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2 Labour, property and persons: reflections from Papua New

3 Guinea

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5 The concept of labour has been central to the constitution of persons and property in  
6 Western political theory since the earliest days of capitalist modernity. For Locke,  
7 labour is the fundamental constituent of property claims in external objects that then  
8 enable the bourgeois or possessive individual to constitute himself as an independent  
9 person. For radical critics, such as Marx, labour is equally important as the ultimate  
10 source of value that is alienated from the labouring class in capitalist society.

11 Anthropologists have often tended to engage with these traditions by minimising their  
12 differences and emphasising their points of connection. This conflation enables them  
13 to be presented as fundamentally similar emanations of a Western cultural value-  
14 system based around shared assumptions concerning labour as a fundamental  
15 individual human property. This Western perspective is then rhetorically critiqued  
16 from the position of a non-Western cultural system. In this essay, I critically explore  
17 the validity of this approach. Drawing on material from Papua New Guinea, I argue  
18 that a more careful attention to Marx's critique of liberal individualism opens up the  
19 possibility for a critical anthropology of labour that goes beyond the conventional  
20 critique from the position of cultural alterity.

## 1 Introduction

2 The concept of labour is at the heart of much of Western political philosophy and as a  
3 consequence a sceptical approach to the concept is characteristic of much  
4 anthropological critique of this tradition; particularly critique emanating from regional  
5 ethnographic literature, such as Melanesia. In the work of John Locke for example,  
6 labour is the fundamental property or characteristic that enables each individual  
7 human to make claims in property. By placing their labour into objects that are found  
8 in the natural world, individual humans are able to mix the labour that is their  
9 property with these objects and thus claim them as extensions of their own property.  
10 This labour theory of property can be contrasted with other labour-based political  
11 theories, most notably the Marxist labour theory of value. For Marx labour constitutes  
12 the essence of human being and is the basis for the production of all economic value.  
13 Through the private ownership of capital, the capitalist class is able to alienate a  
14 portion of the value the workers produce through the expenditure of their labour.  
15 Although Locke and Marx represent fundamentally opposite political philosophies,  
16 they both place a category of something called labour at the heart of their  
17 understanding of what human society should be like. This similarity is sometimes lost  
18 on some observers. For example, in his recent book *How to Destroy America in Three*  
19 *Easy Steps*, conservative commentator Ben [Shapiro \(2020\)](#) casually dismisses Marx's  
20 labour theory of value as 'nonsense' whilst lauding John Locke for

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correctly point[ing] out that ownership of property is merely an extension of the idea of ownership of your labor; when we remove something from the state of nature and mix our labor with it and join something of our own to it, we thereby make that property our own.

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(Shapiro, 2020)

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In a recent article in *Jacobin*, Matt [McManus \(2020\)](#) points to this as a prime

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example of a long-standing tendency among American conservatives to criticize

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Marx without actually engaging his ideas. It is perfectly possible to reject Marx and

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accept Locke, or vice versa, but one needs to think through why the category of

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labour is the legitimate basis for one set of claims and not another, rather than

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simply asserting that it is correct in one context and nonsense in another without

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explanation.

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Shapiro's inability to draw a distinction between the justifications for different

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labour-based theories of rights and entitlements is perhaps no surprise. And for many

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political theorists, Locke and Marx do stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of

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modern Western political thought; with the former using labour as the basis for a

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market-based regime of individual property rights, and the latter to critique that

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system and to advocate for its replacement with socialised rights of access to the

1 products of collective endeavour. But sometimes the distinction can be more  
2 deliberately blurred. From a particular type of anthropological perspective, Locke and  
3 Marx can be bundled together on the basis of their shared humanism, in which labour  
4 is posited as a uniquely human capacity that enables uniquely human claims. This is  
5 portrayed as a particularly Western conception that is imposed on non-Western or  
6 indigenous peoples by agents of modernity across the political spectrum. This position  
7 has become popular in recent decades as part of an 'ontological' and 'decolonial'  
8 critique that seeks to recover the alterity of non-Western ways of being. An early  
9 example is found in [Povinelli's \(1995\)](#) influential paper *Do Rocks Listen? The*  
10 *Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor*.

