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Occidentalism: the world turned upside-down

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Recently, anthropology has been criticized for the distorted way that it constructs and presents alien societies. While these criticisms have been made before (for example, in Asad 1973), the recent debate springs from Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), a critical description of the discipline of Oriental studies. This discipline, like anthropology, has aimed to develop knowledge of a set of societies different from the Western societies that have been home to the scholars who have pursued that knowledge. Said’s criticism is extensive, but central to it are two points about the image of the Orient that Western academics have produced and presented. First, that image stresses the Orient’s radical separation from and opposition to the West. Second, that image invests the Orient with a timeless essentialism.

Of radical separation and opposition, Said says that Orientalism presents an Orient “absolutely different . . . from the West,” that Orientalists have “promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (1978:96, 43). Said identifies political and economic reasons for the concern with difference and opposition. However, he also points to a less contingent reason, saying that such concern helps “the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is closer to it and what is far away” (1978:55). Said’s charge can be applied to much anthropology with little modification. Anthropology is the discipline that, more than any other, seeks out the alien, the exotic, the distant—as did Malinowski in the Trobriands and Evans-Pritchard among the Nuer. With political changes in the Third World, economic changes in Western universities, and intellectual changes in anthropology, this sort of research has become less possible and less necessary. However, for many anthropologists “real” research still seems to mean village fieldwork in exotic places (see, for example, Bloch 1988).

Moreover, when anthropologists are exhorted to expand their disciplinary horizons, they are frequently told to look to history, which studies societies distant in time, not to sociology, which studies those close in place and time. When anthropologists do study Western societies, they are likely to focus on the marginal, the distant: rural villages in the Mediterranean basin, in Appalachia, on the Celtic fringe (see generally Herzfeld 1987). Of course some anthropologists do study central areas of life in industrial societies. Some recent published examples, drawn at random, include studies of notions of parenthood (Modell 1986), of the social nature
of objects (Miller 1988), and of cognitive structures (Strauss 1990). However, studies of the West do not appear to have attained a status comparable to studies of Africa, Latin America, or Melanesia, nor have they had a pronounced impact on anthropological theory. It is important not to confuse the appearance of studies of Western society with their incorporation into and institutionalization within the discipline. Until the latter occurs, the former is likely to remain ephemeral.

Speaking of the second criticism, that the Orient is portrayed in timeless and essentialist terms, Said (1978:70) says that Orientalists portray an unchanging Orient, a "closed system in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical matter can either dislodge or alter." For these scholars, then, the Orient is the manifestation and embodiment of an essence, an Orient-ness, that transcends the vagaries of time, place, and historical accident. And again, this criticism has been made of anthropologists. (And it has been made for some time. See, for example, Leach [1964:7.1] What the fieldworker seeks to represent is not a particular set of people at a particular place and time, but the essence of a way of life, not these villagers or these pastoralists in these years, but "Trobrianders" or "the Nuer."

Many have criticized this ethnographic essentialism, and few would adhere to it stated this baldly. Yet it is an important part of the intellectual equipment of the discipline. It appears most obviously when anthropologists render their descriptions in the ethnographic present tense and thereby place the societies they study in the eternal "is" that is the anthropological equivalent of "Dreamtime" (see Fabian 1983). It appears as well when researchers seek to elicit and describe traces of a stable, precolonial social order of the societies they study—a process that echoes the earlier evolutionist concern with "survivals" that reveal a society's primordial state (Kuper 1988). It appears less obviously when researchers seek to subsume change under timeless, because endlessly repeating, cycles, such as life cycles, exchange cycles, domestic cycles, and cycles of social reproduction. But whatever the technique, the resulting tendency is one, as James Clifford (1988) has argued, that seeks to present the authentic, essential alien society.

Orient and Occident

The critics have portrayed anthropological descriptions of alien societies as variants of what many call, generically, "Orientalism." However, critics have focused most closely on Orientalism in the textual description of alien societies, which is to say, on the product of Orientalism, rather than on the way that these descriptions are generated, the process of Orientalism, the social, political, and intellectual factors that lead to Orientalist constructions of alien societies (a notable exception is Herzfeld [1987]; Said describes the process in many passages in his book). However, the process deserves attention, but not simply as part of a criticism of anthropological method, textual or otherwise. Looking at Orientalism as a process may allow us novel insights into the problem that concerns Said and the critics.

Said's description of the process of Orientalism, the Orientalization of the Near East, focuses on the political and economic relations between the West and the Near East, and we must examine these relations if we wish to understand how the Orient that concerns him was generated in Western thought. But these relations do not exhaustively account for Orientalism. As I have already noted, Said also sees Orientalism as an instance of a fundamental process of self-definition by opposition with the alien. This process may be shaped, facilitated, and given specific content by historical factors, but is not wholly constituted by them. The basic process is simple, though its ramifications are not. Orientalist descriptions are produced by means of the juxtaposition of two opposed, essentialized entities, the West and (for lack of better terms) the Other or the Alien. Each is understood in reified, essentialist terms, and each is defined by its difference from the other element of the opposed pair. In calling this process fundamental, I do
not mean that it is a human universal of the sort that attracts Lévi-Straussian structuralists or sociobiologists. Its content and use may be conditioned, if not caused, by social factors; but this does not negate the fact that it has widespread appeal.

Seeing Orientalism as a dialectical process helps us recognize that it is not merely a Western imposition of a reified identity on some alien set of people. It is also the imposition of an identity created in dialectical opposition to another identity, one likely to be equally reified, that of the West. Westerners, then, define the Other in terms of the West, but so Others define themselves in terms of the West, just as each defines the West in terms of the Other. Thus, we can expect to see something analogous to Orientalism in a set of interrelated understandings that people have of themselves and of others. Of course, the way I have cast this privileges the West as the standard against which all Others are defined, which is appropriate in view of both the historical political and economic power of the West and the fact that anthropology is overwhelmingly a Western discipline. The logic of the model I am using, however, is catholic and could be used to approach the understandings of any sets of people who impinge upon each other.

