## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia.* Studies in Melanesian Anthropology, no. 6. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. Pp. xv, 422, bibliography, index. US$47.50 cloth, $14.95 paper.

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### On Melanesianism

This complex book begins with a critique of feminist and Western anthropological theory. It next develops definitions and presents the author's view of Melanesian culture, and ends with a conclusion discussing domination and comparison. So described, this work might appear to be a discussion of Melanesia; it is actually Marilyn Strathern's statement of her theory of anthropology. As a foretaste, she evaluates and responds to feminist writers, and offers a general critique of Western anthropology with its basis in Western categories and domains and Western-founded interpretations of Melanesian culture. The discussion of comparison as an epilogue further develops the charge that comparison is impossible, that the synthetic image of "Western" and "Melanesian" sociality or knowledge itself depends upon a Western construction. A special vocabulary engages the discussion; yet at the end, she insists "I have not authored 'a perspective' on Melanesian society and culture; I have hoped to show the difference that perspective makes . . . I have not presented Melanesian ideas but an analysis from the point of view of Western anthropological and feminist preoccupations of what Melanesian ideas might look like if they were to appear in the form of those pre-

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occupations" (p. 309). This camouflages her position on the purpose of anthropology, as do many other disclaimers scattered throughout the book. Although it may seem to the reader that the difficulty and complexity are in her interpretations as defined by gender and gift, the vehicle carries her radical revision of anthropology.

The 1989 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, we have been told by Claudia Gross, debated Strathern's proposal that "the concept of society is theoretically obsolete." She is reported as stating that the concept of society is a "useless analytical tool," an abstract entity. The next calamity in Western thought followed society with the creation of the "concept of the self-contained, autonomous individual, the concrete entity detached from all social relationships and opposing society." She proposes to shift to the center of anthropological theory the concept "sociality, the 'relational matrix which constitutes the life of the person' " (Gross 1990). [1]

*The Gender of the Gift's* argument depends upon Strathern's thesis that the relationship, rather than society as an entity or the individual as autonomous, is anthropology's subject. This would transform anthropology. At the same time, this position exemplifies what might be said to be a "female" perspective on sociality. The view echoes, more eloquently perhaps, well-known observations about the importance of relationships to women, and with them interpersonal, family, and local ties, again as contrasted with the political concerns of men. The view is connected, of course, with the domestic-public characterization of female-male concerns (and in particular with the "reproduction of mothering" as put forward by Chodorow [1978]). I am not claiming that Strathern fosters a "uterocentric" view of social life to contrast with the "androcentric" bogey now repudiated. In Strathern's Melanesia, sociality *is* social life. In *The Gender of the Gift* she states that it is a defect of Western thinking to make the person an agent at the center of social relations. For Melanesia, she says, the relationship is the crux of social action.

Parts of this long-awaited book were anticipated by the series of papers and comments Strathern has written during more than the past ten years. In these she has consistently argued against the prevailing view of Hagen (and other Highlands) women as a mute underclass, and rejected the assumed universal nature-culture distinction (Ortner 1974) as not pertaining to Hagen. She completes the amendation, reluctantly referring to the domestic-public dichotomy as applying to some aspects of gender behavior in Melanesia. Her preference is particular-collective relations (p. 49). She further rejects sexual antagonism, sex-role social-

ization, domain, Western feminist concepts of male domination, and other labels as failing to perceive the true nature of Melanesian concepts or as inappropriate to her analysis, or both.

*The Gender of the Gift* is original and ambitious, a synthesis and culmination of many years of thought, based to large extent on works in anthropology, social science, and Melanesian ethnography of the last twenty years. Brilliant, withal the difficult arguments, which are driven by a set of categories and concepts made up of new terms, new meanings, particular phrasings. We are presented with a comprehensive personal commentary and response to contemporary anthropological and social science theory and forms of interpretation. Some of her discussion attacks both feminist theory and Western anthropology, although at one point she says that anthropology and feminist scholarship are incompatible: "Feminism and anthropological scholarship endorse different approaches to the nature of the world open to investigation"(p. 36). She also asserts "[b]oth feminist scholarship and anthropology [are located] within Western culture and its metaphysical obsessions with the relationship between the individual and society" (p. 29).

This latter point is elaborated in a critique of Leenhardt (1979):

> One relationship is always, as he adduced, a metamorphosis of another. Yet his mistake was to conceive of a center at all. The center is where twentieth-century Western imagination puts the self, the personality, the ego. For the 'person' in this latter day Western view is an agent, a subject, the author of thought and action, and thus 'at the center' of relationships. Some of the conceptual dilemmas into which this configuration leads were rehearsed in part 1. It has shaped our cultural obsession with the extent to which human subjects are actors who create relationships or act rather as the precipitation of relationships; this obsession fuels the individual/society dichotomy with which I began. (P. 269)

Strathern's Melanesian "material" or culture includes her own work at Hagen; she describes, interprets, and quotes authors of studies in Melanesia. In presenting her own view of Melanesian gender symbolism, domination, same-sex and cross-sex relations, gift economy, and so forth--reformulating the way these have been described and interpreted by anthropologists in past twenty years--she deposes the feminist-Marxist and Western anthropological uses of such terms as exploitation, oppression, control, labor, and production.

