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Introduction

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The study of the quest for the good life and the theoretical questions about morality and value it presupposes is not new. To the contrary, it is an ancient issue; its intellectual history can be traced back to Aristotle and beyond. In anthropology, the study of morality and value has been a central concern from the beginning of the discipline, despite the claim of some scholars who see the recent upsurge of interest in questions of morality and value as new. What *is* novel is the present historical context in which scholars in many disciplines are posing the question of value in new ways, again. The rise in the popularity of morality as an academic interest, it seems, is in inverse proportion to the decline in morality in society as a whole. The popular evidence for this hypothesis seems to grow by the day, as Hollywood films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street*, reports of ever-increasing multi-million dollar bonuses given to CEOs and official investigations into firms such as Enron and others reveal the corruption and greed that inform business as usual in the twenty-first century.

The merits of this popular hypothesis aside, what is beyond dispute is that the world has undergone profound social, economic and political change over the past five decades, and this has had equally profound effects on anthropological thought. We anthropologists like to think that our inquiries are contributing to the analysis of the new problems of morality and value that are being posed; however, if we are honest, we must consider the possibility that those inquiries are part of the problem rather than the solution. Understanding the present is a task that is

beyond us all and a certain humility is needed given the difficulty of the task at hand. We are all in the dark; the torch that the anthropologist carries casts a useful, but very narrow, light—not one that illuminates the whole. Trying to understand the present requires the efforts of scholars from many disciplines in the social sciences—history, geography and sociology—as well as those in ecology and other natural sciences, as global warming becomes an ever-greater concern.

Many anthropologists take their bearings on this new world order via the lens of the ‘global/local’ distinction. This reduces the anthropologist’s quest for the ‘native point of view’ to that of understanding the process of the ‘globalisation of the local’ and the ‘localisation of the global’. For instance, indigenous agency is celebrated formulaically as the ‘indigenisation of modernity’. This is a noble hypothesis, but the question arises as to whether this formulaic approach to a complex historical conjuncture tells us more about the point of view of members of the academy than it does about those outside it. The trend in current anthropological thought has been away from a study of the social lives of people towards the study of the social lives of things, and away from a concrete study of the ‘becoming’ of power towards the metaphysical study of being. For example, the rise of globalisation theory takes our attention away from what used to be called ‘imperialism’ precisely at a time when inter-imperialist rivalries between nation-states are becoming a crucial issue. The rise of China and the economic and political challenge it poses to the US everyday becomes a more urgent issue, one that has its origins in the gradual deindustrialisation of the Euro-American economic bloc and the industrialisation of Asia, developments that have been in process for many decades.

A focus on the ‘global’ as a conceptual category of analysis also diverts our attention away from class, an ancient sociological category that has acquired new historical forms in the era of so-called globalisation. The new grassroots language of the ‘1 per cent’ versus the ‘99 per cent’, and the more academic language of the ‘plutonomy’ and the ‘precariat’ (Chomsky, 2012), reference this new social phenomenon. Its origin is to be found in the rapidly widening economic inequalities that have arisen in recent years; its contradictory consequences are to be found in the increasing bipolarisation of political movements, as the recent rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the US exemplifies. People everywhere are confused

by the world they find themselves in, as opportunistic politicians from the extreme left and extreme right strive to give voice to the grievances of the precariat by claiming to seize the moral high ground.

Piketty's (2014) classic work succeeds in capturing the economic paradox that lies at the heart of recent developments in the world economy. His statistical analysis of the metamorphosis of capital in Europe over the past 300 years shows that Europe has gone from being an agrarian society ruled by capital owned by a patrimonial landlord class, to an *urban* society in which capital, in the form of *residential land* (rather than industrial capital), is the most important form of wealth. Patrimonial capitalism, Piketty asserted, is back, but in a totally new form. As Polanyi (1944) argued, land is a 'fictitious' commodity because, as something that is a 'gift of nature' rather than the product of labour, its price is 'fictitious'. By this logic, the reality of capitalism today is that *it* is 'fictitious', which is another way of saying that we do not really understand much about the 'fictitious' people who control it; this is because, unlike the landlords of yesteryear, the familial relations of this new patrimonial class are largely unknown. One reason for this is the concealment that goes under the guise of 'commercial in confidence'—the name of the economic game today. What is clear is the rapid growth of cities, booms in land prices here and busts there and the emergence of palaces in the gated communities of those members of the new rich who choose to spend their new-found wealth conspicuously in the age-old quest for fame. This is happening in cities everywhere, including those in the Pacific area, where many political and business leaders eagerly embrace the new global warming language of the Anthropocene and exploit it for their own commercial advantage.

