



Prologue: Value as theory

Value, action, and critique

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In the introduction to part one of this special issue we addressed the thorny question of whether an anthropological theory of value is needed or indeed possible at all. By way of a Socratic debate, we argued respectively for one of two opposite positions. Ton Otto suggested that anthropology can make a major and quite coherent contribution to the issue of value in social theory and he was in favor of bringing the papers together from a “history of ideas” perspective, thereby tracing how the authors’ varied perspectives and approaches to questions of value advanced particular—and easily specified—trends in social theory. Rane Willerslev, to the contrary, proposed that anthropology is an ethnographically driven discipline, which can only produce idiosyncratic “antitheories” of value. In Willerslev’s view, anthropologists are and should be, primarily, warriors of the periphery—that is, “guerrilla warriors,” using indigenous conceptual productions as tactics to fight dominant theoretical traditions. The debate reflects an underlying disagreement, which runs through the collection of articles themselves, about the place of anthropology in relation to other disciplines and, in particular, whether anthropology is primarily theory-driven or ethnography-driven, and whether or not these two abstractions (“theory” and “ethnography”) can be reconciled.

This debate continues in part two of this special issue, but with new fields of inquiry and objects of analysis. The contributions of part one were largely concerned with aspects of value in exchange theory and with the radical comparison of diverse cultural structures. Part two addresses the relationship between value and action, including actions deemed to occur outside the sphere of reciprocal exchanges. Additionally, part two raises questions about what value means for anthropological practice by considering how anthropologists engage with their field sites and projects via critique and collaboration.

Developing the value question

As outlined earlier, both Karl Marx and Marcel Mauss employed concepts of value for a critique of the capitalist system of commodity production and exchange. Interestingly, their critical apparatuses were based on the same premise of an

expected return for something parted with: whether this was in the form of a gift given or labor time expended. Yet, as the contributions to this volume show, there are many types of relationships that are not guided by a premise of reciprocity and should thus be taken into account in order to theorize value formation more capaciously.

Consider, for example, the rubric of “sharing,” which is especially salient in the ethnographic literature on hunter-gatherer societies. Sharing is, perhaps, one of the most “archaic” modes of exchange (Gell 1999), but it also has a much wider application in the postindustrial world of city-dwellers (see for example Rasmussen 2011). Moreover, sharing continues to pose a challenge within anthropology: is it a form of reciprocity or a different phenomenon? In a seminal argument in *Stone age economics* (1988), Marshall Sahlins conceptualized sharing as a “generalized” form of reciprocity. Engaging with this argument, James Woodburn (1998) reflected that among hunter-gatherers with “immediate return-systems,” sharing is a specific transactional mode, marked by little or no expectation of a return. Earlier, Nicholas Peterson (1993) denoted this type of sharing as “demand sharing,” thus reducing the previous emphasis on “generosity,” and instead stressed the role of the receiver, who can make claims on other peoples’ possessions. Recently, a stark separation of sharing from other transactional modes has been criticized by Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Rane Willerslev (2007), who argue that not only does sharing among hunter-gatherers coexist with other transactional modes but when stretched to its conceptual limit, sharing may transform into reciprocity or even into theft. Likewise, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2000: 345) has suggested that in transactional modes like sharing or reciprocity, multiple exchange logics are always at work, and it would be misleading to fuse them into one privileged mode—that is, as “sharing” plain and simple—which, ultimately, smooths over rough edges and edits out contradictions.

However, in part two of this special issue, Thomas Widlok maintains that sharing is *not* reciprocity and muses on the reasons why people share what they value even if they cannot expect a return. On the basis of the hunter-gatherer literature and his own field research among the San of northern Namibia, Widlok characterizes sharing as a complex rather than a primordial cultural phenomenon that requires specific social conditions for its execution. Taking “demand-sharing” as a prototype, Widlok describes sharing as tolerated scrounging rather than as reciprocity or altruism. In Widlok’s view, sharing offers an incentive to rethink and revise existing value theories on a number of counts: first, sharing entails a shift in perspective away from the utility of specific goods and toward what the human environment can afford (and how it can be accessed). In sharing there is no deliberate economic calculation of the value of a particular item that is given up by a person. Instead, sharing involves an acute awareness—and possibly calculation—of the value of maintaining good relations in a group. What Widlok ultimately shows is that a fuller recognition of the importance of sharing as a widespread human mode of transaction in its own right, different from gift or commodity exchange, might have a major impact on how we understand value as transcendental field of relationships of exchange.

