in which values are or are not kept constant. It is an attempt to discuss social change without pre-empting anything by the freighted vocabulary of change-and-continuity. It thus tries to keep ethnographic writing as 'open' to the unpredictable as the social life which stimulates observations on itself.

If the world is shrinking in terms of resources, it is expanding in terms of new candidates for ownership; there are at once new

kinds of entities being created and new grounds for property – among other types of ownership – claims. Whether one lives in Papua New Guinea or in Britain, cultural categories are being dissolved and re-formed at a tempo that calls for reflection, and that, I would add, calls for the kind of lateral reflection afforded by ethnographic insight.

In the latter part of the twentieth century anthropologists are as conscious of the appearance and disappearance of social forms as they were at its inception. This is one reason why I offer no apology for the comparative moves here (bracketing together Papua New Guinea and Britain, or, more accurately, the ethnographically conceived Melanesia and Euro-America). If one is ready to contemplate differences between temporal epochs, then it is helpful to be reminded of differences between cultural epochs. At certain junctures in these essays I suggest that ways in which 'Melanesians' objectify social relations could enrich the impoverished conceptual repertoire with which 'Euro-Americans' seem lumbered; however, there are warnings as well as delights here.

Three changes have occurred over the last twenty years, among many others, in the way that Euro-Americans are asked to think about relations between (to use Gell's terms) agents and patients, or to imagine persons and things alike as actants. First is the late twentieth century (re)embrace of technology which at the beginning of this period produced the cyborg literature, images of interdigitated human and mechanical capabilities. At about the same time, the new reproductive and genetic technologies, as they were called, were signalling unprecedented interventions in procreative and generative processes. Second has been the rise of personalised markets, not to speak of personalised money facilitated by communications technologies, and a self-styled culture of enhanced information flow. Finally, firms and corporations, as well as the organisers of new technology initiatives, have begun to pay increasing attention to what has been known all along but has come to be articulated in new ways, namely the fact that technical (and social) knowledge is embedded in persons and in the relations between them. When the capabilities of persons and relations are identified as skills, and the skills are seen as transferable, then they are also commodifiable. The concept of skill works as a kind of human counterpart to the concept of technology.

The commodity seems more visible than ever. Yet the trajectories are complex, and there might be a parallel here to the dual

emphasis on corporalisation and conceptual effort noted in relation to reproductive technology. In one direction everything seems to be becoming reified, one thing finding an equivalent in another thing: there seems nothing that cannot be bought or sold. In another direction human effort understood as intellectual as well as material means that there is nothing which does not seem to carry connotations of social identity: there seems nothing that cannot be attributed to someone's authorship. At the very least, forms of knowledge are held to have a social origin, and it is no accident that social constructionism was for two decades a dominant social science paradigm. At the same time, then, as the possibilities of commoditisation reach into areas of human life and creativity that were never open to the market before, so too are commodities becoming personified, in the Euro-American sense, that is. By that I mean that they are identified through their attachment to persons in ways that go beyond simple notions of possession, at the same time as attributes attached to identities may be acquiring a newly transactable (sometimes commercial) value. Cultural property is a good example. Of course many anthropologists (and Chapter 7 briefly takes this up) have argued that the commodity never was the pure product which its standing as an analytical category made it out to be. I do not think that was always a simple case of misdescription. I prefer complex trajectories to blurred genres. They give us marginally more purchase for dealing with the unpredictable.

Lateral thinking might come to grips with the complexity and momentum of these changes; critical thinking could tug at the very concept of 'change', which constantly threatens to spin off its own apparently resource-rich orbit, and pull it back perhaps to the real world of enduring problems and resource-poor populations. Together these point to one kind of response from the social scientist. This can be neither a matter of piling on theoretical antecedents nor a matter of going where no one has been before. I would put it rather that we need to go precisely where we have already been, back to the immediate here and now out of which we have created our present knowledge of the world. That means constructing a mode of enquiry which will enable a return to fields of knowledge and activity in the hindsight of unpredicted outcomes, and which will thus enable recovery of material that investigators were not aware they were collecting. The ethnographic method as it has been developed by

social anthropologists, with its insistent demands of immersement, begins to look extremely promising.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These are gathered at the Conclusion to this chapter (p. 257). I am grateful to Eve Mitleton-Kelly from the Organisational and Complexity Learning Project research project at the London School of Economics for introducing me to the idea of complex evolving systems (the phrase is after Peter Allen), and for her observations in this context.

#### Part I

#### EFFECTS