11 In this paper, Marxist-derived political economic approaches are compared to  
12 Lockean accounts on the basis that both are unable to see that their vision of 'labour'  
13 as a human activity aimed at particularly kinds of economic ends is a shared Western  
14 cultural vision that is not universally shared. Hence the need for a 'cultural politics  
15 of... labor' that can incorporate Aboriginal perspectives that view relationships with  
16 non-human actors that shape landscapes and environments as a kind of 'labour', even  
17 if they might be viewed as forms of leisure or non-productive activities from the  
18 perspective of colonial legal systems and radical political economics alike.

19 This conflation of Lockean and Marxist approaches to labour from the  
20 perspective of radical cultural difference has a longer pedigree in anthropology. It  
21 provides a major part of the theoretical infrastructure of a book that is one of the most

1 important texts in anthropological theory in the past half-century, Marilyn Strathern's  
2 *The Gender of the Gift*. Strathern's central concern is not the desire to blur the  
3 distinction between human and non-human realms that later critics, such as Povinelli,  
4 argue is a problematic assumption of the 'labour' theories of Marxist and Lockean  
5 political theory alike. Her concern instead is that Marxist analysis of gender relations  
6 in Melanesia culturally misrecognises them as being built on 'alienation' and  
7 'expropriation' and that this cultural misrecognition is built upon an assumption  
8 concerning the nature of 'labour'. The idea that labour can be exploited or 'alienated'  
9 is built upon a 'common (cultural) notion of a unitary self' (Strathern 1988:157) that it  
10 shares with the 'possessive individual' perspective of classical political philosophy.  
11 Both Locke's idea that labour is the basis of property claims and Marx's illustrations  
12 of surplus value based upon examples designed to illustrate that the individual worker  
13 is robbed of the surplus value that they produce can be said to be based on the shared  
14 assumption, explicitly outlined by Locke, that such labour is 'unquestionably the  
15 property of the labourer'. Strathern is somewhat ambiguous as to the extent to which  
16 this is a problem for Marxism in general or simply for the group of Marxist-inspired  
17 feminist ethnographers of Melanesia that she is engaging with in the text. At a few  
18 points she seems to acknowledge that one can read Marxism as being counterposed to  
19 this conception of the unitary 'individual subject' (e.g. op cit:358 fn21, 362 fn2) as  
20 owner of their own labour, but their relegation to the footnotes of the texts leaves the  
21 overall impression of an underlying unity of perspectives stretching from Lockean

1 patriarchal to Marxist feminist theories that are based upon a Western cultural idea of  
2 the ideal ownership of labour as a property by unified individual subjects.

### 3 The fractal subject

4 This deconstruction of the singular and unitary subject that allegedly unites Western  
5 political philosophers as diverse as Locke and Marx is the basis for Strathern's  
6 development of the concept of the Melanesian partible person as a contrasting model  
7 of personhood. Paradoxically the development of Melanesian partible personhood is  
8 premised on the denial of a key element of personal partibility upon which the  
9 Western individual seems to rely, namely labour. For Locke labour must be removed  
10 from the person and then mixed with natural objects to make property claims. (e.g.  
11 by placing any of his labour upon [natural objects, he] did thereby acquire a property  
12 in them... the labour that was mine, removing them out of the common state that they  
13 were in, hath fixed my Property in them; [Locke 1698](#):187). For [Marx \(1902\[1849\]\)](#),  
14 labour must be removed from the worker in order for the capitalist to use her property  
15 in the means of production to claim her surplus share of the value produced by that  
16 labour.

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18 *He does not count the labor itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his*  
19 *life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another.* Labor-power was not  
20 always a commodity (merchandise). Labor was not always wage-labor, i.e., free

1 labor. The slave did not sell his labor-power to the slave-owner, any more than the ox  
2 sells his labor to the farmer. The slave, together with his labor-power, was sold to his  
3 owner once for all. He is a commodity that can pass from the hand of one owner to  
4 that of another. He himself is a commodity, but his labor-power is not his  
5 commodity. The free laborer, on the other hand, sells his very self, and that by  
6 fractions.

