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**Beyond the Possession Principle:
An Energetics of Massim Exchange**

From object to possession: Winnicott began his famous study of object relations with the following words: "I am not specifically studying the first object of object-relationships. I am concerned with the first possession and with the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (1971:3). But this is in the way of an origin myth--for the child never comes innocently to the first possession, the frayed woollen effigy, the raveling blanket or cloak, the satin border with its pearl shell-like iridescence (any more than it comes to the breast, the *dala* [matrilineal subclan], the mother's skirt), within all of which it is seen to derive such exquisite, enfolding tactile pleasure. Such a field of tactile images is already constituted by a set of signifiers of maternity out of which the mother and the institutions of motherhood are woven, and which mirror a space of subjectivity of a particular and specific kind to the infant.

The "term transitional object . . . gives room for the process of becoming able-to accept difference and similarity" (ibid.:6). So it is with the inalienable possession-- the first possession is that which authenticates and legitimizes group identity, that lends its cosmological validity and stability. In providing an original identity to such a group, it differentiates that group from others. In the enveloping feathered cloaks and the fraying, much handled banana leaves, is not Annette Weiner characterizing the first possession, the transitional object that will make possible the accession to sociality?

In the object-relations theory of psychoanalysis as advocated by such figures as Winnicott and Klein, the ego achieves a sense of itself as a discrete entity by establishing a boundary between what is part of itself, what belongs to it, what it wishes to assimilate or introject, and what is not part of itself, what it wishes to eject, to see as external to itself. Subjectivity is seen as a container of objects, or at least the images of such objects, but it is also defined negatively at the same time, by what it has caused to disappear.

Let me make a case for looking at *Inalienable Possessions* as a theory, of sorts, of object relations. This will allow us to contemplate the energetics of such a system--what drives the subject to discriminate among objects within such a field, but more importantly, how the presence of such energy can be measured or ascertained by the *absence* of objects. It is this last consideration that poses what I see as a dilemma in Annette Weiner's theory of possessions.

For the source of such energetics, we must first turn to Freud.

Materialism and the Economy of Difference

Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (*SE*, vol. 1)¹ was his first attempt to provide a materialist theory of psychic function. He conceived of the human psychical apparatus as a system of neurones that store a quantity (Q) of energy. The neurones are of two types, those that are not physically altered by this exposure to energetic charging, the perceptual neurones (ϕ), and those that are (*psi*). The *psi* neurones display an inertia to such charging. They always seek to discharge this quantity, to avoid cathexis, to empty themselves of this flux, "to divest themselves of Q " (*SE*, 1:296) or resist what Freud called their own "breaching" (German: *Bahnung*, literally, the blazing or breaking of a path, *Bahn*). In the giving off of Q , in this *resistance* to it, the human organism *acts*: "This discharge represents the primary function of the nervous system" (*ibid.*). In the economics of neuronic energy, primary function refers to the free and spontaneous discharge of cathexis, which keeps the neural system free from stimulus.

The human organism could theoretically withdraw from external sources of Q and so maintain the inertia of the neurones in this manner. But it cannot withdraw from the body's own endogenous source of Q : "These have their origin in the cells of the body and give rise to the major needs: hunger, respiration, sexuality" (*ibid.*: 297). Thus the nervous system must maintain a store of quantity (Q_n)² "sufficient to meet the demand for a specific action" (*ibid.*). This function, to maintain a reservoir of bound, as opposed to free, energy, is the secondary function of the nervous system and it "is made possible by the assumption of resistances which oppose discharge; and the structure of the neurones makes it probable that the resistances are all to be located in the *contacts* [between one neurone and another] which in this way assume the value of *barriers*" (*ibid.*:298; emphases in original).

The *psi* neurones have the capacity to retain an imprint or scar of this contact with Q and "thus afford a *possibility of representing memory*" (*SE* 1:299; emphasis in original). Freud referred to *Bahnung* (translated in the *Standard Edition* as "facilitation") as the permanent alteration of "contact-barriers" in the *psi* neurones. The alteration allows the contact-barriers to become "more capable of conduction, less impermeable" (*ibid.*:300) and hence more efficient or expeditious in their discharging of Q_n . But it was also clear to Freud that there must exist differences in the degree of facilitation offered by the neurones. Otherwise, different sensory stimulations would alter the *psi* in the same way, and the neurones would present no accurate record of the particularity of the stimulus ("if facilitation were everywhere equal, it would not be possible to see why one pathway would be preferred" [*ibid.*]). Hence, "*memory is represented by the differences in the facilitations between the psi neurones*" (*ibid.*; emphasis in original).