The contribution by Rosita Henry, Ton Otto, and Michael Wood broadens the empirical field of the value debate by analyzing the transformations of value that occur in the production, collection, categorization, and exchange of ethnographic

artifacts. The authors define an artifact as a "complex phenomenon, consisting of a material thing, its specific documentation, and the stories and theories that give it a history" (2013: 35). They find that artifacts, in their social biographies, assume qualities of gifts as well as commodities and become established both as public goods and as private property, often coterminously. To account for this ontological multiplicity, the authors turn to Tim Ingold's (2012) rendering of material culture studies and ecological anthropology as a useful point of departure. In this account, *things* are distinguished from *objects*. Whereas a "thing" refers to the flow and movement of artifacts through social life (of which they are part), an "object" denotes the singling out of the thing as existing apart from the perceiver through processes of inscription and categorization. The authors argue that value is ascribed in these processes of objectification, which reflect human cultural projects, but the material existence of artifacts as things allows for their involvement in different cultural projects, both simultaneously and consecutively, leading to contrasting and even conflicting valuations.

Part two also engages with the linguistic dimensions of value creation. Whereas values, as cultural representations, can be expressed in numerous means, media, and methods—e.g., through ritual objects and ordinary acts—language is the ubiquitous means of expressing what Louis Dumont (1986: 233) termed "ideas-and-values." In this issue, the ethno-linguist Alexandra Aikhenvald analyzes how a particular language, Tariana, in north-western Brazilian Amazonia, expresses and congeals modes of valuation in use and utterance. In Tariana, the indigenous notion of "good" is phenomenologically related with actions such as "proper, correct, and straight," whereas "not good" is encompassed by idioms expressing "otherness" and "difference." Foreignness is thus often associated with danger, but the desire for white people's goods has also opened up new semantic fields that address the economic domain and its inherent value concepts. Aikhenvald thus continues and enriches the linguistic approach to value by focusing not only on semiotic valence, but on the (meta)pragmatics of language use. For example, in Tariana, fluency and competency in a specific language is highly respected as a mark of trustworthiness and genuine moral personhood, whereas code-switching is a mark of incompetence and low status.

Action and (re)valuation

The three contributions discussed above respond to questions of value from diverse empirical terrains and do so by expanding on conceptual toolkits from existing theoretical domains. However, they also reveal an increasing focus on the relation between value and action (in sharing, categorization, and language use), and a turn away from more formal models of reciprocal exchange and holistic comparison. A focus on the relation between action and value, and in particular on value as a way to deal with the significance of social action, is even more poignant in the next contributions we discuss. These papers can be linked to a line of reasoning that was initially developed in the works of Terence Turner, Nancy Munn, and David Graeber. The specific novelty of this approach is to focus on the production of value *in* action and to expand the notion of value production beyond its more constrained meaning used by early political economists; namely, the production of value through labor. Terence Turner (2008), who places himself directly in the tradition of Marxian value theory, argues that this approach to value,

when properly calibrated, has wide applicability, even in societies that do not engage in commodity production. Graeber (2001), using Turner's ethnographic material on the Kayapo of central Brazil, shows how this can be done by analyzing the chanting of Kayapo chiefs as a medium and measure of value.