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8 Both Locke and Marx, in their different ways, stress that labour is a part (or  
9 fraction) of the human person that can be separated from the person. We might go  
10 further and say that if we are to accept the Lockean property owner and the Marxist  
11 proletarian as being different examples of a Western unitary individual, then the  
12 capacity to separate their labour is in fact central to their constitution as such. Far  
13 from partibility being necessarily opposed to unitary individuality, when it comes to  
14 one key central constituent or property of the individual subject, namely labour, its  
15 partibility is central to the particular constitution of the individual subjectivity in  
16 question. By contrast, the Melanesian dividual person described by Strathern is  
17 fundamentally characterised by the absence of a property called labour that can be  
18 detached from individual persons who can be conceived of as their owners. It is this  
19 that lies at the heart of her critique of Marxist-feminist accounts that described the  
20 supposed oppression of women in Melanesia as being based on the alienation of  
21 their labour. Rather than drawing a distinction between relational/partible and non-

1 relational/discrete conceptions of the person, the starting point for analysis should be  
2 the ethnographic observation of the points at which and ways in which aspects of the  
3 person are considered partible and the kinds of effects that those different partitions  
4 have. Melanesians are apparently hyper-partible and yet the very basis of this hyper-  
5 partibility for Strathern is precisely the **non-partibility** of a key property called  
6 labour.

7 More precisely, the issue is that labour is not conceived of as (a) property  
8 that can be detached from the individual person in the way that it is under conditions  
9 of commodity exchange. The preceding quote from Marx makes clear that the  
10 particular form of alienation of labour that he describes is one of commodity  
11 exchange (the labour is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another). Despite  
12 some theoretical differences, a similar point is made by Polanyi when he describes the  
13 creation of the fictitious commodity of labour as being not only central to the  
14 emergence of the self-regulating capitalist market economy, but also as a mechanism  
15 by which something that is intrinsically part of the human person is now conceived of  
16 as an object that can be separated from the whole person of which it is a part in order  
17 to be sold on the market.

18 In this regard, Strathern's Melanesian argument can be seen as developing  
19 insights from Marx's work, even if she positions herself in critical dialogue with her  
20 overtly Marxist contemporaries. Marx's contrast between the slave and free labourer  
21 is based on a contrast regarding the relationship between the person and their labour

1 the free labourer is separated from their labour in order to retain possession of their  
2 own person once they alienate it to another, whereas the slave remains united with  
3 their labour but as a consequence they have to cede possession of their entire person  
4 to the person who seeks to control their productive activity. It acts as a particular  
5 illustration of the way in which the particular partibility of labour from the person that  
6 is characteristic of wage-labour is not universal but is the effect of a particular  
7 historical organisation of relationships between people (capitalist-worker or master-  
8 slave).

9         Strathern's argument regarding the ideal-type Melanesian relationship  
10 between labour and the person stands within this historical or culturally variable  
11 tradition. Like wage-labour but unlike slavery, it implies that the activities that we  
12 categorise as labour can be separable from the individual persons who perform them.  
13 Unlike wage-labour, that separation is not the absolute separation of wage-labour  
14 from the person as an alienable form of commodity exchange, but rather is to be  
15 understood in the idiom of gift exchange in which such activities or their material  
16 outcomes are to be seen as extensions of the person who performed them and still  
17 carrying something of their person and a claim for enduring reciprocal recognition.  
18 Hence, one can read Strathern's analysis as being another example of the historical  
19 analysis pioneered by Marx. Her work could be seen as critiquing the Marxist-  
20 feminist regional ethnography of the period, not so much for its Marxism, but rather  
21 for its ahistorical and un-Marxist transportation of labour idioms appropriate to a

1 political economy of generalised commodity exchange to a very different cultural  
2 setting where gift exchange occupied a more central role. And Strathern's use of gift  
3 theory to undercut what she sees as an ahistorical transportation of wage-labour  
4 idioms of alienation to gender relations in Melanesia is to a large extent built upon  
5 [Gregory's \(2015\[1982\]\)](#) earlier Marxist-inspired development of a conceptual contrast  
6 between gifts and commodities.