I have stressed the formal symmetry of this process of definition by opposition, but the formal symmetry is not all that matters. The political dimension, along with other factors, makes substantive symmetry unlikely. As Nicholas Thomas (1991a:7) puts it, “the capacities of populations to impose and act upon their constructions of others have been highly variable throughout history.” Because of the political imbalance, Westerners will be relatively free to construct their images of alien societies as they see fit. For example, Western anthropologists, describing societies that they may have studied closely and sympathetically, are likely to confront only their own honor as a check on the representations they produce. Even if those being described come to read and reject the representations, their rejection is unlikely to be voiced in the academic or social contexts that matter most to anthropologists. Aliens, however, are much more likely to be exposed to a range of intrusive experiences with and images of Western people and institutions. They are, then, less likely to be able to construct images of the West free of correction by those being imagined, whether that correction is direct or only by example. Within anthropology, this imbalance is held in check to a degree by people’s tendency to search out differences, if only to distinguish their field sites from nearby areas studied by others (Morauta 1979:564–565). But this tendency is not enough to counter the effects of power imbalances.

Political realities are also essential to an understanding of the larger uses to which these representations are put and the broader actions that they help motivate, by development agencies, international corporations, First and Third World governments, the tourist industry, and the like. Equally, domestic political relationships can be important in the construction and use of these representations. Although the political factors are important, I am concerned here with anthropological practice and knowledge—themselves linked with the larger political factors in complex and ambiguous ways. Although the political dimensions are beyond the scope of the present article, we must keep them in mind when considering the sort of dialectical definition that is of concern here, for they affect the content of the four categories of representation that I have drawn out of Said’s basic model.

**Orientalisms and Occidentalisms**

The category that has attracted the most attention is Orientalism, and it requires only a brief comment here. Although this article focuses on the dialectical nature of the content of the definition of the Other, we must remember that the form of the Other is fluid: it expands as “Us’’ contracts and contracts as Us expands. These categories appear to be part of a segmentary opposition in anthropological thought (see Herzfeld 1987, especially chapter 7). At one extreme, Us is coterminous with humanity, and anthropology seeks to discover universal human social arrangements and potentials, rather as Margaret Mead saw Melanesia as a natural lab-
oratory where the range of human variation was present and could be studied. At the other extreme, the Other expands to include most people in Western societies, people who, after all, are not middle-class academics. Although conventional anthropology tends to distinguish Us from Them in terms of Western and non-Western, the fluid nature of these categories qualifies and complicates the arguments I will make later about anthropological understandings of Western societies.

Of the remaining categories, the one that has been addressed most systematically is what I will call ethno-Orientalism. (My ironic use of the “ethno-” prefix expresses precisely the sorts of conceptual divisions that are the concern of this discussion.) By ethno-Orientalism I mean essentialist renderings of alien societies by the members of those societies themselves. One such rendering, reported in Melanesian anthropology, is kastom, which Roger Keesing (1982:298) identifies as “an idealized reformulation of indigenous political systems and customary law” by people in Melanesian societies. The notion of kastom, however, transcends this definition, for as Keesing (1982:299) notes, the term has such a broad range of practical uses that it is best seen as evocative rather than as strictly denotative. But however vague its meanings may appear when its different uses are heaped up and analyzed, it remains a way that many Melanesians take “a sufficient external view of themselves and their way of life to see their culture as a ‘thing’” (1982:300). It is, in short, a way that alien people produce an essentialist notion of themselves, an ethno-Orientalism.

To call such self-conceptions ethno-Orientalisms is not to say that they are fanciful or that those who produce them are unperceptive. However, like all essentializations, they can mislead and have unfortunate consequences if they are applied unreflectively in novel situations. Consider, for example, Colin Filer’s description (1990) of some of the dangers of Papua New Guinea ethno-Orientalisms when they are used to deal with the effects of mining projects.

The third category has received less attention in print (but see Nader 1989), though it is a recurrent feature of anthropologists’ oral tradition and of conversations between fieldworkers and villagers. This is ethno-Occidentalism, essentialist renderings of the West by members of alien societies (some of these are revealed in De Vita 1990). Thomas (1992) offers several glimpses of ethno-Occidentalism in his discussion of ethno-Orientalism in certain Melanesian and Polynesian societies. He says that members of these societies had a distinct and essentialistic image of the West, one which stressed the importance of money and purchase (as distinct from sharing) as the way that Westerners transacted with each other and secured their individual subsistence. (Indeed, in my own fieldwork, in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, I repeatedly heard some variant of the statement “You Westerners always pay for food; when you get up from the table there is always money, even [said with gleeful shock] with your own brother!”)

Thomas’ work is important here, for he is concerned with how an essentialist Alien sense of self (ethno-Orientalism) is produced in dialectical opposition to the Aliens’ conception of the impinging Western society (their ethno-Occidentalism). He points out that the notion of sharing and reciprocity is central to the ethno-Orientalisms of people in many parts of the Pacific. And these ethno-Orientalisms developed in opposition to developing essentialist understandings of the encroaching and colonizing world. As he argues (1992:65), ethno-Orientalisms have been produced “in a particularly marked and conspicuous fashion in the course of colonial history,” in large part because the existence of these ethno-Orientalisms “derives from the oppositional dynamics of the colonial encounter.”