The reality of the new world order today, in which all people are forced to participate, poses many political, moral and theoretical questions, but the central question the essays in this collection address is: how do relatively poor people in selected areas of the Australia–Pacific region survive in these precarious times? From here, we ask how they cope with the moral issues that confront them today, and about the values that inform their quest for the good life. Authors in this volume were asked to privilege the values and concepts of their interlocutors rather than those of the currently fashionable high priests of the academy. We do not seek to revise anthropological theories of globalisation, but we do hope that the essays here make some small contribution to reformulating our understanding of the present conjuncture. We are motivated by the belief that a disciplined

approach to anthropology, grounded as it is in a radical empirical critique of received ideas based on intensive fieldwork, has something to offer those seeking to grasp the bigger picture.

Some of the essays presented in this book were delivered at the conference 'The Quest for the Good Life in Precarious Times: Grassroots Perspectives on the Value Question in the 21st Century', held at Manchester in 2015. This was the final event of a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project called 'Domestic Moral Economy: An Ethnographic Study of Values in the Asia-Pacific Region'. Four of the essays are based on fieldwork in the Pacific—Matti Eräsaari in Fiji, Keir Martin in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Rachel Smith in Vanuatu and Rodolfo Maggio in Solomon Islands; three are based on fieldwork in northern Australia—Karen Sykes, Jon Altman and Fiona Magowan; and one on fieldwork in India—Chris Gregory. The aim of the conference was to assemble grassroots perspectives on the value question in general, using ethnographic data from the Australia-Pacific region. The geographical focus was chosen simply to limit the scope of the analysis and not to suggest that the region constitutes a 'cultural area'. While the main interest of the collection lies in the concrete descriptive accounts of people located in different sociocultural settings and their struggles to cope with the dilemmas of life in the twenty-first century, three general themes emerged.

The first emerged in the process of trying to classify the essays by either the 'rural' or the 'urban' location of the fieldwork. Demographic data the world over reveals a definite trend towards urbanisation; however, from the perspective of the values of the people involved, the situation is much more complex. For a start, the expansive growth of cities means that the city now sometimes comes to the country and urbanises rural villages, as the essays by Gregory in Sargipalpara, India and Maggio in Honiara, Solomon Islands, illustrate. Land tenure in the Pacific is notoriously complex but, as Maggio's essay shows, the growing demand for urban land and soaring land prices in prime areas have complicated the situation even further as landowner, settler and the state negotiate the politics of the new moral, ethical and legal relationships that have arisen. Not only is rural land being urbanised, new forms of migration have arisen to blur the distinction between rural and urban dweller, creating new intercultural forms. Karen Sykes's essay is based on fieldwork in the city of Cairns, Far North Queensland, with transnational PNG migrants who have houses in both countries. These migrants have created new kin networks of two kinds: those that bind some PNG women with non-PNG men

from Australia and elsewhere; and those that bind most PNG men with PNG women from different PNG regions and, hence, different language groups. Rachel Smith's essay describes how the New Zealand seasonal-worker program has created new money-earning opportunities for village-based men (and some women) in Vanuatu who spend a few months each year overseas. This official form of migration is the latest in a long line of state-sponsored programs developed by the Australian and New Zealand governments, who view the Pacific islands as a pool of cheap labour. Long gone are the exploitative practices of the 'blackbirders' of the late nineteenth century; what persists is the expatriation of the worker at the end of his contract replete with newly won wealth. The bags and boxes of yesteryear that carried such wealth in the form of steel axes, clothes and other consumer items have been replaced by a cheque that enables returnees to build a 'good house'. This has created new tensions in the village, as the durable brick houses that migrant workers build create long-lasting claims to disputed land of a type that bush-material houses did not.

