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### Possessions and Persons

These stimulating reviews of *Inalienable Possessions* accomplish what I hoped my book would elicit: an ongoing dialogue on new ways of thinking about exchange, gender, kinship, and the role of possessions in human life. I call *Inalienable Possessions* an "experiment" because, in working comparatively, I use forms of ethnographic description and interpretation that begin with a society's paradoxes rather than with a society's "norms." My interest is in how social and political systems turn in upon themselves, thereby limiting the degree of hierarchy that might be possible.

What I discovered early on was how easy it is to think about ethnographic comparisons and social theory when one only has to contend with *men's* actions and beliefs. But once one includes women--in biological and cultural reproduction, in the production of essential wealth, and in their control over cosmological resources--paradoxes and contradictions abound. Working within these paradoxes, we are much closer to the dynamics of social action and beliefs than we are when women are ignored or described in negative terms that can be discounted by the "real" world of men's actions. What is powerful about women's presence in social life, however, is that in both ethnographic and theoretical studies, the recognition of women's reproductive and productive force takes us to the heart of a society's most perplexing and enigmatic problems. Although these problems can be fruitfully compared from one society to another, the comparisons will rarely have the simple elegance that for so long has been the accepted hallmark of theoretical accountability.

Marc Augé's review clearly exposes this problem when he argues that unlike the Pacific, where women's reproductive and productive roles are significant, in the West African societies with which he is familiar women do not have a role in cloth production because men are the weavers. Yet

women's productive activities are more complex than Augé recognizes. What is significant about cloth throughout the world is its long and detailed production process: from the growing and harvesting of the raw materials to the dyeing, weaving, and decoration of the finished product, as well as its circulation. Although women may not always be the weavers, they may contribute in important ways to the production process, even controlling the technical and cosmological knowledge essential for creating the most sacred textiles. For example, among the Yoruba, men produce cloths used in their initiation rituals, but women produce cloths associated more generally with reproduction, ancestors, and sacred powers. In other West African cases, women spin the cotton that provides the material for men to weave. Conversely, in some Central African societies such as the Kuba, men may be the weavers of raffia cloth, but women are responsible for the elaborate applique embroidery that gives the cloth its value. And in the Lele case, although men do all the weaving, women control some of the most important exchanges of the finest cloths.

Although high-ranking Asante women may not be actively involved in cloth production, they control, as Augé points out, the inalienable possessions that bestow legitimacy on rulers. My point, however, is that retention--the keeping of inalienable possessions--must be considered part of the production process because keeping is as significant in economic and reproductive terms as circulation or giving. Further, these women, as the most esteemed and high-ranking mothers or sisters, were historically powerful in their own right--not necessarily, as Augé would have it--simply because they are "older, beyond menopause and thus outside the sphere of biological reproduction." Wilks (1975) gives numerous examples of Asante "queen" mothers and sisters who, even at young ages, wield supreme authority over land ownership and succession rights, conduct diplomatic encounters with competing rulers and European officials, and who at times also became autonomous rulers in their own right. Finally, Asante women as queen mothers provide political support for their own sons as regents while they also foster the critical political connections between a high-ranking son and his sister. This is what I mean by cultural reproduction. It is not necessarily that a sister's own children become the heirs to the throne, but that the relationship between a man's child as a possible successor and his sister is critical. It is exactly at the point where succession stops--where women do not biologically reproduce the next heir--that the particular reproductive system turns in on itself and its limitations are exposed.

Articulating these limitations was my goal in the discussion of *kula*, where a surrogate chieftaincy is established in which men gain legitimacy in their efforts to be local leaders from their participation in *kula*. The presence of

Trobriand chiefs enhances other players' chiefly identity, giving them a connection with rank that legitimates their authority in their own chiefless societies. This view complements Maria Lepowsky's discussion of the interisland skull exchanges that took place in the Massim a hundred or more years ago. The movement from bones to shell exchanges in the Massim has counterparts elsewhere, for example, among the Maori and the Kwakiutl. The problem I see in Lepowsky's insightful analysis is her conclusion that "ritualized and aggressive" competition differs causally from the validation of difference, rank, and authority. Clearly, warfare and competition are about cultural and political difference. These goals and actions cannot be easily separated into primary and secondary causes. Further, in *kula* exchange as we know it today, the introduction of many lower-ranking shells has allowed the most well-known *kula* players to hold the highest-ranking shells for a long period of time. *Kula* has always been a changing phenomenon and undoubtedly will continue to be so, but its limitation in terms of developing rank and hierarchy is the loss of ancestral identities in the shells that validate rank at the local level for a lineage or clan. My argument is that *kula* is an attempt to *recreate* rank at a regional level, which Lepowsky's examples of warfare certainly support.