7 Gregory's conceptual contrast was largely based upon a synthesis of earlier  
8 ethnographic accounts from Papua New Guinea and was an attempt to explain the  
9 way in which the traditional gift economy had not only survived, but had seemed to  
10 expand in size and scope as a consequence of integration into a global capitalist  
11 political economy during the colonial era. The organisation of the (re)production of  
12 things and people (in other words activities encompassing but not limited to those  
13 conventionally defined as labour) was central to Gregory's analysis. As he put it in  
14 an early exploration of the ideas that would be at the heart of *Gifts and Commodities*,  
15 gifts are to be understood with reference to clan structure and the principles  
16 governing kinship organisation, whereas commodities are to be understood with  
17 reference to class structure and the principles governing factory organisation  
18 ([Gregory 1980:641](#)).

19 Whilst both Strathern and Gregory take an opposition between gift and  
20 commodity as a major framing for their accounts, Strathern uses it to establish an  
21 essential ideal-type contrast between Western social theory and what an opposing

1 Melanesian social theory might look like, whereas for Gregory the key question is  
2 how these two economic forms interact and shape each other in specific historic  
3 contexts (in his case, the context of late colonial Papua New Guinea). Whilst  
4 Strathern deals explicitly with the wage-labour relationship in Papua New Guinea in a  
5 number of earlier ethnographic writings (most notably [Strathern 1975](#) and [1985](#)),  
6 these works have not had the impact on the discipline of anthropology that the  
7 analysis in *Gender of the Gift* has had. In *No Money on Our Skins* ([Strathern 1975](#)),  
8 Strathern describes a kind of culture clash between rural New Guinea migrant workers  
9 and expatriate employers in the territorial capital of Port Moresby. But this is taken as  
10 the starting point for an analysis of the particular historical configuration of shifting  
11 gift and commodity idioms that shape different kinds of wage-labour relationships  
12 rather than the construction of an ideal-type contrast between Western commodity-  
13 based political theory and an imagined Melanesian social theory gift-based political  
14 theory. In *John Locke's Servant and the Hausboi from Hagen* ([Strathern 1985](#)),  
15 Strathern develops these ideas in more detail. Although this text already contains  
16 some of the critiques of Marxist-inspired accounts that appear in *The Gender of the*  
17 *Gift*, it is also an account of how people, both employer and employee alike, switch  
18 between different ideologies and conceptions of the meaning of the wage-labour  
19 relationship in the course of negotiating that relationship.

20 [The commodification of labour](#)

1 The analysis in *The Gender of the Gift* also deals with the contrast between different  
2 idioms of labour, but because of its overtly stated aim of constructing a fictional  
3 Melanesian social theory based on the 'gift', it largely deals with wage-labour as a  
4 form of commodity exchange that is tangential to the real business of gift exchange  
5 that forms the basis for the ideal-type regional contrasts that underpin the book. By  
6 contrast, Gregory's use of the distinction is developed predominantly as a means to  
7 explain historical change. His model of historical change is still one that largely  
8 proceeds from the assumption of a distinction between a traditional Melanesian  
9 economy centred on gift-exchange and an externally introduced colonial capitalist  
10 commodity-exchange economy. Even if some forms of barter-like commodity  
11 exchange are described as existing around the edges of these local systems, there is no  
12 idea that commodified labour as a means for the production of things is present, let  
13 alone the central form of social organisation. Hence, for Gregory, the introduction of a  
14 commodified conception of labour is one of the central historical processes initiated  
15 by colonialism. Chapter 6 of the book *The Transformation of Gifts into Commodities*  
16 *in Colonial Papua New Guinea* is 55 pages long, of which a total 38 are taken up by  
17 an analysis of 'The emergence of labor-power as a commodity' as opposed to only  
18 four pages devoted to 'The emergence of land as a commodity'. This shows the  
19 importance of the commodification of labour to Gregory's deployment of the  
20 gift/commodity distinction as a means of explaining social change in Papua New  
21 Guinea. It is also a framing that assumes as a starting point a fairly stark division

1 between two separate economies based on opposed principles. These are then  
2 described as being brought into contact and the nature of the subsequent relationship  
3 between them is then the problem to be explained. Even if Gregory begins from the  
4 assumption of a distinction between a European colonial commodity-exchange  
5 economy and a Melanesian gift-exchange economy, his interest is in how the two  
6 create new economic forms in the course of their interaction rather than keeping them  
7 separate for the purposes of the kind of regional cultural contrast that is developed in  
8 Strathern's later work.

