



# Introduction: “Value as theory”

## Comparison, cultural critique, and guerilla ethnographic theory

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The introduction addresses the question of whether it is useful or indeed possible to develop an anthropological theory of value. By way of a Socratic debate, two rather conflicting points of view emerge. On the one hand, it is argued that anthropology can make a major and quite coherent contribution to the issue of value in social theory. On the other hand, it is argued that anthropology, as an ethnographically driven discipline, produces an anti-theory of value. The two perspectives derive from two different visions for anthropology, which differ radically on how they see the relationship of the discipline to other disciplines and to the history of ideas more generally. Where these views converge, however, is on the aim of exploring the potential of value as theory. In both perspectives, value is seen as a powerful concept that can generate new ethnographic questions and insights and can provide a crucial dimension to cultural critique.

Keywords: value, cultural critique, ethnographic theory, comparison, anti-theory

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This special issue brings together a set of remarkable papers on the topic of the anthropology of value. Our introduction to this issue, however, reached an impasse, and it failed in its initial versions. What failed? Stated starkly, we failed to reach a consensus on exactly how to introduce the papers. As elusive as questions of “value” are, approaching them in terms of anthropological theory became equally, if not more, difficult to pin down.

On the face of it, value can mean different things, depending on whether one deals with economic, social, or religious phenomena. Anthropology, of course, deals with all of these, but anthropological questions of value have primarily addressed two major issues. One is the comparability and incomparability of cultural worlds. Value, in this sense, is concerned with the issue of cultural diversity, with questions of ethnic and religious incompatibilities, and with the problem of cultural continuity and change (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Barth 1969; Dumont 1986; Robbins 2004; Kapferer 2010; Viveiros de Castro 2011). The other predominant issue refers to how value is created in processes of exchange. Not

only does this question apply to the exchange and comparison of different kinds of things, but also, and in particular, it addresses how different forms of exchange are related to different forms of sociality (Sahlins 1972; Gregory 1982; Foster 1990; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992; Pedersen 2008). The key question that interested us was whether it is meaningful to look at these different aspects of value from a more comprehensive perspective. In other words, is it useful—indeed, at all possible—to develop an anthropological theory of value?

To this end, we invited sixteen anthropologists from Australia, Denmark, France, Spain, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to James Cook University to participate in a roundtable discussion about the anthropology of value from theoretical and ethnographic perspectives. The participants virtually agreed that there is not yet a contemporary anthropological theory of value. However, opinions differed starkly on the question of whether such a shared endeavor is even desirable at all. Not even we, as editors, could reach an agreement on this basic question, and this became painfully evident as we sat down to co-write the introduction. Ton Otto was in favor of bringing the papers together from a “history of ideas” perspective, tracing how the authors’ thinking about value advanced particular theoretical developments. Rane Willerslev, to the contrary, argued against such a commitment to the history of ideas on the grounds that anthropology denotes an “anti-theory” of value, and this is exactly where the strength of the papers is situated. As with the debate in the workshop, our mutual disagreements revealed an underlying tension that did not simply reflect divergent opinions about how to bring the papers of the volume together, but also appeared to reflect a fundamental predicament of the discipline itself. This predicament concerns disagreements about the place of anthropology in relation to other disciplines and, in particular, whether anthropology is primarily theory driven or ethnography driven.

In our consternation, we decided to turn to one of the oldest methodologies known to the sciences, the “Socratic debate”—the classical form of inquiry between individuals with opposing viewpoints, which is based on asking and answering questions (see Latour 2004 for a recent use of this methodology). This is a dialectical method of oppositional viewpoints. A participant may try to trick one’s opponent to contradict himself so as to reinforce one’s own viewpoint at the other’s expense. In this way, Socrates left his victims ridiculed and ashamed. Our motive for employing the Socratic debate form, however, is somewhat different from this original use. Instead of seeking to arrive at unambiguous answers through confrontation, we use the method primarily to question the models of anthropology that we both hold in an attempt to go beyond the truisms each of us take for granted. The goal, therefore, is not really for one to win the argument, but rather to mutually encourage our critical faculties, thereby elucidating new directions for theory.<sup>1</sup> As you will see from the debate, our preliminary conclusion is that while we strongly disagree about the possibility of an anthropological theory of value, we appear to converge on the significance of looking at value *as* theory.

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1. Errata: Changes to the paragraph, to correct the authors’ errors in citation, have been made on June 24, 2013 at 22:14 GMT. (Original release date: June 20, 2013 at 12:38 GMT.) –Ed.

Thus, while the debate revealed our epistemological differences, it also brought forward the force of cultural critique that a focus on value entails.<sup>2</sup>

### The debate

RANE: When you look at the sixteen papers, do you see the contours of an anthropological theory of value? You tell me that you aspire toward such a general and distinctively anthropological theory that can face up to and challenge the major traditions of social theory. How does the diversity of these papers even come close to accomplishing anything like this?