Again, it is important to temper my formal, mentalistic presentation of these categories with an awareness of the more practical factors that shape them. Thus, Thomas does not claim that these ethno-Orientalisms and ethno-Occidentalsms are the unproblematic result of a mechanical and nonpolitical comparison of Them with Us. Since people within a society have differing interests, perspectives, and resources, they will differ in the representations they find appealing and in their ability to promulgate those representations. Western colonial agents can try to in-
culcate ethno-Orientalisms, and antipathy to Western intrusions is likely to sharpen the opposition between ethno-Orientalism and ethno-Occidentalism. My purpose here, however, is not to investigate the effects of these factors. It is only to point to their existence and significance.¹⁰

The fourth element of this set of definitions is the one that has attracted the least anthropological attention: Occidentalism, the essentialistic rendering of the West by Westerners.¹¹ Because I am concerned with illustrating the importance of Occidentalism to an understanding of Orientalism, I will focus on the Occidentalisms of anthropologists. While these surface in informal conversations, they are not a frequent, explicit theme in academic research and writing. After all, anthropologists look outward to the village rather than backward, over their shoulders, to the West. And Occidentalisms do not routinely intrude on field research in the way that ethno-Occidentalisms seem to do. They do appear when anthropologists consider Western intrusions on the societies they study. Frequently, these intrusions—wage labor, mission doctrine, plantation or mining projects—seem to be treated as local manifestations of a fairly uniform “West.” And they are frequently resented, openly or covertly, in just these terms. That is, they are seen to mark the displacement of a heretofore alien, coherent, and uniform sort of social life by an equally coherent and uniform sort of social life, that of the West. (Comaroff 1989 illustrates some of the problems with this simple view of displacement.)

One important source of Occidentalism in the discipline is the classic texts that continue to inform anthropological education, thought, and debate. Most anthropologists who read these texts do so not naively but through a framework of expectation and assumption about what is really being said, about which bits are important and which are best skimmed. Many of the texts are taken to identify the differences between modern Western society and societies in other times and places, and thus to entail a more or less overt essentialization of the West. Core dialectical essentializations are read in, for example, Marx’s distinction between precapitalist and capitalist societies, Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic societies, and Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between hot and cold societies. While these may spring from particular readings of such texts, they are not wholly alien to them, imposed only from the outside. On the one hand, these texts are sufficiently complex that parts of them can be invoked, cited, and quoted to support such readings. On the other hand, as Adam Kuper (1988:5) notes, anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries “took . . . primitive society as their special object, but in practice primitive society proved to be their own society (as they understood it) seen in a distorting mirror.”

These Occidentalisms are interesting in their own right as part of the culture of the discipline. However, because knowledge of the Alien is produced through a dialectical opposition with knowledge of the West, they cannot be treated as curios, separable from the anthropological orientations and knowledge that they inform. Indeed, if we are to understand anthropological Orientalisms we have to take account of anthropologists’ Occidentalisms.

Thus far my discussion of Occidentalism has been fairly abstract. I want now to give a concrete illustration of what the abstractions mean. I will do so by looking at the distinction between gifts and commodities that derives from Marcel Mauss’s The Gift (1990[1925]). But as this discussion is only illustrative, it is not intended as a definitive treatment of the gift-commodity distinction.¹² The distinction is a useful tool for illuminating many important areas of social life and deserves its current popularity. However, as I shall show, it is a fit subject for a discussion of linked Occidentalism and Orientalism. In using it, rather than some other element of anthropological thought, I do not mean that it is the only, or even the primary, Occidentalism in modern anthropology.¹³ Instead, I use it for a more idiosyncratic reason: it is salient in an important ethnographic region with which I am familiar, Melanesia.
While there are few anthropologists who would now advocate a straightforward use of the distinction between types of societies read in Durkheim’s Division of Labour in Society (1984[1893]), there appear to be many who would advocate a straightforward use of the distinction read in Mauss’s The Gift. Distinctly and consciously Maussian writing is perhaps most common in studies of Melanesia, where forms of exchange have long been a core concern (see, for example, Damon 1983; Gregory 1980, 1982; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1985). But it appears as well in studies of Africa (Kiernan 1988), classical Greece (Morris 1986), and of course India (Parry 1986).

There is much in The Gift, an essay that is not just a fertile source of ideas but also a fertile source of controversy (see Appadurai 1986a:11–13; Parry 1986). But I do not intend to examine the minutiae or debate the problems of the work. Instead, I intend to present a rough, but I think fair, sketch of what is commonly taken to be the core of The Gift, the distinction between gifts and commodities, terms that can be applied to the social identities of objects, to forms of transactions, and to sorts of societies.

Mauss produced an evolutionary model (see, for example, Mauss 1990[1925]:47). At one extreme are “archaic” societies, dominated by kinship relations that define individuals and their connections with and obligations to one another. In transactions in these societies, objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that defines and binds them. At the other extreme are modern Western societies. Here, people are not defined by kinship relations but are independent individuals who transact freely with one another. In transactions in these societies, objects are alienated commodities, separate from the giver and the recipient. Mauss’s evolutionary sequence appears most clearly in The Gift in his analysis of ancient German and Roman society.

In this common reading, The Gift is concerned with types of societies, an approach that almost compels essentialism. And archaic societies, the alien Other of the model, are essentialized by gift transactions, in which “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time—religious, judicial, and moral, . . . likewise economic” (1990[1925]:3). Not only, then, are societies of the gift identified in terms of an essentialistic categorization that distinguishes them radically from the modern West, but they are essentialized by the gift, the focus of all their social institutions. The Gift also presents an essentialist image of the modern West, though this essentialism is more oblique because the West is not the primary focus of the work. Western societies are characterized by alienation: their members are alienated from the people and the objects around them. Equally, in such societies transactions are fragmented, both because transactors are free (and hence alienated from one another) and because the realm of transaction has become isolated from the rest of social life. These are the societies “of purely individual contract, of the market where money circulates, of sale proper, and above all of the notion of price reckoned in coinage," of the “strict distinction” between “things and persons” (Mauss 1990[1925]:46, 47).

The Orientalization of an alien Other and the Occidentalization of the modern West do not exist independently of each other in this common reading of The Gift. Instead, these two essentializations are inseparable. At the most obvious level, they define the two ends of the evolutionary continuum. Equally, they define each other dialectically, in that they are generated as opposites of each other. Archai societies show the embeddedness of economic activities in a web of social relations that is significant precisely because in the modern West the economy is no longer embedded. Each pole, then, defines what is significant about the other, dialectically.