But while it is a rethinking of Melanesian anthropology, it pays little heed to other regional summaries, avoiding without discussion some trite truths about Melanesia. We are not often reminded of the multiplicity of Melanesian local cultures and languages, which have often been cited to prove the long isolation of small groups. This relieves her of the compulsion to provide a conventional "background" on the area, with a general description of ecology, technology, history, "big men," and so forth. We have had more than enough of this in the past, to be sure. But perhaps something is missing? She says little about the actual languages that are the sources of terms or concepts in the examples cited. And, deny it as she may, the argument is based upon the premise of a regional Melanesian culture, which has a common basis of point of view, cultural form or type, kind of knowledge. Shouldn't we ask how the unity of Melanesia has come about? Well into her argument, in the same paragraph she speaks of "Melanesian assumptions about the nature of social life" and repeats that "there is great variation across Melanesia" (p. 326). How is this possible? Here, I think, the cultural anthropology that has displaced the social scientist's goal of seeking to understand a reality "out there" must justify writing in English about Melanesian culture.

I see several major achievements. First, she shows how the terms and analyses of feminist scholars and Western anthropologists are grounded in Western thought and concepts, and are not appropriate or helpful in understanding Melanesia; they lead to incorrect conclusions about male-female relations. By presenting what she views as a distinctively Melanesian-based concept of person, economy, etc., the feminist and Western anthropological categories and domains are overthrown. She disowns the premises of anthropological models of the fifties, sixties, and seventies: society, structure, group, clanship, categorization of male and female, hegemony, domination, inequality, property, power --all are Western-inspired and inappropriate to Melanesia. Embedded in Melanesia, the critique applies universally.

The second main accomplishment is in outlining Melanesian premises, modes of knowledge, constructs. Her stance advances her select new vocabulary, for example, collective action, sociality, mediation, extraction, multiple and partible persons, same-sex and cross-sex relations and identities, detachable parts as exchanged, exchange economy. She explores meanings of sexual imagery and identities: phallus, flute, breast, semen, milk, blood, body substance. In detailed analysis the main examples are Massim and Highlands, and in these she is illuminating.[2] Since she has been a leading light in the field, reading and com-

menting upon the work of others, she may well have influenced the works she quotes.

The very important gift-economy concept is expanded to make things parts of or symbols of persons. In exchange and production, things are and stand for persons. This guides her understanding of personification, the place of labor in gift economy, and makes it possible to conceive of a divisible person, one who can give of him/herself.

However, I see problems in comprehension or use of her concept of Melanesia:

Strathern's style and language may discourage those who would follow the argument and accept it. She does define, summarize, or repoint the argument from time to time; for example, she defines the purpose of one section: "mine is not a cognitive analysis but an attempt to give a cultural description of Melanesian symbolism" (p. 244). These are the points that the reader may want to identify; there are many of them, but they do not form a regular sequence. [3] Yet just when the reader begins to formulate an objection to her position or assertions, there is a new section, disavowing, subsuming the field of objection to minor status in the scheme. These disclaimers, combined with the difficulties of the language and argument, can impede both critical debate and acceptance. Whatever other objections one may raise, she persists in denying any attempt at universality.

The reader must surmount difficulties of special terminology (multiple persons and dividuation, enchainment, extraction, encompassment, and more) as well as special usage of terms of Western anthropological analysis (metaphor, metonym, mediated and unmediated exchange or relations). Standard language seems to take new or differentiated meanings; for example, "take for granted," often used, is applied both to Melanesian thought and to Western authors. At this point I'm sure that Marilyn's reaction must be "she doesn't understand me at all!"

The one anthropologist given full approval is Roy Wagner. Yet one wonders how she accepts his invention-convention concept of culture; it seems to me that this depends upon the individual/society contrast that Strathern rejects. The delicate revision of conventional concepts requires a reorientation more or less, and, for example, when at the end Strathern introduces agency (ch. 10) it is not to show how individuals invent anything; they may cause an event to happen but hardly originate it. For Strathern, the proof is in the result, the events and views to follow. I don't believe this will adequately explain innovation. While appearing to support and favor Wagner, her persons do not appear to be acting as individuals, choosers, inventors, but are ideal types, perform-

ers in fixed roles and relationships, sometimes with a strategy, but forever culture- and relationship-bound. The multiple person is, it may seem, a complex of stereotyped roles, performed vis-à-vis husband, kinsman, same-sex or opposite-sex role player. Where is volition?

In some particulars she seems to be uncompromising and didactic in dealing with the elusive and changeable. An example is the assertive style of her exposition of the gift economy. Everything in Melanesia is gift-inspired, and this does not allow for the possibility of a trade or commodity concept. Yet we have ample ethnographic examples of Melanesian exchange that is not so strictly categorized; there have been forms and expectations of barter and purchase in many contexts, beginning perhaps with Malinowski (1922:177ff.), and certainly demonstrated in Filer (1985). [4] The Melanesians have often shown a dual understanding of an exchange, both as gift relationship and as a measured commodity transaction.

It will be, to be sure, impossible for anthropologists to write of Melanesian culture without reference to Strathern's *tour de force.* I look forward to future uses that will be made of this brilliant work.

## NOTES

1. The summary of the debate by Gross (1990) expands this point very well.

2. For example, I now understand the songs and dances that the Chimbu perform in anticipation of a *mogenambiri* prestation between clans or tribes as spells compelling donors to bring in supporting gifts.

3. Such statements may, for example, be found on pp. 204, 207, 259, 260, 299.

4. To give another example, after a pig feast, the Chimbu offer plumes and other valuables in trade for young pigs to reconstitute their pig herd. Pigs are often named by the object (e.g., money, bird of paradise plume, kina) used to buy them or the place (e.g., Damar, Kerowagi, Goglme) from which they came. The pig carries the identity of its origin as traded.

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