TON: I see several lines of reasoning rather than a coherent theory. In my view, a very strong line of anthropological thinking about value has to do with how value is created through exchange and what this means for our understanding of relations of reciprocity and non-reciprocity, equality and inequality. Anthropological thinking about the gift, barter, and commodity exchange has generated important theoretical contributions, which have had an impact outside of our discipline. I find that some of the contributions to this volume continue to advance this tradition. We have fascinating ethnographic analyses of supply-chain capitalism (Tsing), the valuation of brands (Foster), the (im)morality of financial markets (Ortiz), and the contemporary trade in carbon credits (Dalsgaard). Another important line of reasoning that can be detected in the papers is the use of values as shorthand for different worldviews or cultural systems, where the emphasis is not on the exchange of things but on how people express their religious and social values and how this informs their actions. Here, we have the great Dumontian tradition to make sense of how we can compare the apparently incomparable—namely, different value systems or “ideologies” (Dumont 1977, 1986). This line of thinking also deals with the issue of relativism that keeps cropping up in anthropology and which emphasizes the difference between value systems and the limits of comparison and translation. In part one of this special issue, quite a few papers (Robbins, Willerslev, Gregory, Iteanu) are inspired by Dumont and bring the comparative project forward in innovative ways.

The third line of reasoning, which I can see the contours of, is the attempt to establish a kind of synthesis between exchange-based theories and values-as-worldviews by looking at how action is informed by values and simultaneously creates value. Michael Lambek’s paper (in part two of this special issue), for example, is part of this synthetic line of thinking. He aims to expand the Marxist understanding of labor as the source of exchange-value toward a more general theory of value that considers any form of human action from the perspective of value creation. In my view, this rethinking of the connection between action and value provides the most promising direction for developing a contemporary anthropological theory of value. David Graeber’s ambitious book *Toward an anthropological theory of value* (2001), which I find very inspirational, points in the same direction. He sees Terence Turner and Nancy Munn as pioneers of this line

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2. The following debate is an edited version of an actual recorded dialogue that took place in Aarhus on May 11, 2013.

of thinking. I fully agree, and this also emerged during the workshop where Munn's influential ethnography *The fame of Gawa* (1986) was discussed frequently.

Munn shows how the Gawan people of Papua New Guinea share a paramount value, the realization of intersubjective spacetime, which drives their intentional actions while simultaneously providing them with a means to assess their relative success against this common standard. Munn talks about the expansion and contraction of spacetime and about positive and negative value. Thus, the paramount value that defines the good life is also the standard by which Gawan people compare their relative success and status in society. A number of the contributors in part two work along this line of theorizing in order to connect various forms of action and value (Corsín Jiménez and Estalella; Henry, Otto, and Wood; Marcus; Nielsen; Sykes). I think the focus on social values in relation to the creation of value through action is an exciting development. It is true that we are a long way from an integrated theory of value in anthropology, but we do have important bodies of theorizing that provide highly relevant insights. These bodies have emerged throughout the history of our discipline and are now being developed by way of further ethnographic discoveries and theoretical debate, as shown by the papers.

RANE: Although you might be right in finding these traces of promise in the papers, it's quite telling that very few of the authors make explicit how they contribute to a general theory of value. That's an inherent aspect of the anthropological project, I think. I really don't believe that there is, ever can be, and, perhaps, ever should be an anthropological theory of value. But we obviously disagree on this.

TON: It is true that very few of the authors refer to a general theory of value, but all of them place themselves in relation to a theoretical argument and refer to existing anthropological theories of value. Therefore, if you don't take my point of view and try to draw out the consequences of these theoretical arguments by comparing them and grouping them around key themes, what is the alternative? And how can we, as anthropologists, take part in the general debate about the place of value in social theory?

RANE: Let me first address the question I posed to you. I am not surprised that the sixteen papers do not point to an anthropological theory of value. What they provide is a diversity of ethnographically driven interpretations of value, which point in every possible direction. A few authors, most notably Michael Lambek and Marshall Sahlins, try to craft a general theory of value, which, perhaps, they may claim is distinctively anthropological. Then there are authors such as Joel Robbins and André Iteanu who strongly defend Dumont's theory as the basis for such a general theory. All are highly inspiring papers, but I have to admit that I am outright against the first attempts and a little skeptical about the latter ones. Let me briefly draw attention to Lambek. He is one of the most influential anthropologists of our time, and his work, particularly on sacrifice, has had an enormous impact on my own thinking as well. However, here he is up to something else. He makes the point, which you find so enlightening, that value is created in action. No doubt his piece is a serious theoretical attempt at creating a general anthropological theory of value. Yet, in my view he fails. His argument becomes so general that it

loses its punch. His essay turns into something akin to a Frazerian project, where he piles ethnographic example upon ethnographic example to show what is obvious, at least to anthropologists—namely, that there are a multiplicity of values, which are all connected to action.