Maussian Orientalism has been addressed, at least implicitly, both by those who have raised general questions about anthropological Orientalism and by those who have debated the validity of Mauss’s rendering of specific societies toward the archaic end of the range (see, for
example, Bloch and Parry 1989; Granovetter n.d.:ch. 3; the debates described in Parry 1986; Thomas 1991b). Rather than review these debates and questions here, I concern myself with Occidentalism. I shall do so by suggesting that the rendering of Western industrial societies as commodity systems is essentialistic and is likely to hide as much as it reveals.

Certainly it is true that the modern West contains an elaborate system of transactions in which alienated individuals give and take alienated objects in monetary transactions in the market. But what makes the model Occidentalist is using the sheer existence of this system, however elaborate, as the basis for an essentialist typification of Western capitalist society. In fact, many significant areas of social life do not conform to this essentialization in any straightforward or unproblematic way.

The most obvious of these is the family. Doubtless it is correct that relations within the family are influenced by capitalist employment relations outside it (Lamphere 1986), but this influence does not mean that household relations are displaced by commodity relations. Instead, household relations resemble gift relations. As David Schneider (1980, especially chapter 3) summarizes the beliefs of the Americans he studied, family relations are founded on the enduring bonds of love based on shared biogenetic substance, and transactions within the family are expressions of those relations rather than of the alienation of the market (see also Barnett and Silverman 1979).

Although mundane family transactions may not be as visible as large-scale, public transactions in the market, they are central to the survival of family members as individuals and to the survival of the family as a group. The mothers that Barker (1972) describes who cooked and kept house for their children, like those that Corrigan (1989) describes who bought clothing for their children, give labor and objects that are necessary for their recipients' survival and for the regeneration of relations within the household, just as they are expressions not only of the moral and religious values of the giver but also of the values and indeed the judicial rules of the society at large. The importance of these transactions as embodiments of social relations is apparent when the giver refuses to give or the recipient to accept, the sort of circumstances described by Ellis (1983) in her analysis of meals in the violent breakdown of marriage.

Commodity relations do not always hold sway outside the family either, a fact apparent, and perhaps to be anticipated, at the margins of reputable commercial transactions, where the black economy is pervasive. This, for example, is the case with the petty dealing of stolen goods in London's East End. Such trade may seem to be a colorful distraction from real commerce, but it is socially and economically important for those who are involved. Here, transactions are not impersonal exchanges of material equivalents. Instead, according to Gerald Mars, the giving of a thing is frequently seen as a "favor," one that "has to be repaid, but only when the opportunity arises and only with whatever comes to hand. And 'whatever is at hand' may not be material at all." These transactions, then, entail diffuse, open-ended personal obligations, with the consequence that the "goods that are given have been dematerialized and the transaction has been personalized" (Mars 1982:173).

Like transactions in gift systems, these are an important source of the material objects and money that the transactors need. However, transactors often do not seek maximum economic advantage, and in fact "money is only a part, and rarely the most important part," of these deals (Mars 1982:171). For such dealings do not reflect the impersonality and alienation that characterize commodity systems. Instead, they usually involve people who are linked in important ways through ties of kinship, neighborhood, and extensive personal experience, people for whom these transactions are part of the development and maintenance of social relations with others. And it is this that makes these transactions obligatory in a way that gift transactions are, but legal market transactions are not. People need to offer to transact in order to maintain their social reputations as fully competent members of the community, to identify themselves as "trusted insiders as against the threatening outside" (Mars 1982:175), a maintenance of identity that reflects adherence to a set of moral values about "doing the business" (Hobbs 1989) as
much as it does the desire to maintain personal repute or to secure the economic means of survival.

More mundane and more pervasive than shady deals struck in pubs in the East End is retail trade, and here we see alienated institutions and transactions that fit the commodity model closely. However, these hardly exhaust the social relations of circulation in retail trade. Well into the 20th century, many people bought and sold as part of enduring personal relations—not, perhaps, so enduring as the kin relations binding gift transactors, but not so impersonal as the Occidentalism of the West as a commodity system would suggest. This personalism was apparent in the widespread use of credit in small shops through at least the middle of the 20th century (Johnson 1985:ch. 6), a credit as much social as financial. It was based on the decision to enter into a personal relationship of trust, and one that was reciprocal, linking shopkeeper to customer. The parties to the credit relationship were expected to support each other in good times as well as bad. The customers expected that the shopkeeper would not simply give credit, but would carry them through bouts of illness, injury, or unemployment, through strikes or bad harvests, through times of extraordinary expenses like medical bills or funeral costs. In short, they expected the shopkeeper to trust them to repay when times got better. But the shopkeeper expected that the customers would be loyal to the shop, buying there when times were good and purchases could be paid for in cash, even though a more impersonal store nearby might offer the same goods for less. In such a relationship, buying a tin of milk was not an impersonal exchange of equivalents. It was a recreation of a durable personal relationship, recalling previous transactions and anticipating future ones. This relationship appears to have been commonly marked by the fact that customers never quite paid off their debts, the small balance that remained marking the continuation of the relationship of trust. Thus, referring to practices from the time of his youth, Mars writes:

> when a trust relationship does break up the debt has to be paid off—precisely and immediately. The open-ended transaction is closed, and the method of final settlement reverts to normal market exchange. The transaction is, in effect, depersonalised . . . as it was among working-class families in the north of England where I grew up. The credit account at the local store would be broken through dispute. Then the bill was paid and the family's custom removed to another shop. [1982:173]

This sort of relatively durable, personal relationship of mutual obligation is not restricted to the points where commercial and domestic realms intersect in the way that they do in retail trade. In addition, such relations seem to exist at times in the heart of capitalism. Ronald Dore's analysis of relations between large firms, primarily in Japan but also in Britain, addresses this issue. Dore notes that manufacturing firms and their suppliers, for example, often see themselves as bound by durable obligations. A manufacturing firm that faces financial problems may call on its suppliers for relief, expecting them to accept lower prices or deferred payments for a time, and suppliers will expect the same sort of support from their manufacturing customers (Dore 1983:465). In other words, these firms are not wholly alienated and independent transactors; rather, they are linked in "social relations . . . [that] take on a moral quality and become regulated by criteria of fairness" (1983:479). Moreover, evidence of these sorts of relatively durable relationships is not restricted to the level of the firm. Studying relations among agents and employees of various American firms, Mark Granovetter found that "continuing economic relations often become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust and abstention from opportunism" (1985:490; see also Gambetta 1988).