This point is important in considering James Weiner's cogent essay proposing an energetics of Massim exchange based on psychoanalytic theories. For James Weiner, sociality is "a nexus of relays, paths, and connections between people and objects, and . . . the energy--productive, psychic, symbolic, or otherwise--that propels, diverts, delays, and reroutes people and objects along such paths." The Massim world of *kula* is "a vast array of cathecting pathways along which the tokens of productive energy are dissipated, pooled, protected, and controlled." Following Freud and Derrida, James Weiner proposes that these tokens--the *kula* shells--are "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."

Yet I am left puzzled by several points. James Weiner writes as if *kula* exchange were a closed system and he cites my comment that "participation in *kula* does not lead to the creation of anything new except what is already in the system." My context for this statement was not as a description of an immutable exchange system but regarding the inability for the *kula* system to develop more complex hierarchical levels or structures of rank. The dynamics of *kula* exchange are always producing new paths, new players, new partners, new participating islands, new shells, and new substitutes for shells, such as axeblades, money, or, as we saw in Lepowsky's review, human bones. Further, *kula* shells do assume a fixed value within a hierarchy of

value, if by value we mean the ability of players to categorize and rank shells within an agreed-upon system of value. Thus, there is more here than the "something-out-of-nothing" that James Weiner says my exchange demands.

James Weiner further argues that it is not the fragility of connectivity that is a problem for Trobrianders, as I expressed it, but the tendency for the system to "overcathect" and therefore delays in giving shells, temporizing the demands of one's partners, and personal desire are logically prior to other phenomena. At this point I think our differences are more apparent than real. In my view of sociality, I am not putting forward the claim that the "self is unitary, inviolable" as he states. In my earlier Trobriand work, I showed the way individuals are socially created by others. A person's name, beauty, knowledge, magic, land, yams, *kula* shells, and decorations signifying rank--all in varying degrees are loaded onto each self. With each thing given, there are unending obligations--the overcathecting part--but each thing can be lost. A person stops using her higher-ranking name or decorations out of fear of others; the spells given are bogus; the land is forever in dispute. This is the reason that Trobrianders do care about alienation--because "the integrity of the self," contra James Weiner, *is* deeply affected by the loss of possessions.

The delay that James Weiner envisions as the source or the origin of exchange obviously is significant. But in his model, following Derrida, does delay allow for differentiation? I would argue that it is *keeping* that is logically prior. For keeping allows for the differentiation of the self, as the self is expanded by the possession of objects that give the self a history--a past, present, and future. This is what both *kula* and local exchange accomplish, but the difference between the two is critical. In local exchange the self is being built up (and at death taken apart) by objects that signify not only the self, but the group. These possessions give far more weightiness to social identity that the histories of individual exploits that are lodged in *kula* shells.

Whatever conclusions the reader draws from James Weiner's essay, his ideas are indeed provocative and certainly give us much to consider, as do Augé's and Lepowsky's comments. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for Friedman's review, which is arrogant and plagued with patriarchal theories of alliance, structuralism, and plain old-fashioned male dominance. As I said at the beginning of my rejoinder, paradox and contradiction make some people decidedly uncomfortable, especially those who continue to construct simplistically their theoretical positions on male-oriented conceptions of society and culture.

To start with, Friedman unequivocally pronounces that inalienability as a "possessive desire" is "our [my] category and not theirs, not unless otherwise demonstrated." Throughout *Inalienable Possessions* I give example upon

example of how people desire these specific objects--how they cry and fight over them, mourn their loss, die for them, surround them with all kinds of rituals, treat their presence with the utmost care and the knowledge associated with them (such as their histories) with great secrecy. Surely, this is "possessive desire." If inalienable possessions exist because I gave them that gloss, then are we to discount what our informants tell us? If the paradox of keeping-while-giving appears so trivial to Friedman, then why all this fuss over pieces of stone, bone, or cloth? Since *Inalienable Possessions* was published, I have had letters from colleagues, telling me that they had information about such valuables, but they did not know how to explain them within traditional exchange theory. Others said that only after questioning their informants about such inalienable possessions did their informants then reveal their hidden caches of such valuables.