9         The apparent absence of wage-labour prior to the colonial era contributed to  
10 the sense that wage-labour was something introduced or even imposed from external  
11 sources at the time that Gregory was researching and writing in the late 1970s and  
12 early 1980s. And although wage-labour of a sort was introduced into the region in the  
13 late 19th century, it had predominantly been in the form of indentured labour on  
14 colonial plantations. The indentured labourer was not the free labourer described by  
15 Marx in the passage cited previously, but was rather someone who was tied to a long-  
16 term contract of several years a long distance from home and who was subject to  
17 criminal penalties, including imprisonment, if he chose to rebel against the harsh  
18 living and working conditions by attempting to leave before his contract was  
19 complete. The indentured labourer thus seemed to blur the distinction between the  
20 free labourer and the slave established in Marx's text. Part of the rationale for  
21 establishment of this partially unfree labour was that, as Gregory put it,

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[m]embers of a gift economy had no economic need to supply their labor-power as a commodity, so the colonizers had to create this need.

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In addition, as [Good and Fitzpatrick \(1979:128\)](#) put it, this specific form of

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organisation of

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wage labour and other key aspects of the colonial political economy were designed to counter organization by the colonized people outside the **traditional** context and independent of colonialism.

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As the Territory of Papua and New Guinea and other smaller regional territories approached independence, there was an increasing move away from more forced to more **free** forms of employment that looked more like classical wage-labour (see [Gregory 2015\[1982\]:128](#)). Given the seeming lack of wage-labour-like relations in the pre-colonial situation and the prevalence of largely unfree forms of wage-labour in the relatively short amount of time since the establishment of colonial rule in the late 19th century, it is not surprising that the colonisers also had to work to

1 introduce this form of wage-labour. In the 1960s, a great deal of effort was put into  
2 educating natives of the Territory about the nature of this kind of work and how to  
3 distinguish it from other kinds of productive activity. An educational pamphlet  
4 produced by the Department of Labour of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea in  
5 the 1960s begins in the following manner:

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What is a Worker?

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What is a workers' association?

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How is a workers' association formed?

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Workers

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A worker is any person who works for somebody else for wages. A doctor is a

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worker if he does not work for himself but receives money from an employer. A

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doctor who is employed by the Government is a worker.

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All the following people are workers:

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Airline pilots

18

Clerks

19

Mechanics

20

Drivers

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Labourers

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1           What is important to remember is that everybody employed and paid by other people  
2           is a worker. Workers are not self employed.

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4           Many Papuans and New Guineans work for the Government.

5           It is the same if a man works for the Government or somebody else. All people who  
6           earn wages are workers.

7           To help you understand what is a worker, write out a list of all the different jobs  
8           which people do who belong to a Workers' Association.

9           It does not matter where a worker comes from, or what Church (religion) he belongs  
10          to, or how old he is. All workers are the same when they work for wages.

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(Department of Labour, 19--)<sup>1</sup>

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13           Although the main topic of the pamphlet is to introduce the population to the  
14           importance of Workers' Associations (i.e. trade unions), it begins by attempting to  
15           educate its audience, who are presumed to need clarification as to what a worker is. A  
16           worker is predominantly defined by work for wages and indeed anyone who works  
17           for wages is a worker, regardless of other identities he may have.