Finally, the Occidentalism of the gift-commodity model does not seem to apply in any straightforward way to individuals in firms. David Halle (1984:5–6) has found that the formal economistic impersonality of the firm can in fact be permeated and subverted by familial bonds. The American blue-collar chemical workers he studied were frequently linked to their co-workers not just by virtue of common ties to their employer but by kin and affinal ties with one another (see Grieco [1987] for British workers). In fact, one can argue (albeit somewhat outrageously) that relations among the employees of a firm resemble gift relations. When such
employees transact with one another as part of their work, they are morally obligated to do so and are transacting not as individuals but as parts of a social web that identifies them and their relationships and obligations to one another. Further, the objects and services that employees transact with one another remain linked with the employees, because workers and what they transact have identities based on their places within the encompassing firm.18

I have described several bodies of work indicating not only that certain relations and transactions in industrial capitalist society may depart from the Maussian rendering of commodity systems, but also that these relations and transactions resemble those in gift systems in important ways (though this assertion of resemblance is not an assertion of identity). In other words, in the West many individuals experience gift relations frequently in their lives; some groups exist in a socioeconomic milieu that is pervaded by gift relations.19

The gift relations that I have described may be shaped by and subordinated to a more powerful set of commodity relations. However, this fact is not grounds for Occidentalizing the West as a commodity system. The coexistence, indeed the mutual if unequal penetration and subversion, of gift and commodity relations means that each is shaped by the other. Even if Western societies are commodity systems in the last analysis, elevating that last analysis to an analytical first principle will needlessly and wrongly simplify a complex social form. Saying that commodity relations are important or even primary in the West does not warrant essentializing the West as a system in which commodity relations are of such overwhelming importance that we can ignore the existence of other sorts of relations. To return to a point made earlier, this Occidentalism makes sense only when it is juxtaposed with its matching Orientalism, the essentialized society of the gift. Compared to such societies, the West is the society of the commodity—these two essentializations defining and justifying each other dialectically.

**Occidentalism and Orientalism**

Anthropological Occidentalism such as I have described is important in its own right.20 However, its essentializations of the West do not exist on their own. Instead, they are paired with essentializations of alien societies in a process that defines Us, Them, and the differences between the two. Occidentalism and Orientalism are the dual offspring of a problem that, says Said, has dogged Western scholars since the ancient Greeks: making sense of the difference between Them and Us. This difference is an intrusive part of the anthropologist's professional initiation in field research. The people that anthropologists classically study really are different, and many researchers find that identifying and making sense of that difference is the most overwhelming task of their field experience.21 The fact that in tackling the task anthropologists frequently rely on the discipline's existing stock of essentializations should not obscure the fact that the difference is real and important, both personally and professionally.

While making sense of this difference in terms of paired, dialectically generated essentializations may be understandable, or perhaps even unavoidable, it has consequences that may be undesirable. It can lead to an exaggerated and even false sense of difference. Difference itself can become the determining, though perhaps unspoken, characteristic of alien societies, so that signs of similarity become embarrassments, to be ignored or explained away in terms that maintain the purity of Us and Them. In a sense, signs of similarity become polluting, Mary Douglas' “matter out of place,” and are dealt with accordingly by the ethnographer and the discipline (this invocation of Douglas [1966] is in Herzfeld [1987:7, 15]).

The effects of this dialectical approach to alien societies become particularly insidious when the dialectical origin of our constructions disappears from view. A dialectical framework is inherent in developmental and evolutionary models like those in the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and of course Mauss. Earlier and simpler social forms (whether “precapitalist,” “mechanical,” or whatever) are defined and given significance in dialectical opposition to later and
more developed social forms—which is to say, the modern West. However, in their recent embarrassment with such models, anthropologists have thrown out the dialectical baby with the evolutionary bath water. As a consequence, these constructions of alien societies have become detached from the conception of the West to which they are opposed, and have instead come to be treated as substantive concepts. They have become reified in positive, rather than dialectical, definitions. “The society of the gift” has been detached from its conceptual dialectical opposition to modern Western society and has become a positive, independent description of a distinct type of society.

By defining what is significant, and hence worthy of attention, these concepts shape the ways that anthropologists approach and think about the societies they study. Thus, scholars tend not to see things that resemble gift transactions in the West, just as they tend not to see things that resemble commodity transactions in gift societies (these points are made by Granovetter [n.d.] and Thomas [1991b]). Further, when these things are seen they tend to be treated as trivial, as aberrations or distortions, perhaps to be explained in ad hoc terms. Alternatively, transactions of the “wrong” sort may be marginalized by being relegated to particular schools or approaches among anthropologists concerned with a particular ethnographic area. In Melanesia, for instance, transactions that appeared to be of commodities became the special interest only of Marxists (for example, Godelier 1977), who were generally peripheral to Melanesian anthropology. Moreover, such transactions were presumed to appear only in circulation between societies, rather than within them (cf. Sahlin 1974), and hence were considered peripheral to the basic organization and operation of these societies.

The tendency to ignore (or forget) the dialectical basis of the notion of societies of the gift can have an interesting consequence. Because the opposition between societies of the gift and those of the commodity tends to shape the way anthropologists perceive and render the alien societies they study, it becomes embodied in ethnography. Readers may then misrecognize these ethnographic descriptions, may see “the society of the gift” as springing from the ethnographic evidence rather than from the dialectical framework that shaped the presentation of that evidence. It may appear to people that they are deriving this opposition between gift societies and the West from positive ethnographic descriptions. However, they may only be regenerating the underlying dialectical opposition (see Strathern 1988). In this way, anthropologists come full circle.