Morten Nielsen's contribution to this issue is directly inspired by this line of reasoning. He is particularly indebted to Munn's (1986) working out of Gawan value creation in terms of its transformative capacity to expand or contract the spacetime of self-other relationships. His case study concerns young road workers in southern Mozambique who are not happy with the pay they receive from their Chinese employers. The workers consider this pay as a "handout," which, in turn, suggests a failure—on the part of the Chinese employers—to recognize them as proper social persons. At one level, this situation could be read as a passive resistance to market relations, where labor is turned into a commodity with a price—an exchange value—that the workers cannot control. But Nielsen takes his analysis much further. He observes that an interesting value transformation occurs in the perception of the workers to their work when they have earned sufficient money to buy a bag of cement. Their image of the unsatisfactory employee-employer relationship is transformed into a relationship between their work on the road and the construction of their own houses. Thus, the former social relation, marked by its negative value transformation, is obviated (here used in Roy Wagner's sense of the term) by a positive relationship that implies an expanded vision of the past and the future. The bag of cement is both a positive memory linked to the road work and the anticipation of a future house—replete with its implications for kinship and marriage—that also may facilitate the acquisition of citizen status. This is, of course, an uncertain future, but it affects the valuation of the present, materialized in a bag of cement.

Karen Sykes' contribution to this volume also deals with the relation between actions and values by investigating how changing economic and kin-centric practices entail new kinds of choices and the need for revaluations. Exploring the consequences of recent Papua New Guinean migration to Australia, Sykes examines—from the perspectives of women—shifting relations between sisters (who migrated) and their brothers (who stayed behind). Traditionally, in this Papua New Guinean context, the payment of bridewealth established a bond between the clan of the husband and the clan of the brother, of which the sister is a part. In the two cases Sykes describes, a mortgage (taken to build a house) became a central part of bridewealth negotiations, wherein the house was given to the parents to live in, but it remained the property of the mortgage taker. Sykes argues that, in both cases, the expression of respect for brothers was the traditional value that bound the new and old practices together. In this way, market relations were integrated with kin relations, but at the same time, new monetary possibilities appeared to affect the valuation of brothers by their sisters as the latter aimed to balance their risks and interests between transnational households and obligations to natal clans.

In another contribution, Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Adolfo Estalella focus on the emergence of new values in political action. Their particular case is the Occupy Movement in Spain, known as the "15M Movement," having been inaugurated on May 15, 2011. This grassroots movement created a space for intensive social experimentation in a modern urban environment, leading to the design of new social forms and values for a specifically urban setting. Through a form of

participatory ethnography, Corsín Jiménez and Estalella were able to follow this urban social experiment as it evolved through “popular assemblies”—more than one hundred in Madrid alone. What they show is how the work of organizing these assemblies was constitutive of a new experience of relationality in the city, referred to as “making neighbors.” This new relationality was quite different from existing urban relations based on personas such as the stranger, the cosmopolitan, and the consumer. It was also fundamentally distinct from the temporal and durable qualities of social forms like kinship and friendship, as the neighbor became what they refer to as an “atmospheric” person, created in and through the political ambience and experimentation of the assemblies themselves. Their case study reveals how social and political value emerges through the design of the neighbor as a new social relation, an “idea-and-value” in the Dumontian sense, but simultaneously a social value that is produced in and through experimental political action.

Value as theory and critical practice

Michael Lambek’s contribution is, perhaps, the most ambitious attempt in the collection to provide a general anthropological theory of value. What makes it particularly anthropological, in our view, is its “holistic” scope (cf. Otto and Bubandt 2010). Lambek engages in a thought experiment where he conceives all action from the viewpoint of value. By making this holistic move, he extends the traditionally Marxist understanding of productive activity as the paramount source of value to include all forms of human activity, even those actions that are deemed to lie outside the sphere of material production and exchange. Although Lambek does not explicitly deal with Munn, Turner, or Graeber in this contribution (but see Lambek 2008), his attempt to theorize the connection between value and action is very much in line with their intellectual agendas. Following Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, among others, Lambek distinguishes two types of activities, namely *action* and *production*—or “doing” and “making.” He argues that ethical value is to action as material value is to production, thus relating this established dichotomy to the question of value. Lambek further links ethical value with incommensurability and material value with commensurability. This leads to two different kinds of valuation, namely *choice* in the case of market value, and *judgment* in the case of ethics, where a balance between noncommensurable values has to be established. The most innovative part of Lambek’s contribution—after he set up this useful conceptual framework—is to be found in his detailed reflections on how acts, performative ones in particular, can objectify value and how this objectified value then circulates in society. The value of these acts is not only objectified by the execution of the acts themselves, but also retrospectively by the way the acts are narrated. Value can also be stored in sacred postulates or verbal formulas, which, in turn, assume authority through their narrative iteration. In Lambek’s analysis, objectified value is circulated and sustained by human activity and, therefore, can rapidly disappear in its absence. Extending the storage of objectified value to things, Lambek argues that the gift can also be brought under this paradigm, since the gift is an objectification of the value generated in acts of giving, accepting, and returning. Thus, he reasons, a gift is the objectification of acts, just as a commodity is the objectification of labor. Within this all-encompassing theory, however, older theoretical oppositions persist. For Lambek,