18           The pamphlet goes on to paint a positive picture concerning the role of  
19           Workers' Associations in looking after wage-labourers, in a manner that suggests that  
20           for the colonial authorities, promoting Workers' Associations was inherently tied in  
21           with the promotion of and correct understanding of the nature of wage-labour more

1 generally. In this regard, the pamphlet fits a general trend at the time, pointed out by  
2 [Foster \(1998\)](#), for the colonial government in the Territory to attempt to educate the  
3 natives in the realities of a modern economy in a manner that often ended up looking  
4 like a left-wing critique of capitalism. Foster describes the ways in which the attempt  
5 to undermine so-called cargo cults led the colonial authorities to produce educational  
6 material that highlighted that the **cargo** did not emerge from underground caves  
7 controlled by spirit ancestors but was rather produced in factories and workshops. For  
8 Foster this amounts to an explicit acceptance of a Marxist labour theory critique of  
9 commodity fetishism **to** wean the rebellious natives off of cargo cults, they had to be  
10 educated into the importance of labour as the source of economic value. In order for  
11 them to realistically engage with capitalist development they had to be educated into  
12 its labour-based critique. This might suggest that during the late colonial period the  
13 critique of generalised commodity exchange had to be taught as part of its  
14 explanation, so alien was it as a way of life, much as the encouragement of workers'  
15 organisation in opposition to capital had to be taught as an integral part of educating  
16 natives into understanding wage-labour and differentiating it from other kinds of  
17 social relations and productive activity. Such interventions demonstrate that the  
18 centrality or naturalness of wage-labour cannot be assumed, but to what extent do  
19 such framings from the late colonial era continue to provide a starting point for  
20 analysis today?

## 1 Beyond cultural misunderstanding

2 Documents such as the educational pamphlet quoted above give the impression that  
3 the major issue to be dealt with in terms of the management of labour are varieties  
4 of cultural misunderstanding. From the perspective of the colonial administration,  
5 the natives need to be educated into what works of labour are and how they differ  
6 from other activities. From the perspective of anthropology, the misunderstanding is  
7 more commonly presented as emanating from the other side of the relationship, as the  
8 expatriate employer misunderstands the native's engagement with the wage-labour  
9 economy as irrational, due to the employer's own misunderstanding of the cultural  
10 context that drives the native to behave in particular ways. For example, [Strathern](#)  
11 [\(1975:38\)](#) argues that migrants from the Highlands of New Guinea working for  
12 expatriate employers in the capital city, Port Moresby, do not have models of  
13 impersonal, industrially-oriented relationships. Instead, they tend to view all  
14 productive social relationships, including those with their employers, through the lens  
15 of reciprocity and gift exchange. This makes quitting an undesirable wage-labour  
16 relationship potentially difficult, as gift relationships are ideally supposed to be  
17 enduring and permanent. Strathern describes one potential resolution, which is to act  
18 in a manner that puts the onus of responsibility on the employer. The employee acts in  
19 a manner that might encourage the employer to end the relationship, whilst all the  
20 while declaring that it all depends on the employer (op cit:141). This motivation is

1 largely misrecognised by the employer who misreads an act of autonomy as an  
2 assertion of overblown and irrational over-dependence, because she is largely  
3 unaware of the ways in which the dominant framing of gift obligation is the context  
4 within which the migrants enact wage-labour relationships.

5         The mutual misrecognition model might have made intuitive sense in the early  
6 1970s, when the migrants studied by Strathern came from communities who might  
7 have only been brought under the control of the colonial government within living  
8 memory and wage-labour was a relatively recent innovation. Today it might seem  
9 more helpful to frame the disconnection between employers and employees as one of  
10 a conflict of values or interests rather than cultural misunderstanding. In my  
11 experience of fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, locals are aware of the way in which  
12 wage-labour is supposed to operate. They simply don't like how it operates, don't  
13 think it compensates them fully for their effort, and often have alternative sources of  
14 support that mean that they are not as reliant upon it as employers might wish.  
15 [Strathern \(1975:33–4\)](#) describes Papua New Guineans speaking of having been  
16 tricked by Europeans who "ate" the profits of their labours, putting aside only a  
17 minute proportion for wages. Strathern's later critique of Marxist-feminist scholars  
18 was that their analysis of the exploitation of labour in the context of ritual gift-  
19 exchange was based upon an insensitive exportation of idioms of individual  
20 ownership of labour. As this earlier ethnographic account illustrates, however, this  
21 should not be taken as an argument that Melanesians are culturally incapable of such

1 framings. In the context of wage-labour relationships, they are as capable as workers  
2 anywhere in the world of such a perspective.