The reification of dialectical definition, then, poses problems. What had been only a distinguishing characteristic, albeit an important one, becomes a defining characterization. And this in turn generates a key problem identified by the critics of anthropological Orientalism: a distorted, exaggerated model of the alien society. In the case of the Maussian model, the gift transactions that had, quite reasonably, been taken to distinguish life in the Trobriands and the Pacific Northwest from life in Paris, London, or Chicago became something very different. They became an absolute, rather than a relative, characteristic of a type of society. The selectivity that had made sense in the original dialectical formulation became distortion; the model that had focused on difference between us and them, ignoring similarity, became a definition that denied or elided similarity. The partiality inherent in Maussian Occidentalism came to be echoed in Maussian Orientalism and in the anthropological work that reflected the model.

antiessentialism

I have suggested that those who criticize anthropology for its Orientalism may not fully perceive the nature of the problem that they address. Seeking to reduce or eliminate Orientalist tendencies, these critics have generally urged anthropologists to look at societies in less stereotyped ways or to adopt new textual or representational devices for portraying them. But however salutary these urgings, they imply that the problem lies in the relationship between an-

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thopologists and the societies they study, while the West from which anthropologists come is transparent. However, anthropologists' relationship to the West is likely to be as problematic as their relationship to Third World societies.

This relationship to the West is problematic because most anthropologists have a fairly naive and commonsensical understanding of Western societies, for most are not trained in scholarly analysis of the West. What they acquire as part of their academic training may well be little more than simplified renderings gleaned from discussions of Western societies in Marx and Durkheim, Benedict and Mead, or Lévi-Strauss and Sahlins. Even those who, as students or scholars, study the West are prone to come away with a simplified model, if only because of the likelihood that they and their teachers will treat the West in terms of the common framework within the discipline, a framework of relatively distinct and internally homogeneous ethnographic areas. More is involved, then, than simply ensuring that anthropologists know more about the West; we must also ensure that the orientation embedded in their knowledge avoids a tendency to essentialization—an essentialization contained, of course, in the very phrase "the West."

We may, of course, seek to resolve the problem by shifting our focus from ethnographic entities (such as societies and regions) to theoretical ones. Obvious candidates are encompassing structures, whether social (such as a "world system") or conceptual (such as agency, gender, or notions of the self). Societies would then be seen not as distinct entities to be investigated on their own but as places where general structures and processes are manifest in particular ways (this tactic is illustrated by Thomas 1989:ch. 7). Such approaches have been adopted by many anthropologists and by some central institutions in the discipline, though perhaps not in a conscious attempt to avoid ethnographic essentialism.

While these approaches have their attractions, they have disadvantages as well. For instance, it is not clear that a focus on encompassing social structures would solve the political and epistemic problems that have been attacked by the critics of ethnographic essentialism. Such a focus is likely to generate new problems and distortions that will turn out to be as pernicious as the old. One can easily imagine that those using a world-system orientation, for instance, would end up privileging the powerful and slighting the minor players in the system, in which case the present hierarchical distinction between Us and Them would be reproduced, albeit with new names.

A concern with encompassing conceptual structures entails the risk of weakening ethnographic essentialism at the cost of strengthening the essentialism of concepts. Such a concern may do little more than land anthropologists back in the 1930s and 1940s. In those decades scholars expended much effort, later seemingly judged futile, in trying to define just what certain conceptual entities really are: What is "the family"? What is "marriage"? Does this society have "marriage"? These definitional debates are not over, of course, though the topics have changed: What is "class," and do these people have it (Lloyd 1982)? What is "gender inequality," and do these people have it (Errington and Gewertz 1987a; Strathern, ed., 1987)? And one imagines the ease with which implicit moral evaluations would follow from decisions about who has it and who does not.

Because a concern with encompassing entities, conceptual or social, inevitably devalues the people being studied, it is likely to have a more insidious effect. It would reduce even further the likelihood that anthropologists will see as wholes the sets of people that they study and would reduce the likelihood that anthropologists will attempt to produce comprehensive accounts of them. This result would be unfortunate, because a stress on comprehensive ethnographic description can reduce the attraction and dangers of essentialism.

In advocating a comprehensive approach, I do not mean that anthropologists should construe their subjects as isolated, self-contained, and neatly ordered units. Rather, taking a comprehensive approach means attending to the relationships between different areas of social
life. These relationships are important not only for understanding the patterns that exist in the social units we study. They are important for two other reasons as well.

First, a concern with these relationships can help limit the tendency to essentialize conceptual entities. Entities like "the self," "class," or "gender inequality" exist only as manifested in local settings. And in those local settings their form and effects will be shaped by their relationships with other local structures and processes. By encouraging attention to these relationships, a comprehensive approach will help counter the tendency to grant a unity and determinacy to these entities. In making this point I am merely restating the tension between ethnography and theory in anthropology. This tension is old, but because it is so fruitful we must be careful not to undercut the legitimacy of detailed, comprehensive ethnography in the way that intense attacks on anthropological Orientalism threaten to do.

Second, a concern with these relationships can help limit the tendency to essentialize ethnographic entities. The activities that an anthropologist observes take place in a context that extends beyond the immediate situation. The activities themselves exist in the context of the other things that happen in the society, just as the society itself exists in the context of larger social, cultural, and economic frames. This point is hardly novel, but it bears repeating. Attention to relationships will help sensitize researchers to just how a particular society is linked to the larger world. Just as important, it will help motivate researchers to recognize the incongruities in what they observe, such as the co-existence of ancestral practices and Western imports, of self-conscious traditionism and active adaptation. If such incongruities exist in a society, attending to their relationships will help counter the essentializing tendency to separate and rank them, to see one side as embodying the real society and the other side as "matter out of place."