If we adopt the Dumontian (1986) idea of a “paramount value” as the intrinsically ordering dynamic that structures the relations between all the other values it contains—and hence the entire structure of a system—and relate this idea to our discipline, then the paramount value is exactly the diversity of perspectives that we see in the sixteen papers. This is the challenge that anthropology poses to the major traditions of social theory, which are often conceived aside from what it is that human beings around the world actually do. It becomes difficult for a scholar within economics, for example, to generalize about the nature of value when he or she is constantly bombarded with cases of “odd” peoples that supposedly think differently about the matters of ethics, economy, and the good life and act accordingly. In this sense, anthropology is a minor discipline. Yet, this should not lead us to an inferiority complex. As Bruce Kapferer stated in an interview in 2010: “Anthropology was a discipline of the periphery that gained its energy in the periphery. It’s in the periphery that you actually are able to place the centre in some sort of critical relation” (quoted in Bertelsen 2012: 195). In my view, anthropology’s relation to other disciplines that favor more generalized accounts of value becomes akin to warriors of the periphery—that is, “guerrilla warriors” facing an organized army. Anthropology poses a form of irregular warfare in which ambushes, sabotage, raids, the element of surprise, extraordinary mobility, and other forms of petty warfare are used, to give deadly blows to the dominantly larger and less-mobile theoretical traditions. It’s worth citing Mao’s (2010: 7) small book on guerrilla warfare to get my point across: “Avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack; withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision.” The analogy to anthropology’s confrontation with the history of European ideas is not too farfetched, I think. Anthropology’s theoretical capacity to attack is based on the unpredictable blows that it delivers through its commitment to ethnography. As ethnographers, we enter into other realities and find striking kinds of thought and practice that can potentially subvert the dominating theories by confronting them with new understandings of what human life entails. In this sense, anthropology denotes an “anti-theory” of value, and this is exactly where its strength is situated. To quote another revolutionary, Che Guevara (1997: 54), who used his place in the periphery to subvert an entire authoritarian regime: “There is in all this [guerrilla warfare], it would appear, a *negative quality*, an attitude of retreat, of avoiding frontal fights” (my emphasis). “Negative quality,” “periphery,” and “anti-theory,” yes! Anthropology gets its creative energy by moving at the margins. The more conventionalized and centered it gets, the less anthropological it will be.

TON: So, in your view, we should not aim at all at formulating an anthropological theory of value?

RANE: This is my point. We can only have ethnographically driven concepts, and yet they have the capacity to punch the dominant theories where it hurts the most and from every possible angle.

TON: I understand your point, and I must admit that I am attracted to it. But it does not go far enough in my view. If we wish to have an impact as a discipline, I believe we also have to enter into open battle and not limit ourselves to guerrilla warfare only. As Mao (2010: 14) himself pointed out: “Guerrillas . . . may gradually develop into regular units and, when operating as such, employ the tactics of orthodox war.” In order to enter into open battle, we need to build on those guerrilla attacks and see in what directions they point. It doesn’t have to be only in one direction, as I have just explained. That’s why I want to sketch the history of thinking about value, because there have clearly been different lines of thinking that inform contemporary ethnography. A common thread in much anthropological theorizing about value is a critical attitude toward central premises of Western ideology. I strongly identify with this critical potential of anthropological theory. In order to have an impact beyond our discipline, I think that our guerrilla attacks are not going to do enough unless we join forces and actually engage in open battle against central assumptions underlying neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, and other ideologies that are shaping our era. I think we have the opportunity to do that. Ethnography combined with a strong history of theorizing will help us move forward.

RANE: It is interesting that in Giovanni da Col and David Graeber’s (2011) manifesto for HAU, they argue that our discipline’s great contribution to social theory (at large) was to introduce ethnographically driven concepts. Freud and Marx, among others, had to confront anthropology, exactly because it provided “odd” concepts—concepts that did not fit into their own theoretical worlds. It made it difficult for them to generalize about human nature on the basis of the ancient Greeks as the sole representatives of humanity. Thus, the genuine value of ethnography—that which made anthropology’s impact felt—was not grounded in our discipline adopting theoretical concepts from social theory, but rather in the fact that it introduced new and alien concepts from the field that had never been heard of before. Anthropology, therefore, is not really a theory-driven discipline. The theoretical is derived from the ethnographic. And this brings me back to my guerrilla analogy: ethnographically driven concepts may perhaps never fundamentally shape major social theories of value, but they do make themselves felt, and quite often in a painful way. All of this gets me to the question of how you want to shape the introduction. I see the value of the historical outline you drafted, but more as an enlightening discourse about what different scholars have said and how they are related: Marx, Weber, Dumont, and so on. But in my view, such a historical framework suffocates the papers. Their capacity to punch back at social theory is significantly weakened by this approach. The moment you prioritize concepts developed through the history of European ideas and read the contributions accordingly, you force anthropology to face an open battle by exposing our ethnographic concepts to the standard tactics of regular theories. In this confrontation, our discipline can only fail miserably, because it’s based on their concepts, their standards of knowledge.

