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### **Rethinking Regimes of Social Inequality**

I should begin by thanking Robert Borofsky for recruiting such an apt pair of reviewers for my book. I also very much appreciate the depth of thought and contemplation that is so strikingly evident in Marilyn Strathern's and Nicholas Modjeska's commentary on my work. The two reviews (which nicely complement each other) draw attention to a number of lines of inquiry that could usefully be pursued in further research, in the analysis (and reanalysis) of ethnographic data, and in comparative and developmental formulations. Consideration of these potential lines of inquiry is the main focus of this essay.

I am entirely in agreement with Modjeska's suggestion that a comparison of my analysis (in *Constructing Inequality*) with that presented in Godelier's *The Making of Great Men* (1986) would be theoretically productive. The heuristic value of such a comparison is enhanced by the divergent theoretical models engaged by each work. I was concerned with a controlled comparison of the linguistically related Strickland-Bosavi tribes, on one hand, and with Collier's general (and cross-culturally applicable) model of brideservice

societies, on the other hand. Godelier on his part confines his comparative purview to a number of cases that he sees as relevant to the great-man/big-man contrast and to Sahlins's original model of big-man systems (1963; see Godelier 1986:162–188). He does not consider any of the Strickland-Bosavi tribes in this context.

Comparison is invariably motivated, decidedly unpromiscuous, hostile to heterogeneity, and prescriptively endogamous (such that apples are compared to other apples). The emergence of a perception of the mutual relevance of the Etoro and Baruya cases and the invocation of the heuristic desirability of this particular comparison thus raises several interesting sets of issues. One of these concerns the grounds for the construction of a comparative universe: grounds that may be either linguistically or geographically regional, on one hand; or typological in terms of sociocultural characteristics such as form of leadership (big-man) or mode of marriage (brideservice), on the other hand. Both types of comparative frameworks are implicitly underwritten by assumptions that like causes produce like effects and that a convergence of cases thus reveals developmental processes and trajectories. Generally speaking, the selection of an environmentally homogeneous region as the bounds of a comparative universe would be likely to produce substantial convergence if economic and ecological processes drive social transformation, while a typological framework anticipates that core sociocultural features generate constellations of derivative attributes that constitute social formations composed of interrelated elements. Expectations concerning the sources of transformation are thus built into the choice of comparative framework. In calling for a comparison of the Etoro and Baruya, Modjeska invokes "significant social organization and cultural features in common" and specifically eschews a regional litmus test (see his note 20). It is noteworthy that the similarities he lists would all be considered components of the superstructure within the Marxian approach he favors.

The second set of issues concerns the theoretical framework that explicitly provides the conceptual terms of the comparison. Here Modjeska clearly advocates a Marxian framework. He sees Godelier's analysis as "couched in terms of Marxian notions of symbolic capital" that he considers illuminating. However, on rechecking, it seems that Godelier speaks in terms of "overall social logics" that entail modalities of exchange and discrete sets of interrelationships between kinship, wealth, and power that constitute distinctive forms of social hierarchy (1986:175). He does not utilize the concept of symbolic capital per se in this work, and the reframing of his analysis in these terms derives from Modjeska's retrospective perspective (1991).

It should be noted here that Knauff takes up the question of the framing of comparative analysis and the underlying assumptions this entails (1993:

117–128), as well as the applicability of Godelier's great-man/big-man typology to south coast New Guinea (ibid.:78–83). The general question of the utility of Godelier's analytic framework is instructively debated by Andrew Strathern (1995), Pierre Lemonnier (1995), and Bruce Knauft (1995) in a recent *Pacific Studies* book review forum. An earlier article by Andrew Strathern (1993) and a recent contribution by Biersack (1995:247–261) also provide relevant assessments. There is not sufficient space here to review all the perceptive points made in the course of this debate, although my response to Modjeska's suggestion builds upon these in a general way.