Concern with comprehensive, descriptive ethnography (even if only as a goal rather than as an achievement) would help forestall a new and undesirable anthropological turn, a turn inward, an increased focus on the abstract theoretical and conceptual apparatus of the discipline. Almost certainly this turn inward would be accompanied by decreased attention to the particulars and complexities that are a focus of conventional ethnography. This attention helps protect the discipline from the dangers of unreflective essentialization, just as it helps make the discipline particularly sensitive—however imperfect that sensitivity may be—to the world outside itself.

Conclusion

Like anthropological reading, anthropological writing is not naive. Motivated by a desire to establish one point or refute another, it may foster an essentialization of its own, one that brings to the fore certain features of a situation while slighting others. This article is no exception.

Thus, in my opening description of Occidentalism and related essentializations I stressed their formal nature and only alluded to the fact that practical contingencies would shape their content and use. I did so because my main concern in this article is to present the basic logic of my model. Empirical studies are necessary to give practical content and significance to that logic, and I hope that this initial presentation will be sufficiently persuasive to encourage people to undertake those studies.

Equally, I have caricatured anthropology. The discipline is especially self-critical now, and it would be foolish to claim that the criticisms I have made and reported in this article are especially novel (as I have noted from time to time). But, as I said, much of this criticism misses the point that I have tried to make. Proposed innovations to and published criticisms of the discipline primarily address the relationship between anthropologists and the societies they study. In ignoring the relationship between anthropologists and the West, they address only part of the problem.
Finally, I have caricatured essentialism itself, though this caricature is common in recent criticisms of anthropology. I have treated it as a problem to be eradicated and I have treated it as an unconscious product of anthropologists' work. Even if an essentialist viewpoint is particularly pronounced in industrial capitalist societies (Taussig 1977), I do not think that we can or should avoid it. Essentialization appears to be inherent in the way Westerners, and probably most people, think and communicate. After all, to put a name to something is to identify its key characteristics and thereby essentialize it. Certainly essentialization is common in sociology and history, which tend to essentialize key notions like class, empire, or the industrial revolution. Further, some anthropological essentialization is the result of conscious intent. To repeat what I said at the beginning of this section, anthropologists who are motivated to make or refute a point will shape their representations appropriately. The problem, then, is not essentialism itself. Instead, the problem is a failure to be conscious of essentialism, whether it springs from the assumptions with which we approach our subjects or the goals that motivate our writing.

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notes

1 Said initially (for example, 1978:326) saw at least some anthropology as a counter to Orientalism, although he subsequently changed his mind (see Richardson 1990:17).

2 To anticipate a point made later, “exotic” is an expandable category, “they” a variable set of people. These can include the benighted of Brooklyn or the children in the slowest track of a school serving a poor, black neighborhood in Atlanta. A discipline whose members are largely white, middle-class, well-educated people whose closest contact with outsiders is likely to be with college students is able to define much as alien.

3 Although it tends to present alien societies as simple and static, essentialism does not require simplicity or stasis in any straightforward way. A society can be essentialized in terms of its complexity, as Herzfeld (1987:157–166) argues is the case for Europe.

4 Such work often goes little further than textual analysis itself and hence does not address the issues that concern me. Some notable examples include Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Marcus and Fischer (1986). For criticisms of such work, see Errington and Gewertz (1987b), Keesing and Jolly (1992), and Spencer (1989).

5 They may also be exposed to Western images of the Aliens themselves, as when villagers find themselves employed as performing Aliens in the tourist business (cf. Gewertz 1990; Gewertz and Errington 1991).

6 For example, in “Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women,” Laura Nader (1989; her use of “Occidentalism” is different from mine) describes some of the uses of these essentializations in gender politics. She shows how some commentators in the Middle East construct images of the West in light of local political structures and debates, just as some commentators in the West construct images of the Middle East. In each case, Nader says, the essentialization serves to encourage quiescence among women and so helps to preserve existing gender relations.

7 Melanesian ethno-Orientalisms of various sorts are described in Louise Morauta’s (1979) analysis of anthropological studies of Papua New Guinea societies by Papua New Guineans, as well as in Jill Nash and Eugene Ogan’s (1990) discussion of Bougainvillian perceptions of mainland Papua New Guineans.

8 The process can be particularly complex, as in the case of Greece (Herzfeld 1987), where both Orientalism and Occidentalism are at work. Greeks appear to define themselves schizophrenically both as Western (as European in relation to their Turkish heritage) and as Oriental (as Turkish in relation to their European heritage).

9 This opposition is illustrated in microcosm in Eric Hirsch’s (1990) analysis of betelnut use in a Melanesian society. Arjun Appadurai (1986b:745–750) points to some of its complexities in his discussion of the reconceptualization of India, the West, and their colonial encounter by some South Asian intellectuals.

10 The factors shaping ethno-Orientalisms can be complex, as an example from Papua New Guinea illustrates. There, the twin notions of ethnic diversity and the strength of village ties are important parts of people’s ethno-Orientalisms. These notions reflect differences that many Papua New Guineans see between themselves and most whites. Equally, however, they reflect colonial and postcolonial government
dentalism that parallel those made in this section can be drawn from Keith Hart's discussion of money in terms of an essentialized model of jajmani relations springs from its dialectical opposition to his characterization of the West (Dumont 1977) in terms of an essentialized economic ideology.

Mauss in several ways. Briefly, Fuller argues that Dumont's characterization of India (Dumont 1970) in terms of gift relations does exist in Western industrial societies. Thus, in the introduction he says that gift relations are "hidden, below the surface" (1990[1925]:4). This ambiguity about gift relations in the West recurs. He casts doubt upon them when he says, for instance, that "societies immediately preceding our own" have "traces" of gift systems (1990[1925]:47; also see other passages quoted in my discussion). Likewise, he refers to the "victory of rationalism and mercantilism" in the West (1990[1925]:76; but also see the contrary points he makes on the same page). Mauss describes the existence of gifts in the West at greatest length of emerging Greek identity in the 19th century (1986; see also 1987). Drawing on an earlier version of this article, Gewertz (1990) has addressed aspects of anthropological Occidentalism.