When Friedman talks about the productive role of women, he would do well to read more carefully the ethnographies and historical materials that describe the political power that women once had, for example, in the Andean region (to which Friedman refers), where some women had local political authority and owned land in their own right, prior to the rise of the Inca state and Western colonization (see, e.g., Silverblatt 1987). As Jane Schneider and I pointed out in *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989), the breakthrough to capitalism challenged cloth as a medium of social power throughout the world and undermined the power that women had in the productive process as well as in the exchange of these objects. But the ethnographic and historical data are complex and must be sifted through carefully. They cannot be reduced to polemics that eliminate the domain of women's control both in production and exchange.

Further, I have *not* argued that because women produce cloth, they then have power. What I show is how, in many cases, production gave women partial or full control over retention and circulation. Often this control involved the highest-ranking cloths. And production involved cosmology. Women's controls over ancestral and other cosmological powers were invested in aspects of cloth production--from the spinning or dyeing or weaving to other decorative applications. Cosmology exists first in the knowledge people believe themselves to have. Such knowledge then is transferred through production to symbolic representations in cloth as well as other kinds of possessions. When these objects are kept or exchanged, the cosmology represented by them increases their value and thus, contra Friedman's argument, cosmology enters exchange. And nowhere in my book did I make the claim that cloth was the only inalienable possession. I repeatedly called attention to the importance of bone, stone, shell, and other objects worked by men and defined by them as inalienable.

Finally, Friedman completely misrepresents my discussion of Polynesian women rulers. My point is not that women can become chiefs because they are women, as Friedman states my position, but that rank overrides gender in these cases. Friedman, however, believes that rank is "very often dependent upon the male warrior chiefs in their [women's] own groups." What he ignores, as do so many others, is that women were also "warrior chiefs" and that in many cases men's rank was dependent on women. This is why the brother-sister connection (cultural as well as incestual) is so vital.

Fortunately, there are some interesting points of discussion in Friedman's polemic, especially a further development of a theory of possession. But such a chauvinistic, and at times inaccurate, diatribe does nothing to further our understandings of these complex issues. The time is long past when scholars can banish women to the sidelines of political action by theoretically holding to simple symbolic gender oppositions that define women, if they are not total controllers of a political system, as totally absent from such action. This means that we must be prepared to examine the commingling of symbols and not their gendered separations. Power relations are not separate from gender relations but are inextricably lodged in the paradoxes that all societies promote or attempt to overcome.

Significant among those paradoxes is the problem of keeping-while-giving. The most critical point of my disagreement with Friedman is that he cannot see that certain objects *are* about the creation of social identity. This is the root of inalienable possessions--a fact that Mauss and Simmel made very clear. Possession of an object, however, does not mean stasis or inactivity. Just as being relates to becoming, possession must also be characterized as action. But until recently, social theory directed our attention to the objects as they are being exchanged--one "gift" given for one received. What has been missing is the recognition of the actions that are produced because of keeping an object out of circulation, although it may, at some future time, be put into circulation. Ownership is much more unstable than stable. The potential for loss, the need for secrecy and additional wealth, and the lack of appropriate heirs, all demand action and accountability. Therefore, the more intense the effort to keep the possession out of circulation, the more determining will be its effect on individual self-identity. As Simmel pointed out, this is only the reverse of the notion that the owner's identity is determined by the effect of the possession upon the possessor. As the objects increase in density, that is, in the cultural and emotional weightiness they assume through their symbolic and economic value, age, and length of inalienability, the relation between self-identity and the possession becomes more significant and the differentiation between individuals is more highly marked. Conversely, as objects decrease in density, the connec-

tion to the self lessens. Thus a chain is forged from being to possessing and from possessing to being, making the connection between persons and objects deeply intimate.

I want to thank the editors for providing such an exceptional forum in which these important issues are given thoughtful and serious attention by the reviewers. For me, what has been most rewarding is the breadth of the reviewers' comments and the many new ideas they developed here. I believe we are embarking on a new way to conceptualize material culture, power, and gender and, as these reviews indicate, we need many voices to effect this change.

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