Modjeska perceives a broad parallel between my analysis and Godelier's in that both concern a type of reproduction of inequality that is "an entirely different kind of domination/inequality than that found in Highlands societies, where prestige is largely tied to performance in ceremonial gift exchanges that, in turn, depend upon pig production and finance." To my mind this formulation proposes that the character of the prestige-stigma system shapes the components and contours of the systemic generation of inequality. More specifically, the prestige-stigma system prefigures exchange requirements, which then strongly impinge upon production. This being the case, the prestige-stigma system is the logical point of departure for the analysis of social inequality (even though this confounds Marxian analytic protocol). Moreover, comparison grounded in similarities and differences in prestige-stigma systems is potent and productive precisely because of their constitutive character.

Modjeska touches on the contrastive difficulty of employing a conventional or unreconstructed Marxian analysis in his remarks on the "semiautonomous" nature of the superstructure in the Etoro case (see his note 17). It would appear that it is this lack of expectable articulations linking base and superstructure that prompts recourse to the concept of symbolic capital. In view of this it is not unreasonable to closely inquire into how the concept of symbolic capital articulates with an established Marxian framework, and to wonder if it does not constitute an appendage that serves an epicycle-like explanatory function. Thus, while Modjeska sees my analysis of Etoro social inequality as grist for reconstructed Marxian mills, informed by his retrospective perspective on Godelier's analysis of the Baruya, I see it just the other way around. What Modjeska subsumes under the label of symbolic capital is quite readily analyzed in terms of a prestige-stigma system, as *Constructing Inequality* illustrates. Moreover, the concept of symbolic capital does not readily encompass stigma, and the assignment of stigma (in the form of a witchcraft accusation) constitutes a critical arena of power. In short, I contend that the theoretical constructs developed in *Constructing Inequality* provide a better elucidation of the ethnographic data and of the phenomenon of social inequality than those recommended by Modjeska.

In the remark cited above, Modjeska identifies a specific configuration of prestige (tied to ceremonial gift exchange) as the crux of the distinctive forms of inequality found in Highlands societies. Taking this observation to its logical conclusion suggests the formulation of a typology of prestige-stigma systems that would serve as the scaffolding for comparative endeavor. One could readily envision how this might build productively upon prior comparative frameworks, including those that have focused on finance and production (A. J. Strathern 1969, 1978), production intensities (Feil 1987), fertility cults (Whitehead 1986), and overall social logics and/or exchange logics (Rubel and Rosman 1978; Godelier 1982, 1986; Lemonnier 1990, 1991).

Although Marilyn Strathern acknowledges the validity of my critique of Collier and Rosaldo (1981) and Collier (1988), she also endorses the continued utility of drawing a fundamental distinction between two types of societies analogous to Collier and Rosaldo's distinction between "brideservice" and "bridewealth" societies. I am in complete agreement with her on this point and in her assessment of the enduring significance of Collier and Rosaldo's project, namely, the development of contrastive models of social inequality applicable to comparatively unstratified societies (without classes or estates) cross-culturally. However, the question then arises: what theoretical vantage point would most usefully serve as the generative basis for this reconceptualization of contrastive regimes of social inequality?

Strathern proposes that the crux of the contrast between brideservice and bridewealth regimes that invites conceptual reincarnation is a difference in the purposes for which men need wives. Thus, among the Etoro, "Men still need wives in one sense, as they do juniors and youths, even though it is as receptacles for their life force rather than for contributions of food and work. They even reinvent in the anthropologist's mind something like the old division between brideservice and bridewealth regimes, even if the focus on marriage and wealth is proved misplaced." I concur in this view. What I would add is that the purposes for which men need wives are an artifact of the prestige-stigma system and the nature of the engagement between the prestige-stigma system and the economic system, including the articulation grounded in the division of labor. (Modjeska's notes 16, 17, and 18 are also germane to these points.) The theoretical vantage point developed in *Constructing Inequality* will thus serve equally well to forward the comparative projects advocated by both Strathern and Modjeska. More specifically, in *Constructing Inequality* I propose that one may identify a delimited category of societies that manifest comparable forms and dimensions of social inequality:

[T]he prestige systems of the societies that are grouped together in terms of the employment of principles of categorization based on

age, gender, and personal characteristics are of a distinctive type. Prestige is accorded on the basis of distinction in culturally valued activities in which personal qualities that betoken virtue are manifested. These are consequently activities in which an individual's own skill and labor contribution are discernible and can be distinguished from the contributions of others. Thus, male prestige is typically derived from activities that are predominantly or exclusively performed by males and that do not require direct female labor inputs. Prestige is often accorded on the basis of hunting success, generosity in distributing game, distinction in raiding and warfare, ritual performance, possession of sacred knowledge, and possession of spiritual powers, while stigma is typically linked to sickness-sending and the violation of taboos. Female access to the performance of culturally valued activities is often limited. However, a substantial number of societies with minimal forms of social differentiation have both male and female shamans, and a few have female ritual leaders (see, for example, Poole 1981a). When prestige-producing activities are open to women, the same principles of allocation apply in that prestige is linked to the individual's own skill and labor. Thus female prestige derived from shamanism is diminished when the efficacy of female practitioners is defined as contingent upon male contributions (see, for example, Godelier 1986: 120–21). This substantiates the centrality of the principle of individual effort. The general applicability of this principle is also evident from the fact that the prestige derived from hunting is significantly reduced or eliminated when hunting is collective. (P. 479)

I should note here that I treated the question of the central locus for the production of inequality as an empirical question, to be answered by an analysis of available data pertaining to all relevant domains of Etoro social life. I would likewise be inclined to pursue the task of reformulating a general typology of contrastive forms of social inequality by consideration of the ethnographic data rather than by generating types directly from theoretical models. My consideration of different forms of the division of labor among the Strickland-Bosavi tribes exemplifies the kind of comparative methodology I consider productive. This application generated contrastive constellations of features pertaining to the Etoro division of labor, on one hand, and that of the Kamula on the other, while at the same time showing that most of the ethnographic cases present a more balanced combination of features. In other words, the distribution of forms of the gendered division of labor among the Strickland-Bosavi tribes is not empirically bimodal, but more nearly ap-

proximates a continuum. Consideration of the contrastive polar cases at either end of this continuum is nevertheless quite instructive, because the two distinctive configurations of the gendered division of labor manifested do co-vary with differences in marital practices and conjugal relations. There are observable constellations of features (consistent with the concept of ideal types). At the same time, the continuum distribution of the bulk of the cases is also theoretically instructive. It is evident that a single sociocultural system may employ one form of the gendered division of labor in one domain of production and the contrastive form in another. The question of whether these are in contradiction (perhaps generating friction in conjugal relations) or represent complementary countervailing tendencies might then be investigated. The central point here is that we need to glean more from such expectable (non-bimodal) configurations of comparative data than merely registering their disconfirmation of an ensemble of structural types generated by a priori theoretical considerations. This might usefully include consideration of the degree to which cases may cluster at certain points along this kind of continuum, as well as consideration of the extent to which every logically derivable permutation is observed (or every point occupied by an ethnographic case). It might be more useful to envision the inquiry as a survey of the naturally occurring isotopes of the phenomena under investigation than as an attempt to locate the empirical manifestation of Platonic archetypes. Likewise, it is unstable intermediate types that may potentially have the most to tell us about processes of change.

In sum, what I am advocating is a systematic, case by case, empirically based ethnographic comparison of the prestige-stigma systems of Melanesia to determine what types emerge, to identify their distinctive features, and to chart the distribution of cases along a continuum of variations. We have good reasons to believe that this would provide a heuristically useful basis for reconceptualizing regimes of social inequality and thereby advancing our understanding of the phenomenon of social inequality, including the developmental aspects of it.

There is a rich tradition of focusing on prestige in Melanesian (and indeed Pacific) ethnography. Malinowski tells us in the introduction to *Argonauts* that what we will see in the ensuing chapters is the Trobriand tribesman "striving to satisfy certain aspirations, to attain his type of value, to follow his line of social ambition" ([1922] 1961:25). He also proposes that it is by focusing on the paramount interest of the Trobriander in the Kula that we will "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (ibid.; emphasis in original). The imprint of Malinowski's conception of the task of ethnography carries forward from *Argonauts* up to the present and to some degree transcends the succession of theoretical

epochs witnessed over this period. If the Enga say “Pigs are our hearts!” then virtually any ethnographer of the Enga will likely take note of this particular cultural obsession in some publication, even if said anthropologist is himself or herself obsessed with the theory or issue *de jour*. This is to say that the ethnographic record is quite amenable to the comparative enterprise proposed.