As well as reflecting my own reading of Mauss (Carrier 1991), this sketch draws in particular on treatments of gifts and commodities in Gregory (1980, 1982) and Parry (1986). Criticisms of Maussian Occidentalism that parallel those made in this section can be drawn from Keith Hart's discussion of money in the modern West. Hart is motivated in part by a desire to show "that 'we' are profoundly diverse and caught in the middle of profound upheavals" (Hart 1986:652). Such a statement, which may apply to most ages in the West, helps show the danger of Occidentalism, Maussian or otherwise.

It is not clear that this common reading represents The Gift faithfully. Mauss states at a number of points that gift relations do exist in Western industrial societies. Thus, in the introduction he says that gift relations "still function in our own societies, in unchanging fashion," though he goes on to say that these relations are "hidden, below the surface" (1990[1925]:4). This ambiguity about gift relations in the West recurs. He casts doubt upon them when he says, for instance, that "societies immediately preceding our own" have "traces" of gift systems (1990[1925]:47; also see other passages quoted in my discussion). Likewise, he refers to the "victory of rationalism and mercantilism" in the West (1990[1925]:76; but also see the contrary points he makes on the same page). Mauss describes the existence of gifts in the West at greatest length in the book's conclusion. However, many of his illustrations are reports of decaying practices among French peasantry or of laws that are not enforced (1990[1925]:66-67, 154 n. 5). Where he asserts the existence of gift relations in more central parts of modern society, the ambiguity is clearest and most poignant. Often he seems to be straining to see signs of a resurgence of gift relations, a recognition of a need to return to a sounder social logic, in reforms that are always "laboriously in gestation" but have not yet borne fruit (for example, 1990[1925]:67-68, 78).

This essentialization is common among anthropologists of Melanesia, perhaps most strongly influenced by The Gift. For example, Feil (1980:297) says the tee, a form of ceremonial exchange among the Enga, "orders all social relations between groups and individuals," while in their cross-cultural analysis of Highlands New Guinea societies, Rubel and Rosman (1978:320) conclude that "the structure of ceremonial exchange also organizes behavior in other cultural domains, which is why it can be singled out as the dominant sphere." This view is so widespread that one influential writer can say that "exchange itself is the central dynamic" of Melanesian social organization (Whitehead 1986:80) without feeling a need to argue the point.

Such essentializations are not, of course, unique to The Gift. Gewertz (1990) criticizes the view that Western people are independent while non-Westerners are constrained by their social relations; Silver (1990) describes aspects of the emergence of Western independence in 18th-century thought.

From this perspective, the significant alienated relationship between people is the one that exists between the employee and the employer, especially at the moment of employment, and the significant alienated relationship between person and thing is the one that exists when products leave the company as they are sold to customers.

Gifts can also be important for those who have moved to Western societies. For instance, some Pakistanis living in England have elaborate gift systems (Webner 1990). To argue that such groups are not really Western merely compounds the Occidentalism.

The discussions of dialectical and essentialization in this section echo Herzfeld (1987) and draw on Kenneth Burke's (1969a, 1969b) discussions of synecdoche and dialectical definitions. Some of my points parallel Appadurai's (1986a:11-13) objections to anthropological renderings of the gift. Young (1992) is a striking example of how an anthropologist deals with the problem of making sense of differences between Them and Us in classic village fieldwork. In "Cancer, Control, and Causality," Baldhem (1991) shows how anthropologists who study people in Western societies confront a similar problem.

Trivializing of the anomalous is illustrated by Lévi-Strauss's influential if brief treatment of Western gifts (1969:56-57), which deals with relatively minor transactions (offering to share wine with a stranger in a crowded restaurant) or portrays giving as something marginal to real life (conspicuous gift-giving as a kind of potlatch).

See David Schneider's study of notions of kinship articulated by a body of "white, urban, middle class informants" (Schneider 1980:121), notions which became generalized to American Kinship. In the epi-
logue to the second edition of the book, Schneider himself (1980:122) pointed out the problem with this generalization. However, he retained the title and continued to invoke “American kinship” in the core of the text.

24The concept of a world system or its equivalent is implicit in Clifford (1988) and Said (1978); it is advocated by Gewertz (1990), Gewertz and Errington (1991), Turner (1989), and Wolf (1982). Its most recent predecessor is the much-derided Marxist concern with the articulation of modes of production (cf. Wolpe 1980); its most recent incarnation seems to be “globalization.” A significant recent advocate of approaches focusing on agency, gender, and the self is Strathern (1988).

25For instance, consider the 1990 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Film screenings and the concurrent 29th Conference on American Indian Languages aside, 251 sessions were listed in the published program. Of these, less than a quarter (55) had a regional or ethnographic indication in the title.

26Questions of what gender inequality or class is and whether this or that society has it have a political dimension that may have been absent from older debates about marriage or family. In pointing out the possible parallel between these two sorts of questions I am not asserting that questions about things like gender inequality should not be asked or that they are never fruitful or politically desirable. Instead, I warn against the risk of a decay into conceptual essentialism that our successors will in their turn judge futile.

27My comments about the strength of a comprehensive approach reflect my reading of Hyman (1959). To those who think this recommendation banal, I reply that the fundamental issues involved are old, as are the possible solutions.

28Like much else in this article, my advocacy of the study of relationships in lieu of the study of entities is not new (in this case, see Leach 1961).

29Points analogous to those I make about conceptual entities can be made about the abstract cultural entities that populate many ethnographies (see Carrier and Carrier 1991). It is also the case, of course, that more partial and theory-laden ethnography, of the sort that would seem appropriate to a focus on conceptual entities, would become relatively valueless and even incomprehensible once the significant conceptual entities in the discipline changed.

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