there is still a difference between commodity and noncommodity spheres, between labor and other kinds of action, and, as he explicitly points out, between ritual and legal-bureaucratic spheres of performative action.

Marshall Sahlins' essay in this issue also makes a strong claim about anthropology's contribution to value theory and, rather than using "guerrilla tactics," he engages in a full-blown attack on the way value has been theorized in modern, neoclassical economics. His strategic approach is organized along several lines of assault. First, he demonstrates how the general claim by economists that the economy should be treated as a separate system is, in fact, impossible to sustain, as the impact of so-called "exogenous factors" is a necessary part of any economic explanation. Far from being a self-regulating system, the market is only one way of objectifying the cultural-historical order. Thus, by banishing culture as "exogenous" to the market, economists also banish a conceptual apparatus, which would actually be able to *explain* economic practices. Furthermore, Sahlins effectively demolishes the much-beloved figure of economic thinking—*Homo economicus*—the rational, calculating, and maximizing individual, stripped of all actual human characteristics. Sahlins ventures to claim that *Homo economicus*, as a matter of historical fact, is a fiction, poignantly asserting that the "self is not the sole end of an individual's existence any more than it is the exclusive means." (2013: 168). Sahlins then gives ethnographic substance to his claim by giving examples of parents' love for their children "as other selves of themselves" and a wealth of other ethnographic examples concerning kinship relations across the globe. His point is to show that material interest and agency, quite evidently, are inherent in relationships rather than in individuals. After destroying economics' blind beliefs in the market, rational choice, and the cult of the individual, Sahlins proceeds to build up an all-inclusive anthropological approach to value, which he calls the "political economy of alterity." Central to his approach is the ethnographic observation that, cross-culturally, material goods of the highest values originate from the *outside*, culturally defined, and in particular from transcendent cosmic realms. As cause for this alterity of the supreme values, Sahlins points to the universal human condition of finitude: key factors of human life—health, prosperity, and death—are beyond the powers of human agency; therefore, human societies need to be linked to suprahuman powers outside themselves. The *value* that originates from beyond is subsequently appropriated in material goods—thus linking the creation of so-called "material value" to the cosmological imagination.

Whereas Lambek's and Sahlins' contributions are exercises in theoretical synthesis (as well as modes of critique), many chapters in this volume show how ethnography can generate challenging questions and criticize theoretical assumptions through unexpected findings. This is what we denoted in part one as the "guerrilla ethnographic method." These findings are brought about by radical comparison—as discussed in relation to Dumont's value project and also by detailed observations, where ethnographers follow their subject across transnational spaces and through various transformations in time. Think of the way Anna Tsing (part one of this special issue) followed the Matsutake mushroom along its international journey of manifesting as different types of transactions. Or, Henry, Otto, and Wood (part two of this special issue), who traced the various value transformations of artifacts across places, times, and institutional contexts. In their detailed tracking of concrete connections, ethnographers discover that all systems and institutions,

however seamless in their self-representations, have rough edges, which, as Tsing (2013: 39) remarks, are "a purchase point for intellectual and political work." That is to say, they have *value* for both theoretical elaboration and cultural critique.