These observations connect to Josephides’s discussion of two approaches to the writing of ethnography, and her reference to the parallel philosophical distinction between “theory-centered” and “ethnography-centered” approaches. I agree with her that an account of social practices is essential to both. Sanday’s suggestion that ethnographic inquiry focus on the concrete performances and activities of everyday life resonates with this as well. However, I would extend this to encompass Malinowski’s emphasis on the obligations, duties, desires, aspirations, and obsessions that animate the diverse social actors engaged in these practices (and carry this further than Malinowski did). I have attempted to do this at many points, including my discussions of (1) the mother’s, father’s, and initiate’s perspectives on the culminating act of anointing the initiate’s head with tree oil; (2) male and female perspectives on key myths; (3) male and female responses to the prospect of violent retribution for witchcraft; (4) the meaning of witchcraft compensation to the alleged witch and the deceased’s next of kin (respectively); and (5) the father’s weeping upon receipt of bridewealth that Marilyn Strathern ponders in her review. Strathern’s concern that we examine “labor,” “work,” “effort,” and “nurture” in terms of local meanings (rather than imported assumptions) entails parallel objectives (and she has contributed to this enterprise in *The Gender of the Gift* [1988]).

The questions anthropologists address have often derived from interests shared with a wider audience and resulted in widely read books. (The works of Margaret Mead readily come to mind.) This is certainly consistent with anthropology’s role in liberal education and is as it should be. However, the questions that arise in the mind of the nonspecialist (whom we can imagine as a student for the purposes of this discussion) often require reformulation. For example, the student may wish to have his or her predilection that all human beings are motivated by economic self-interest confirmed by Melanesian ethnography. We would then need to turn this into a question of the Melanesian actor’s motives and objectives in engaging in exchange. But the difficulty with the nonspecialist’s questions about gender equality and inequality is that such queries are more resistant to such reformulation and the reader (or student) may not be so amenable to the disconfirmation of prior beliefs. Thus, although Economic Man—as a modal personality type (Devereux 1978)—can be exorcised and sarcastically debunked, this is not

equally true of Universal Woman, likewise a bundle of assumed motives and desires. Indeed, there is no small irony in the fact that the Trobriand Islands served as the site for both the deconstruction of Economic Man and the fabrication of Universal Woman at successive points in the history of anthropology (Malinowski [1922] 1961; Weiner 1976; M. Strathern 1981).

The potential difficulty posed by a theory-centered approach seems to me to be more readily resolved by recourse to comparative theory. An ethnographically centered theory, built up upon a foundation of systematic comparison of ethnographic cases, provides a receptive ground into which to anchor an ethnographic account. In this respect I do not concur in Montaigne's view (noted by Josephides) that a rich contextual perspective based on case material is necessarily antithetical to general theory. The difficulty tends to arise when exotic models (e.g., African models) are imposed on the ethnographic data, or when the data are forced into a framework associated with a theory developed through the study of other types of data by other disciplines (e.g., economics). Although encounters with exogenous models and theory may be productive, the ethnographic monograph may not be the ideal genre in which to realize this potential. The difficulty in this case is not with a theory-centered approach per se, but rather turns on an incompatibility between genre and theory, and is a difficulty that arises only in the case of certain exogenous theories that the genre of the ethnographic monograph cannot easily be stretched to accommodate without coming apart at the seams. Exploring the exogenous theory or imported model in an article with suitable disclaimers might then solve the problem.

There is not sufficient space to directly engage Lepowsky's stimulating monograph and do justice to the task. However, I hope to have furthered discussion by taking up some of the issues raised by the reviewers of her book, as well as the reviewers of mine.

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