Matti Eräsaari's essay is based on fieldwork in a village near Suva that is considered 'home' by a population who resides, for the most part, in Fiji's major urban centres and overseas, but who gather in the village for funerals and other ritual activities. This coming and going of people has seen traditional respect for the chiefly hierarchy decline and commoners' egalitarian values flourish. Keir Martin's essay illustrates how the movement of people is sometimes a one-way movement from town to country. Such movements are exceptional; in this case, the consequence of a volcanic eruption that destroyed the town. Martin shows how the event enabled the local government to overcome a problem of urban overcrowding by resettling people on virgin land, a move that enabled some to try and escape *kastom*—the customary ties that bind and obligate—as others sought to enforce it. The customary values of the Bininj and Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, whom Altman and Magowan discuss, have also proved resilient, but Aboriginal people have always been mobile and their customary values have different implications. To take one example, the new neighbourhoods that have been established in urban centres are referred to using the language of 'camps'. Houses in these urban 'camps' are filled to overflowing with people, their number of occupants varying daily as people continually move from outstation to town, and from one camp to another, to participate in life cycle rituals—mostly funerals—or to go on fishing or hunting expeditions for livelihood.

The implication of the above is that ‘place’ means one thing for the state and its functionaries and another for the people who occupy places within that state and beyond it; that is, place has a complex affective value informed by *kastom* as well as an exchange value as private property. This is not to deny the importance of official conceptions of place, but it does highlight the need to understand the unofficial concepts and the tensions and dilemmas that arise as a consequence of this difference. For residents in a ‘strong’ state, such as Australia, the sudden twists and turns of government policy profoundly affect the lives and morale of a precariat like Indigenous Australians. Karen Sykes, in her essay on a PNG transnational family in Cairns, begins by noting that these policies are informed by concepts and data that make questionable assumptions about the structure of migrant households. She also notes the paradoxical fact that migrants, who use the idiom of ‘working other gardens’ to refer to their residence in Australia, are increasingly finding that they are estranged from their traditional lands in PNG. For residents of ‘weak’ states, such as Solomon Islands, PNG and elsewhere, laws are something to be dodged and negotiated. Rodolfo Maggio’s essay is a case study of how a ‘hybrid’ court dealt with a land problem involving a death that was rumoured to be caused by witchcraft. His close analysis of his recording of the proceedings reveals that a dispute between sisters was at the heart of the problem. Martin reminds us that there is ‘nothing necessarily geographically Melanesian about the “Melanesian city”’ when it comes to the actions of the modern welfare state. He draws a thought-provoking comparison with Young and Willmott’s (1964) famous study, *Family and Kinship in East London*, which showed, as his own work does, that kinship networks provide forms of social solidarity that can grow stronger, rather than weaker, with the growth and development of a market economy.

A second general theme is that of differing valuations of time. Householders everywhere measure time by generations: the past with reference to one’s parents and grandparents, the future with reference to one’s children and grandchildren, and the present with reference to oneself. Where householders live in kinship-intensive neighbourhoods, this familial way of talking about time informs thoughts and actions. In Melanesian cultures, the language of *kastom* is used to value the past as either good or bad depending upon who is speaking. The title of Martin’s essay, ‘This Custom from the Past Is No Good’, expresses the sentiments of one interlocutor about the values of his ancestors. These sentiments are not shared by everyone of course, and their expression signals the

emergence of new social tensions and new social categories as the language of the 'big man' is replaced by the language of the 'big shot'. The latter expression is considered disrespectful behaviour of the kind that should not characterise familial relations. The people of Epi island in Vanuatu with whom Smith worked do not, as yet, use the language of the 'big shot', but they experience the same tensions between senior and junior generations, as her essay illustrates.

Matti Eräsaari's essay charts an analogous generational change in values occurring in the Fijian village of Naloto. This village is in the heartland of chiefly Fiji, an area where hierarchy was classically expressed through the exchange of whale's teeth. Unlike the classic agonistic exchange of shell valuables between competing equals for which PNG is famous, the giving of whale's teeth ritually celebrated hierarchy. A giver would kneel on one knee and literally present the valuable upwards to a chief. A ritual speech, heavily laden with honorifics, would accompany the presentation, which was usually a submissive request of some kind and never a claim to superior or equal status. The rise of egalitarian exchanges of whale's teeth between commoners at funerals, which Eräsaari describes, signals a profound shift that is permeating all levels of indigenous Fijian society, from village household to parliament. The decision of the current prime minister, leader of the 2006 military coup, to abolish the Great Council of Chiefs is but one of the many signs of this transformation.