Here we use the term "cultural critique" broadly, in the sense articulated by Marcus and Fischer ([1986] 1999), who see it as one of the two central promises of the discipline of anthropology in its twentieth-century guise (the other being the study of the diversity of cultural worlds). The aim of cultural critique is to disrupt the common-sense experience of our own cultural worlds and to reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions—especially those that inform our social theories. As we have already stated in our introduction to part one (Otto and Willerslev 2013), an anthropology of value inevitably has to address the aspect of critique—and it has done so extensively from Mauss and Marx to Dumont, Sahlins, and Graeber—since the value concept is intrinsically comparative and evaluative. As an outcome of our Socratic debate, we were able to identify two contrasting modalities of cultural critique, which we called the "guerrilla type" and the "open battle." Anna Tsing's contribution (part one) may be seen an example of the first type: she generates a fascinating critique of the commodity form (and the system of which it is a part) by following the transactions of a particular commodity (the Matsutake mushroom) and discovering ethnographically how it is transformed from a gift to a commodity and back again. Marshall Sahlins (part two), on the other hand, takes the route of an open-battle attack on the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform the modern science of economics. He thus demonstrates the conceptual power of a theory-oriented, comparative anthropology (that still relies on ethnographic particularities as armaments). But perhaps we should add a third modality of cultural critique to this militaristic pair: one that unfolds in the multifarious collaborations that contemporary ethnographers enter within their field settings, including engagements with different scholarly traditions, different modes of knowledge production, and practical engagements in byzantine social and political situations. The contribution by George Marcus to this volume helps us to envisage what this modality might look like.

Over the past three decades, Marcus has played a key role in coining new concepts for the anthropological reflection about ethnography and its potential for critique. In his contribution he looks back to the 1980s and follows some of the changing forms of ethnographic engagement with equally changing field sites up to the present time. In the 1980s, the so-called "postmodern" intervention in anthropology allowed for cultural critique to be considered as a rationale for ethnographic writing (Marcus and Fischer [1986] 1999). Questions of value were a key feature of this movement, if not as explicit objects of study then still as part of the critical frameworks that were employed, such as postcolonial and Foucaultian perspectives. During the 1990s, anthropology began to rethink its place in the context of globalization, which led to a scrutiny of the concept of "the field." Anthropologists usually did not feel the need to declare their projects in normative terms, but they nevertheless (and perhaps necessarily) entered into working collaborations with informants that involved contests of norms and values with uncertain and often messy outcomes. In the last decade, these collaborations have evolved further, taking innovative forms that no longer privilege the traditional format of ethnography as textual production. Instead, these new initiatives employ interactive digital media and various experimental forms of collaboration. A key

concept emerging from these new collaborations is that of “third spaces,” in which many contemporary ethnographic projects appear to be operating. Third spaces, as Marcus defines them, transcend traditional dualisms of *self* and *other* or *us* and *them* by organizing a conceptual space alongside (and as a commentary on) fieldwork. Examples include collaborative social-political projects, design workshops, or the design of interactive Internet sites. Because these third spaces involve the negotiation of contested norms, they forge an “explicit anthropological discourse on value.”

Conclusion

The articles in this volume neither point in one direction, nor do they resolve our disagreement about the possibility of developing a truly *anthropological* theory of value. Taken together, a first group enhances anthropological theories of value as a dimension of (material) exchange, as well as value as an aspect of cultural comparison (part one). A second group proposes an intensified focus on social action as a way of theorizing value and vice versa (see especially part two). So what to conclude from our Socratic dialectic on the place of “value as theory” in contemporary anthropology? We see the tension between cultural critique of the “guerilla type” and the “open battle” as one of the major contemporary predicaments of our discipline, which not only creates an uncertainty of purpose in relation to other disciplines but also generates creative energy and critical potential. Moreover, we think that Marcus’ discussion of the concept of third spaces provides a way to understand how this tension between the two positions may be mediated in the concrete engagements (political, artistic, and otherwise) and multidisciplinary collaborations that ethnographers increasingly become involved in. Third spaces encourage the development of theory as well as its ethnographic challenge and may even indicate anthropology’s own “political economy of alterity”—that is, some external origins of our own discipline’s value. We wish the reader an enlightening journey through this contested space as represented by the remarkable contributions of this volume.

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