TON: I think that deep down we may not differ that much. I, too, think that the ultimate force of anthropology lies in ethnography and not in sophisticated social

theory as such. Where we appear to differ is how we go about using ethnography to generate new ideas. In my opinion, good ethnography is always informed, whether explicitly or implicitly, by already existing theory. Malinowski (1922: 9) formulated this very clearly in his foundational statement about the ethnographic method: "Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies." Thus, ethnography that merely seeks to confirm ethnographic concepts suggested by other ethnographers, often working in the same region, is not very productive; it is likely to reproduce preconceived ideas. But knowledge of the history of theory is necessary to enable us to ask new and penetrating questions in ethnographic inquiries. It is in the tension between theoretically inspired questions and confusing ethnographic encounters that new insights can emerge. This is the strength of anthropology that allows us to reflect on fundamental theoretical premises in a way that is much harder to achieve in other disciplines. I think you take away the potency of ethnography by not acknowledging that there is a theoretical tradition that serves as its inspiration. Knowing this tradition will make you a better ethnographer and not a less creative one. In my regional field of Melanesia, this is demonstrated, for example, by the revolt against African descent models in the emerging Papua New Guinea Highlands ethnography of the 1960s and 1970s, which led to a much better understanding of exchange as a principle of social organization; more recently, our creative understanding has benefited from the innovative ethnographies that were inspired by Wagner's (1991) and Strathern's (1988) theoretical ideas about composite persons. Theory allows you to "see" potential questions and work with "foreshadowed problems," which are then to be put to the ethnography at hand and may lead to new theoretical discoveries.

RANE: In my view, for ethnographic theory to evolve, we need to liberate ourselves from the history of ideas. At the end of the day, the kinds of concepts you bring with you from the field are not necessarily shaped by Marx, Weber, and other great thinkers. In a way, these concepts are potentially unique. I guess it really boils down to a question of how you conceive of the human being. Do you allow for the "radical otherness" of the other, or do you subscribe to a view where you accept that there are cultural differences, but basically assume that we share a common humanity that in turn allows us to use our own concepts to talk about the other (Suhr and Willerslev 2012)? I support the idea that the other can only be talked about by means of the alien concepts that you as an ethnographer bring with you from the field and into the world of scholarship. We must allow for the radical otherness to do its magic, because it is from here that anthropology takes its vitality.

TON: If your point of departure is the radical otherness of other people, I think that's a very strong theoretical assumption, but surely also a productive one. In a sense, you are almost more theory driven than I am. The interesting thing is that you argue for the value of guerrilla-type ethnographic interventions on the basis of the impact they have had on some major social theories produced by others; that is, you seem to measure the success of ethnographic concepts by the extent to which they get accepted by other disciplines. Yet, I would say that we should not leave it to others to build those theories! And I think that anthropology has demonstrated

that it can generate some powerful and influential theories itself. Take Marcel Mauss, for example. He was greatly involved in the social and political issues of his time, which saw a bitter struggle between capitalist and communist ideologies. As part of his theoretical reflections, Mauss ([1925] 1969) searched the ethnographic archives for alternative ways of conceiving of values and forms of economic exchange. From those studies, he developed a theory of the gift that has been enormously influential and has inspired generations of anthropologists. My point is that we can use ethnography to build theories that are more than footnotes in other disciplines. We can build theories that can engage in an open theoretical battle. Indeed, this was my motivation for suggesting that we write the introduction in a historical light. I saw it as our task to provide a historical and theoretical context for the specific forays and advances made during the value workshop. But here you disagreed. Now I think we are getting to the bottom of our disagreement. It has to do with our different views on what anthropology entails. In my view, one of the great things about theory is that one builds on previous thinkers; theory adds on. Surely there are breakthroughs and even paradigm shifts, but somehow one always builds on one's predecessors. What I wanted to show is how our contributors built on and qualified, and thus enriched, the value debate, in relation to existing lines of theorizing. In my view, this would bring out their originality rather than obscure or oppress it.

RANE: It is all a question of translation, really. You have these alien concepts that pop up in ethnography. Do you try to explain them through already established concepts, so that you make a one-to-one translation, or do you allow for their alienness to work on you, so that translation becomes a question of re-describing our own established concepts in a way that allows us to imagine alien worlds? I believe in the latter proposition, and I take it from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004, 2011; see also Holbraad 2007). In my view, you cannot carry out comparison in the naïve sense of collapsing concepts, which is what you do when you link ethnography directly to the theoretical concepts of Marx, Weber, and others. This, I believe, is also the key point of Dumont: One cannot take the Judeo-Christian sacrifice tradition, for example, and compare it to sacrifice in another tradition to then conclude that there is some essence of sacrifice. All you can do is to allow for the different values in the two traditions to rub against each other and make this difference the focal point of the comparison. This is what I try to do in my own paper when comparing Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac with the Chukchi sacrifices. And this has made me realize that anthropology's attempt to develop a theory of value is intimately connected to a theory of comparison. We have always defined anthropology as a comparative exercise. But very few serious attempts have been made to develop such a theory. And I think that's where the problem lies. Although the sixteen papers have the potential for developing a general theory, as you suggest, most of them do not explicate this aspect, exactly because they are not guided by a proper theory of comparison. Until anthropology has developed a widely accepted theory of comparison, we can provide nothing but an anti-theory of value; we can be nothing but guerrilla warriors.