Thus, memory cannot be represented as a symmetrical relationship between an external stimulus and internal discharge of $Q n'$. What is represented in the neurones is a differential in cathecting resistance to $Q n'$ ("*cathexis is here shown to be equivalent, as regards the passage of $Q n'$, to facilitation,*" [ibid.:319]). The repetition of a memory--"that is, its continuing operative power" (ibid.:300)--adds a quantity entirely distinct to the quantity ($Q n'$) of the stimulus; repetitions act only through the gap that separates them as distinct. Since the initial breaching, the gap between repetitions and the difference between full quantities cannot be represented as distinct *qualities* of stimulus, memory cannot be represented as the storing of imprints upon the physiology of the nervous system. "[Facilitation] cannot have its basis in a cathexis that is held back, for that would not produce the differences in facilitations of the contact-barriers of the same neurone" (ibid.:301).

If the quality of a stimulus can only be created as a result of differential in facilitation, which comes first, then, the stimulus or the differences in resistances that allow the stimulus to be facilitated as memory? In considering this apparent paradox created by Freud's hypothetical neuronal landscape, Jacques Derrida concludes: "repetition does not *happen to* an initial impression; its possibility is already there, in the resistance offered *the first time* by the psychical neurones (1978:202; emphasis in original). Derrida observes that right at the moment of origin of Freud's neuronal system, memory is based on the differences between the traces, rather than the traces themselves. "Trace as memory is not a pure breaching that might be reappropriated at any time as simple presence; it is rather the ungraspable and invisible difference between breaches" (Derrida 1978:201).

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The phrasing of the human perceptual and cognitive mechanism as an *economy* of energy invokes some of our most perduring modern Western images of power and value, including the quantifiability of information, its value as unit of meaning and transaction, and the pleasure-pain principle of maximization of satisfaction that Freud was to elaborate upon (and ultimately reject) later in his career. These same Western images, and the same attempts to subject them to critical scrutiny, pervade the history of all Western behavioral sciences. What I would like to do in this comment is nothing as facile as suggest a "psychoanalytic" interpretation of *Inalienable Possessions*. I begin rather with a view of sociality as a nexus of relays, paths, and connections between people and objects, and of the energy--productive, psychic, symbolic, or otherwise--that propels, diverts, delays, and reroutes people and objects along such paths. Autonomy and stability, and the sub

jectivity that actors attribute to themselves, are perceptions that arise, after the fact for the most part, within this hodographic arena. They are interpretational moments that provide the perspective necessary for the gauging of the system's limits and efficacy. There is, in other words, a meeting ground, a switching point, here between economics and hermeneutics. I am proposing that both Freud and Annette Weiner (and by implication, psychoanalysis and anthropology more generally) share an interest in a materialist description of human behavior at some level, and that the reasons why Freud ultimately cast doubt upon and reformulated his materialism might be illuminating in this exercise.

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With its language of paths, diversions, delays, facilitations, and resistance, Trobriand exchange could well be an expanded version of Freud's neurohodography. The French term for the German *Bahnung*, "facilitation," is *frayage*. Jeffrey Mehlman, who first translated Derrida's article "Freud and the Scene of Writing," rendered this as "fraying" (1972). But Alan Bass, who later translated the same article for the collection *Writing and Difference* (1978), discarded "fraying" in favor of "breaching" because *frayage* "has an idiomatic connection to pathbreaking in the expression, *se frayer un chemin*" (in Derrida 1978:329n.2). But here I prefer to retain the idea of the fraying of a path, as well as something that opposes that fraying, a binding of energies and messages, a bunching and clogging of objects along a pathway that always threatens to block off the space that fraying creates and that provides the differentiation between alternative routes,

These roads are defined by the traffic of objects and people that keeps them open, the breaches that form them--but do the paths themselves get wider and more free-flowing as the traffic gets heavier and more frequent? Do repetitions alter the amount of differential of cathexis? The recipients at the ends of these paths facilitate them by eliciting prestations. While other paths, if not used, become overgrown or covered over with forest matter and eventually disappear altogether--what then is the Massim world if not a vast array of cathecting pathways along which the tokens of productive energy are dissipated, pooled, protected, and controlled? (And we should recognize that the islands in the *kula* chain are linked to each other along efferent and afferent pathways that, like human neurones, are all given at birth--no additional paths are created in the organism's life, only a change in the differential charging along existing paths ["participation in *kula* does not lead to the creation of anything new except what is already in the system" (Weiner 1983:165)].) It seeks always to maintain a constant level of socio-political energetic charge by rerouting valuables along different paths, thereby