These changing valuations of time and place provide the background to the various ways in which the inhabitants of these places pursue their quest for the good life. Like people everywhere, this involves, among other things, the quest for fame and fortune. The central theme of Smith's essay, the quest for the 'good house' in Vanuatu, is also a theme in Gregory's essay on a market town in India. In both cases, it is the relatively wealthy migrant who is able to build the good house, which, in both cases, is the sign of a newly emerging economic class. The big difference between these examples is that, in the Indian case, class difference divides unrelated people, whereas in Vanuatu, it divides friends, neighbours and relatives. The 'big shots' of PNG have been very successful at exploiting the economic opportunities presented by the twenty-first century; so too have Aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land who have benefited from a booming art market and access to large flows of cash. However, the quest for a good house has little meaning in the 'mobile' Aboriginal value system in which access to good transport is the supreme value. As such, successful artists used their new-found wealth to purchase vehicles—for the benefit of all,

not for their exclusive use; only their fame as an artist of renown was theirs alone. For some, this renown was international, as Altman's essay shows. While fame can survive the fluctuations of prices in the market, money wealth cannot. People everywhere are the victims of price fluctuations of this kind and Aboriginal artists in Arnhem Land, whose livelihood has been shattered by a collapsing art market, would trade their fame for a vehicle if that were possible.

While the quest for money is part and parcel of the quest for the good life, it by no means defines it. The notion of wealth epitomised by the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, which gives equal if not greater weight to human values such as abundant progeny, good friends, good neighbours, good health and longevity, is shared by people across many faiths, as the essays in this volume illustrate; apart from Gregory's, they all examine Christian communities. These values, which concern right conduct and good fellowship, define the moral basis of most religions. What divides people are the culturally specific forms of 'true beliefs' and the ritual and poetic expressions of them. These values are intimately related to familial values of respect and familial love. The idiom of kinship is often used to express these religious values. Kinship, for its part, is often defined as a form of 'good fellowship' because estrangement of kin is an ever-present danger, as Maggio's chapter illustrates. The importance of familial values in the quest for the good life is found in all the essays in this book. In Maggio's example, the emphasis is on the pragmatics of kinship, not the semantics of kin terms—that is, with how people use familial values for their own ends rather than blindly following 'marriage rules'. This broad conception of wealth is the third general theme that emerges from this work; like the other themes, it is informed by familial values anchored in culturally specific ways of life, death and reproduction.

Bruno Latour's (2004) article, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', raised an important question:

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?

Latour's answer, that we should move from a debate about matters of fact to a debate about matters of concern to people living in the twenty-first century, has much to recommend it, but he sends anthropology down the wrong track with his ontological turn. 'The solution', he asserted, 'lies in this promising word gathering that Heidegger had introduced to account for the "thingness of the thing"' (p. 245). While it is important to study the thought of celebrated European academic philosophers, and while it is important to study the metaphysics of being, the fact remains, as Hegel (1969) showed, that 'being' without 'becoming' is 'nothingness'. Anthropology has its origins in the concrete study of the voice of the uncelebrated, non-European, non-academic, colonised subject; in the study of the rising and passing away of mere mortals as they cope with the necessity of finding food for the belly and food for imaginative thought; and in the study of morality, that ancient art of trying to live together well.

Anthropology is a child of imperialism, as Gough (1968) famously claimed, but it also provided the basis of a radical empirical critique of received ideas. What has become of this critical spirit? Has it run out of steam? Why is the primacy of critical ethnographic research being challenged by the ontological turners (Ingold, 2008)? This is a matter of concern for us, as we live in a world that is entering an era of inter-imperialist rivalry of a fundamentally new historical kind. There are no new formulae in this collection to replace 'the localisation of the global' or the 'indigenisation of modernity'; however, we hope to have raised some matters of concern by highlighting some of the moral dilemmas and paradoxes faced by some people in the twenty-first century: those who find themselves to be land-rich and dirt-poor; who seek the good life by participating in rituals about good deaths; who value kin highly but are faced with the reality of estrangement; or those other, less fortunate members of the precariat in the Pacific, such as the stateless, 'illegal' refugees imprisoned on Nauru by the Australian Government, whose quest for the good life is caught in the horns of much more vicious dilemmas than those experienced by the people discussed in these essays.

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