TON: I think that's an important point. But you are not solving the issue by refraining from comparison until a proper theory and method is found. In a way,



such a theory and method already exist, as illustrated by your own example. Let's use this idea of the potentially radical otherness of the concepts we find in the field as our theoretical starting point. This is also, in my view, one of the great vantage points of ethnography. But don't you agree that we construct this radical otherness at the same time as we rub those exotic concepts against our original theoretical concepts? The construction of ethnographic concepts of the other (and of ourselves) is a result of these conceptual comparisons. The more friction it causes, the better the theoretical results. Your own paper, where you compare two sacrificial traditions, is a good example of this. Through the friction caused by juxtaposing the radical otherness of these traditions, you end with a surprising and innovative reinterpretation of the Judeo-Christian case. But in order to accomplish this, you draw on existing anthropological theories of sacrifice and also on the Dumontian notions of hierarchical encompassment and reversal of values. Thus, you show that the terms of comparison emerge through the very act of theoretically informed comparison.

In a similar way, we can compare different ethnographic cases, as were presented at the workshop. I believe that terms of comparison emerge when we try to apply theoretical concepts—for example, sacrifice, gift exchange, or value hierarchy—to different ethnographic contexts and investigate whether they help us ask penetrating questions. In this spirit, I have suggested some areas of comparison between the contributions of this volume—namely, one around exchange theory and value, one around Dumontian comparisons of value systems, and one around the relation between value and action. So, I have identified three theoretical questions or aspects of comparison, and that is why I suggested that we order the papers according to these three aspects. I agree that such grouping is always partial and provisional, not only because the theory is always provisional, but also because most of the papers speak to more than one of the aspects. But by organizing the papers in this way, we show how the contributions develop some original lines of anthropological thinking about value that can inspire further ethnography and can challenge key assumptions of dominant ideologies that are represented in other social disciplines. Would you agree with that?

RANE: Not really—yet, I must also admit that I don't see a better alternative right now for grouping the papers. In this regard, I retreat from my guerrilla attack and surrender. Let's give it a try along the lines you suggest. It could work.

### **The contributions**

Here, we introduce the papers of part one of the special issue on value as theory; there are eight in all. We group the papers as suggested in the debate above and deal here with the topics of exchange theory and value and Dumontian comparisons of value systems. The papers of part two will be introduced in the next issue of *HAU*, and they will be linked to the theme of the relation between value and action.

### ***Exchange theory and value***

An important line of thinking about value in anthropology emerged from analyzing various forms of exchange, in relation to and in contrast with Western forms of market exchange. In this regard, Marcel Mauss' *The gift* ([1925] 1969) is

undoubtedly the most influential essay. It theorizes the gift as a key concept for the analysis of exchange in non-Western (“archaic”) societies. Yet, as Graeber (2011) in his re-analysis of *The gift* emphasizes, Mauss did not develop a simple dichotomy between the altruism of archaic societies and the unbridled individualism of modern ones. Often, the gift functions in situations of competition and inequality in non-Western societies, and exchange in Western societies is not governed purely by economic calculation (Mauss [1925] 1969: 74). Mauss was interested in the identification of moral principles that were potentially present in all societies and wanted to use the ethnographic record for developing viable alternatives for contemporary society (Graeber 2011: 155–63). The analysis of the gift as a particular form of reciprocal exchange has been taken up and developed by a range of influential, agenda-setting anthropologists, including Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), Marshall Sahlins (1972), Marilyn Strathern (1988), Annette Weiner (1992), and Maurice Godelier (1999).

For the present argument, we want to draw attention to the important conceptual work of Chris Gregory (1982, 1997), who created a theoretical synthesis between the Maussian perspective on gift exchange and Marx’s political-economic analysis of commodity exchange. Gregory defines gifts as relations between non-alienable things by means of inalienable things. The main purpose of gifts is the establishment and maintenance of social relationships. Commodities, on the other hand, represent relations between aliens by means of alienable things, with the main purpose of exchanging things. But of course we deal with logical categories or ideal types here, and the reality is much more complex and shows many hybrid forms. Take, for example, money, which is the central means of market exchange but which can have more or less purely commoditized forms. According to Gregory (1997: 1), however, the development of modern monetary forms has led to a decline of the power of nation-states to control the market and its inherent individualist tendencies. This in turn has caused a growing distrust among citizens in the moral capacity of nation-states. There is a rich anthropological literature about the relationship between money and morality in non-Western societies (Parry and Bloch 1989; Guyer 1995; Akin and Robbins 1999). These volumes show, among other things, that many non-Western societies have been able to protect their key reproductive social institutions from the disruptive influence of commodity exchange—for example, through the process of “enclaving,” which means erecting cultural barriers around critical social institutions (Akin and Robbins 1999: 24). But the question remains whether these cases present only temporary adaptations and modifications of commodity exchange, which are bound to give way to other forms, or whether the situation in Western societies really has taken a different direction (Hart 2005).