protecting the paths from overload. (However, the internal system is capable of spontaneous regeneration: "In order to maintain the regeneration of new resource potential via [exchange] relationships, the accumulation of women's wealth, and dala property, new yams must be grown every year" [ibid.:156]--although we should probably read this in reverse: exchange serves to cathect endogenous, internal productive stimulation, to keep the "primary" function fully discharged.) In the external system, however, "stability remains a problem. . . . If high-ranking shells are diverted from one path to another, the shells' names are changed and their former histories lost" (p. 140). The strategy thereby becomes to use the external system, unaffected by magnitude of Q_n , as a reservoir to siphon off excess charging from the "internal" system. "Keeping a kula shell out of [internal] exchange because it is promised in kula allows a person to store wealth in the face of other social and political obligations" (p. 145); "the assignment of the shell to kula may protect it from loss in internal exchanges" (p. 145). The external system is thus capable of homeostatic regulation: "a path may become so encumbered with even one players switches that the other partners decide to let the path 'die'" (p. 142).

Some paths afford better possibilities for replication. How are the differential qualities of the various paths established? What is it that ordains that some shall flourish and get wide and muddy with use, while others dry up and disappear? One answer would be that it is the different characters involved, the different capacities of individuals to persuade, elicit, and compel others. But does this solution not appeal to the idea of sociality emerging from an assumed state of ordinary nonsociality, a connection being posed between two hitherto unconnected people, making of the exchange the "innovative, inaugurative relationship which 'creates,'" as David Schneider characterized it (1965:58)? Is it not dependent upon the clear distinction between personal traits of individuals *upon which* social differences are based but which are logically and developmentally prior to them?

If we are thus compelled to discard the Western notion of the presocial individual, if the self-interested self finds no descriptive currency in the Massim area, what then is our strategy? What if we were to now see our analysis of Melanesian exchange as also dependent upon a preexistent differentiation of value? What if the objects of such exchange were not valuable because of their representational power but because of their ability to defer, to temporize--that is, to articulate such spacing within which the subjectivity necessary to the articulation of social action becomes possible? ("It takes years of work to convince the player to release the shell and this necessitates having many other shells to move along this particular path" [p. 141].) What if such delay was not an accidental and fortuitous breakdown in the

system of exchange but the very integral heart of the temporizing effects by which this system acquires its efficacy?

The exchange is not inaugural or originary; it is always a repetition of an already-existing social differential. The differential, the other, is there at the beginning. The *kula* player never merely gives one shell to one player: "The other players who vied for the chance to exchange receive only a return shell for the vaga each one gave the owner" (p. 142). But how much more forceful that description is if we remove the unnecessary word "only." "In these latter cases, reciprocity is used to reject a person. Giving a vaga shell and quickly receiving a return denotes an end to further advances; no *kula* path for the large shell has been opened" (p. 142). (But what is the precise negative value of rejection in this case, in this system in which nothing can be added or subtracted but only momentarily repressed or delayed?) In other words, there is no *kula* without a deferral, a spacing; no *kula* without a differential in the timing of response, between immediate and delayed; no *kula* without the debt, the hysteresis, that creates the temporal interval of the gift (see Battaglia 1990:76). There can be no simple mapping of magnitude of exchange, or enumerated replications of exchange items onto a corresponding proportion of political or social capital. Such a view would demand that the objects themselves maintain fixed values within a hierarchy of values.

No origin without prevenient differentiation, no appeal to the *ex nihilo*, the something-out-of-nothing--and yet is this not what Annette Weiner's view of exchange demands? ("In the process of the attachment and separation of artifacts during life, individuals are attracted into relationships, but adverse individual desires and finally death disrupt the continuity" [Weiner 1976:23].) In this view of human sociality, the self is unitary, inviolable. The fact that she accords centrality to the struggle for autonomy in all human societies attests to the necessity to assume such internal unity of the self and its stability through time. The objects manipulated by such selves, on the other hand, always run the risk of becoming alienated from such selves. In the struggle to articulate and retain autonomy, this alienation is resisted by selves. But why do these selves care whether such objects become alienated, if the integrity of the self is not affected by their loss? Because the objects, being something outside the self, allow for a more expanded form of self-permanence, a stability of self that, in being handed down across generations, outlives the self.