Four contributions to this special issue take up this important question and demonstrate the importance of ethnographic studies of concrete exchange processes and valuations. Anna Tsing addresses the contrast between gifts and commodities in a modern capitalist form of production and exchange, the so-called supply chain. Her ethnographic strategy is to follow a particular commodity, the matsutake mushroom, from its collection in the forest to its purchase on the (Japanese) market. It is clear from her analysis that the mushrooms start their trajectory as gifts rather than commodities, because they still contain elements of the hunters’ personal values and social relations. In the hands of buyers, bulkers,

and exporters, the mushrooms go through various stages of assessing and sorting (by size, grade, and weight), which removes the personal connections and turns the products into pure commodities. But curiously, on the market, this process is reversed again through personal relations between wholesale sellers, local buyers, and ultimately consumers, because matsutake, due to their value and perceived exquisiteness, are prized gifts. This case shows that capitalist commodities may involve strong personal investments and therefore wander in and out of gift status. The commodity status of matsutake is not self-evident but requires continuous work, which in this case is that of assessment and sorting. Tsing concludes that market relations always depend on and exploit non-market relations in order to accomplish their goals of money-making, thus putting her analysis in line with a Marxist understanding of value extraction.

Robert Foster's contribution deals with a fascinating new development in the commoditization of modern economies—namely, the translation of a subjective valuation, such as the reputation or "brand" of a company, into a commodity with an exact price value. He shows how branding is the contingent outcome of relationships between various stakeholders in the brand; apart from the investors, this includes consumers, workers, and suppliers, but also media, governments, and NGOs. The consumers are active agents whose "consumption work" (Miller 1987) contributes substantially to the creation of a brand, and who are prepared to pay for the right to use the brand for their own identity projects. The development of a standard for calculating brand value by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has made it possible to put a dollar value on company reputations, which companies can use to raise money by attracting investors. This translation of the qualitative value of reputation into a commodity form, without the need to actually sell the brand, eclipses the concrete consumption work done by consumers and thus presents a new form of value extraction.

The contribution by Horacio Ortiz takes us to one of the most advanced forms of commodity exchange in modern societies—namely, financial markets—and analyzes the discourse of value that plays a major part in these milieus. Ortiz conducted his ethnographic fieldwork among a team of professional investors in a French multinational company, buying so-called asset-backed securities (ABSs) for their clients. These professionals describe what they are doing as "value creation" in an efficiently working global market. The "efficient market" is effectively composed of these professionals, who are given the right to make decisions for others (who provide the capital) on the basis of their knowledge of certain procedures of risk assessment. By focusing on the technicalities of the procedures in these complex markets, the discourse on value creation is "economized" and taken out of the sphere of ethical considerations. As Ortiz shows, this separation cannot always be maintained, and in times of crash and crisis, some of the financial actors are inclined to make critical ethical judgments. But most of the time, they consider themselves "ethically constricted subjects," facilitating a system to run efficiently so that financial value can be generated. What is completely elided, as Ortiz points out, are the enormous political consequences of these financial markets that create great economic inequalities through their credit ratings, giving low credit to some, high credit to others, and even making it impossible for others to borrow. These decisions are presented as technical and driven by an efficient market; in this way, they largely escape moral judgment and political responsibility.

Ortiz's ethnography thus shows with rare clarity how economic value derives from the practice of organizing a market and how the consideration of other values, which may be in conflict with this practice, can disappear into the background.

Another fascinating development of Western commodity markets is analyzed by Steffen Dalsgaard in his contribution on the practice and potential of the carbon trade. Out of concern about climate change due to greenhouse effects, the Kyoto Protocol introduced the possibility of putting a price on CO<sub>2</sub> pollution. This is done by a cap-and-trade mechanism, in which governments put a cap or limit on admissible carbon emissions from industrial actors, with the opportunity for these actors to buy carbon credits from others if they exceed their limit. In this way, a market in carbon credits is created, which, it is anticipated, provides a financial incentive for carbon reduction. Dalsgaard discusses various problems and alternative mechanisms and points out how carbon trading has the potential to bring together different spheres of human action, in particular the economy and the environment (but also development), within a singular system of commensurability. He speculates about the potential of carbon to develop into an encompassing standard of equivalence or currency, in spite of obvious bureaucratic and administrative difficulties. Dalsgaard also critically shows how carbon trade effectively can create and maintain inequalities in wealth and developmental potential.

### ***Dumontian comparisons of value systems***

Louis Dumont has played a crucial role in putting the analysis of values on the anthropological research agenda, and his work continues to inspire contemporary anthropologists (Robbins 1994, 2004; Rio and Smedal 2009; Kapferer 2010). Dumont's conception of holism (Bubandt and Otto 2010) became the cornerstone of his analysis of value systems. In Dumont's view, values are linked to each other in complex ranked and encompassing ways, and the identification of the central values that encompass all others can only be done through a comparison between systems conceived as wholes, because these key values are not necessarily expressed *as such* in the systems they are part of (Dumont 1977: 19). Dumont's life's work has been the comparative study of value systems, or ideologies, especially between India and the West, in which the identification of the determining terms of one system has made visible the terms of the other, and vice versa.

In his comparative study of value, Dumont (1986: 233, 247 ff.) prefers to talk about "ideas-and-values" (*idées-valeurs* in French) rather than simply values, because in his view, the explicit separation of "is" and "ought"—or "fact" and "value"—is a particular feature of modern ideology. According to Dumont (1986: 227), "essentially, hierarchy is the encompassing of the contrary." Importantly, the concept of hierarchy thus implies a notion of levels, and this is also how Dumont conceives of the way societies deal with value contradictions. The hierarchical relation can be reversed at other ideological levels applied to different social contexts. A good example of the reversal of values at different levels is the relationship between Brahmins (priests) and kings in the classical Indian system, a relationship that is characterized by the paramount encompassing value of purity. At the highest (religious or cosmological) level, priests are of superior value to kings because they embody the greatest purity. But at the subordinate level of

public order, priests actually have to obey the kings, who are entrusted with maintaining political order itself (Dumont 1986: 252–53).

With his ideas about comparison, holism, hierarchical encompassment, and reversal at different levels, Dumont created a number of important conceptual and methodological tools for the empirical study of value systems. In this issue, four chapters in particular deal with his intellectual heritage and show how it can advance key anthropological questions.

Joel Robbins addresses the issue of the opposition between monism and pluralism. He remarks that while the anthropological study of values has witnessed a relative decline after Dumont, it has remained a central concern in other disciplines, including philosophy. Here, the key debate is between monists, who assume that ultimately all values in a society can be harmoniously integrated, and pluralists, who deny that this is normally the case. Key representatives of the latter perspective are Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin, who emphasize that the human condition is characterized by the existence of conflicting values and therefore the necessity to make difficult, even tragic, decisions between incompatible ends. While recognizing that philosophical monism is currently out of fashion, Robbins argues that most societies have both monist and pluralist tendencies and that anthropology is in a position to study the relation between these tendencies empirically. Here, the heritage of Dumont is particularly valuable, as his concepts explain both value encompassment, and thus a tendency towards monism, and value differentiation, leading to pluralism through reversals at different levels and in different contexts. Robbins' contribution explores how this perspective can enrich anthropological analysis by comparing four different cases across a spectrum, from a largely monist order among the Brooklyn Hasidic Jews, via two mixed cases (the Sepych in the Russian Urals and the Avatip in Papua New Guinea's East Sepik Province), to the strongly pluralist society of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea's West Sepik Province.

Chris Gregory's contribution takes up a heated debate Dumont was involved in concerning his Indian ethnographic analysis and shows how the application of Dumont's methodology—the holistic comparison of value systems—actually can take this debate further. His point of departure is Dumont's contested claim that in Southern India the value of affinal relations is equal to that of consanguineal kin relations, in contrast to Europe, where consanguinity is considered more important than affinity. Gregory, who himself did ethnographic field research in Central India, deduces from Dumont's writings that the situation in North India is different—that is, that affinal relations are actually valued more highly than consanguineal relations. Gregory shows that the terms in which this question was framed by Dumont have confused the debate and that it is better to use the expression "fraternity as a value" instead of "affinity as a value." Through an impressively incisive analysis of kinship terms (of reference as well as of address), "emotive" values, and marriage practices, Gregory is able to show a logic in the two Indian systems that reveals the dominance of the brother as the key valuer in the South Indian system and the dominant position of the husband in North India. How this has come about cannot be reconstructed from the existing material, but Gregory asserts that the struggle between husbands and brothers persists to the present day and that the major battleground can be located in the dazzling wedding rituals of the Indian subcontinent.

Dumont's method of radical holistic comparison is able to generate innovative and even surprising ethnographic interpretations, as Rane Willerslev shows in his analysis of two different traditions of human sacrifice: the Judeo-Christian tradition as represented in the biblical story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Isaac, and the Chukchi tradition, which Willerslev studied through ethnographic fieldwork. The Chukchi, a group of reindeer herders in northern Siberia, sacrifice to the spirits to obtain their blessing, but they do this through a chain of substitutes for the most valuable sacrifice—a human being (the most valueless being a stone). Willerslev argues that the Chukchi—driven by a pragmatic attitude—aim to trick the spirits into accepting a rather valueless sacrifice. In contrast, Abraham's near-sacrifice is normally interpreted as a test of his faith by God. Through a radical comparison of these key values in the two sacrificial traditions, trickery versus faith, Willerslev shows that each actually encompasses its opposite. Thus, the Chukchi value of trickery also involves faith, as its shadow, so to speak, and Abraham's act of faith may actually cover up a more hidden attempt to trick God. This truly surprising interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition is generated by applying Dumont's method of cross-cultural comparison, including a search for a hierarchical encompassment of opposites. Willerslev concludes that an even higher level of hierarchical encompassment exists in both traditions, which can be seen to be guided by the same paramount value—namely, the maintenance of a necessary distance between humanity and divinity.

The final example of how Dumont's heritage informs present-day ethnographic analysis, as well as ideological critique, is from André Iteanu, a former student of Dumont. In particular, Iteanu addresses the way in which a Western society characterized by the central value of equality deals with hierarchy. Following Dumont (1986: 227), Iteanu states that the notion of value is inseparably connected to hierarchy, but this poses a problem for societies that see themselves as egalitarian. The case is that of young Muslim girls who wear headscarves in school, which has been a major political issue in France since 1989, culminating in the French parliament passing a law that forbids wearing visible religious signs in schools and other public institutions. Why did these girls cause such a public outcry, and why did the French state, supported by public opinion, react in this radical way?