In such a view, connectivity becomes a problem, becomes difficult, and under such conditions, a culture looks to symbolize the fragility of the social fabric. And so Annette Weiner suggests that "the very physicality of cloth, its woven-ness, and its potential for fraying and unraveling denote the vulnerability in acts of connectedness and tying, in human and cultural reproduc-

tion, and in decay and death" (p. 59). But the problem for the Trobrianders is not the fragility of connectedness, but its tendency to overcathect, its tenacity and demand--a system of productive consumption that is the internal, endogenous source of stimulation. No doubt, the characteristic *delays* in the reclaiming of *dala* land from men's sons who are not *dala* members (Weiner 1976:159) are the Trobriand productive system's most essential feature. For them, it is how to break connections, how to delay and temporize demand and desire, how to instigate fraying and dissipation, that is the task at hand.

The Object of Death

The consideration of energetics introduces a fundamental ambiguity into the understanding of human behavior: Towards what end do organisms strive? Towards the ultimate discharge of energy, or to the maintenance of it at a constant level? What Freud identified as the repetition compulsion seemed, by his description, to both create psychic tension and provide the mechanism of its release at one and the same time. In considering the repetition compulsion, the replication of unpleasant experiences, Freud hypothesized that there was a drive, a pulsion beyond the pleasure principle, more conservative than it, a drive in which the organism attempts "to restore an earlier state of things" (*SE*, vol. 18; *Penguin Freud Library*, 11:308). The quality of the external world, however, is such that it always works to disturb this drive, to cause delays and diversions on its path towards dissociation.

Every modification which is thus imposed upon the course of the organism's life is accepted by the conservative organic [drives] and stored up for further repetition. Those [drives] are therefore bound to give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact they are merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths old and new alike. (*Ibid.*:310)

This was Freud's concept of the death drive (*Todestrieb*) and I would like to suggest that because of the implied energetics of her model, there is a central role for it in Annette Weiner's theory too. Freud's formulation of the death drive seems, from a social-science perspective, to confound our received intuition. We feel that sociality is fragile, that the entropic forces of the external world introduce instability to social relations, that these relations must constantly be repaired and revitalized, constantly recathected, to remain viable. But what the "death drive" asks us to consider, phrased in

anthropological terms, is something altogether opposite: What if the dissolution or end of relationship was difficult to attain; what if the external world constantly worked towards *delaying* the dissipation of the social self, constantly introduced *detours* in the attainment of its death? In the Massim, the dissociation of the person leads not to a cessation or diminution of the deceased but rather a redistribution of the aspects of a person that reside in others. The conservative tendency of Massim exchange is to always seek to return the subjectivity, autonomy, and power of the person to its constituents, to other persons. "The social person of the deceased (the aspect of a person that participates in the personae of others) is not diminished but expanded to the limits of his or her social circle" (Wagner 1986:267). As a result of continuous acts of such local expansion throughout the *kula* region, the regional flow of *kula* valuables evince a pulsing, a diastemic delay caused by the diversion of valuables into local island economies of death and mourning.

It is clear, thanks to Annette Weiner's meticulous ethnography, that as was the case with Freud's topography, Massim exchange demonstrates that we cannot "immobilize and freeze energy within a naive metaphoric of space" (Derrida 1978:212). Social and political value can never be repositied within objects or structures; it emerges between them, in the space where a differential facilitation and resistance of objects is to be found, a space that is as much a function of the perception of meaning as is language, or a myth, or the beauty, power, and efficacy of a canoe prow. Further, the structure of delay, of deferral, of *Nachträglichkeit* that is the essential feature of *kula* means that value cannot be similarly repositied within accretable units of time; it prevents us from subjecting the *kula* to the dead hand of economics. The valuables create their own timing, their own retroactive historical creditation, and the death they work towards is that which creates the very conduits of life energy.

Weiner's inalienable possession, which stands opposed to the moving gift of reciprocity theory, doesn't so much retain movement as divest itself of it. The more it travels, the more weighty, ponderous, and immovable it becomes, until it finally comes to rest. But it is in that movement that sociality creates its own rhythms and spacings, its own potential for differentiation--difference, as Freud observed, cannot be repositied in held-back, inalienable quantity. The inalienable object, insofar as it thus spells the death of sociality, could only be a hypothetical or imaginary limit to a social world, rather than a literal or material counterweight or anchoring of it. What Annette Weiner has shown so masterfully in her writing on Trobriand exchange is that death is not an accident of social life but the very condi-

tion toward which people labor, through the deferrals that exchange confers upon their social life. In giving, the death of the object is delayed, and in that interval created by delay emerges the temporality that enables social life.

NOTES

1. All references to Freud are taken from the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis), and the *Penguin Freud Library*.
2. Q is generalized quantity of excitation; $Q n'$ is quantity of intercellular discharge of energy.

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