Typically, these young girls are third-generation immigrants, often bright, and well performing in school (unlike the boys). In contrast to their parents and grandparents, they reconvert to Islam as their own individual choice. It is here that the real problem lies: as people who are well on their way to becoming French citizens embodying values of equality and freedom, these girls challenge the French understanding of these values and thus deny the success of their integration into French society. Instead of being secular and sexually liberated, values that the French would predominantly connect with the paramount values of equality and freedom, these girls emphasize religious values, often connected with sexual repression. Ironically, they challenge important values of French society—albeit at an encompassed level—by exercising their individual freedom, which is one of the three key values of the French Revolution. The political and economic result of this clash of values is that they are expelled from schools, do not get the careers they would be fit to pursue, and remain in the limbo of the *banlieue*, the suburban neighborhoods that are places of transition, where they, in fact, remain unequal

and not free. Thus, instead of encompassing religious choice, the French egalitarian ideology leads to a rejection of the girls' religious values and to their political removal from public space; it becomes a political contest between incompatible values.

## Conclusion

Iteanu's case raises the question: Are such different worldviews incompatible, and thus do they reflect, as Weber argues, an "eternal struggle of gods" to be fought out in the political sphere (quoted in Behnegar 2003: 127)? What Iteanu shows is how a Dumontian analysis of the French value system can help us clarify what kind of value conflict is actually at stake, the specifics of which are characteristic of the French situation; this sheds light on the ideological basis of the perceived value incompatibilities. Further comparison with other Western societies, then, will provide the foundation for a wider perspective on how the values of freedom and equality, potentially at least, can encompass the expression of religious choice. In this way, the comparative analysis of value systems becomes a form of ideology critique that can feed back, quite relevantly, into political debates. Dumont thus defended a non-relativist stance on the study of ideologies. In principle, different value systems are comparable and translatable into each other, and their comparative analysis reveals their internal structures of hierarchical encompassment.

The detailed analyses of modern exchange practices by Tsing, Foster, Ortiz, and Dalsgaard show us how, in practice, the market is not fully commoditized: free market exchange is a value rather than a fully realized practice. But they also make us realize how the expansion of the market can lead to a growing dominance of economic values and to the gradual obviation of alternative values with serious political implications. Accordingly, we can see a monist tendency in modern Western ideology (see Robbins in this issue), driven by the practical and ideological success of a system that seeks to make as many things as possible comparable against a single standard of equivalence. Exchange-value drives the expansion of the values of economic ideology. Against this background, the relevance of the comparative study of values stands out splendidly.

All questions of value are also questions of morality and ethics. In this sense, looking at *value as theory* cannot avoid questions of *value as morality*. Although the market and its agents, as Ortiz shows, try to keep financial value creation outside the sphere of ethical consideration, they, too, are forced to make some critical ethical judgments in times of financial crises. Willerslev shows how the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, which provides the very foundation of the Judeo-Christian understanding of faith in God, carries with it a shadow value of trickery, which allows us to reinterpret the canonical story in quite opposite terms. These points and many others in the papers reveal the relevance of the anthropology of value for considering moral issues.

Thus, the contributions to the first part of this special issue, in spite of their ethnographic and theoretical diversity, clearly converge on the importance of a comparative approach to the study of value, where dominant Western values are the implicit ideological background against which the explicit comparisons take place. In this way, the papers contribute to the important anthropological project of cultural critique (Marcus and Fisher 1988), whether as guerrilla fighters or as

troops in a more standard army. Ultimately, the purpose of dealing with value as theory is to assess where today's anthropology is situated in relation to the history of social theory. Can it still be considered the comparative discipline par excellence, and above all, to what extent does it remain a critical discipline that unerringly provides challenges to central premises of Western ideology? We are confident that the present collection of papers does all of these things in abundance. Enjoy reading!

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## Introduction : La valeur *comme* théorie. Comparaison, critique culturelle, et théorie ethnographique de guérilla.

Résumé : Cette introduction aborde la question de l'utilité, voire de la simple possibilité, de développer une théorie anthropologique de la valeur. Sous la forme d'un débat socratique, deux points de vue contradictoires émergent. L'un fait valoir que l'anthropologie peut apporter une contribution importante et tout à fait cohérente à la question de la valeur dans la théorie sociale. L'autre soutient que l'anthropologie, en tant que discipline guidée par l'ethnographie, produit une anti-théorie de la valeur. Les deux perspectives découlent de deux visions différentes de l'anthropologie, qui envisagent chacune de manière divergente la relation de la discipline à d'autres disciplines et à l'histoire des idées en général. Un point de convergence se dégage cependant, concernant l'intérêt d'explorer le potentiel de la valeur comme théorie. Pour les deux perspectives, la valeur est considérée comme un concept puissant à même de générer de nouvelles questions ethnographiques et de nouvelles réflexions, et d'apporter une dimension cruciale à la critique culturelle.

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