3         During one period of fieldwork, I remember going to visit a friend at a large  
4 mine, operated by a multinational corporation, where I encountered a company  
5 anthropologist, doing consultancy work for the company. The anthropologist  
6 recounted an incident to me in which a group of workers had not shown up for work  
7 one day, as they knew the weather would not make it possible for them to do their  
8 allocated tasks. They then protested vociferously when their wages were withheld.  
9 She was clearly aggrieved on their behalf by the irrationality of the situation in which  
10 they were punished for the entirely reasonable act of not standing around in the heavy  
11 rain for no purpose other than just to fulfil the obligation of having shown up for  
12 work, but she also went on to say with a wry smile that it illustrated that they still  
13 didn't get how wage-labour operated; that once you have agreed to sell your  
14 productive capacities for a period of time then you can't welch on the bargain, even if  
15 it is abundantly clear that nothing can actually be produced. Looking back on it  
16 however, I wonder if it really was a case of them not getting it, so much as refusing  
17 to submit to the irrationality of it. My experience of the Papua New Guineans that I  
18 worked with is that they were as perfectly well aware as workers in the UK of the  
19 sometimes nonsensical demands that their employers wished to subject them to. The  
20 old joke grab a broom and look busy, the foreman's coming is not simply a one-  
21 liner; I remember literally hearing that frantically whispered in my ear by an old hand

1 towards the end of an afternoon shift during my first week working in a warehouse in  
2 an English industrial estate, during my teens. The Papua New Guineans that I worked  
3 with did not have the same reliance on wage-labour as my English co-workers. Most  
4 of them had access to customary land or support from extended networks of relatives,  
5 for example. This may act as a hidden subsidy to capital by lowering the cost of the  
6 necessary social reproduction of labour, as has long been acknowledged by those who  
7 benefit from this situation, such as the Mine Native Wages Commission in South  
8 Africa in the 1940s (cited in [Meillassoux 1972](#)), who argued that

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10 [i]t is clearly to the advantage of the mines that native labourers should be  
11 encouraged to return to their homes after the completion of the ordinary period of  
12 service. The maintenance of the system under which the mines are able to obtain  
13 unskilled labour at a rate less than ordinarily paid in industry depends on this.

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15 Similarly, an Australian government board of inquiry into the plantation sector  
16 in Papua and New Guinea in the 1970s (cited in [Gregory 2015\[1982\]](#):156) put it thus:  
17 [the village sector has been subsidizing the plantation sector for many years]. Gregory  
18 (op cit:126) summarises the situation during the late colonial era in the following  
19 terms:

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[T]here is no landless proletariat who are forced to work in order to survive. This is not to say that there are not some people without land, just that this phenomenon does not exist on a large scale. There are people willing to work but these are, for the most part, migrant laborers who are born into a clan and return to their village to marry and settle. Thus the reproduction cost of labor is borne by the clan. In other words, wages are geared to single men, not married men with dependents. The wage they get reflects the conditions of reproduction and not the so-called inferior productivity of migrant labor.

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Whilst the number of people without access to land and the number of women involved in wage-labour has probably increased in the intervening decades, in many regards the picture remains the same in contemporary Papua New Guinea. The flipside of this mechanism by which those who are not wholly reliant on business owners for wages have their wages suppressed is that there is an accordingly lower incentive to subject oneself to the everyday irrationalities or humiliations of the wage-labour experience. If the wages are kept low to the point where they do not allow a realistic hope of achieving a comfortable Western lifestyle and the bare necessities of life are likely to be accessible through other kinds of social relations, then this is perhaps more likely than any kind of cultural misunderstanding to explain the lack of work discipline or commitment to the job that employers, both expatriate and

1 members of the emerging indigenous elite, often ascribe to wage-labourers in  
2 contemporary Papua New Guinea. And rather than 'labour' being something  
3 culturally mysterious to contemporary Melanesians, it is a form of social obligation  
4 that, as [Strathern \(1975\)](#) also observed, they understand all too well as enacting a kind  
5 of impersonal control that they are often still in a position to reject.

## 6 Conclusion

7 Ethnographic material from Papua New Guinea has a long history of expanding our  
8 intellectual horizons with regards to economic relations. Strathern's critique of  
9 analyses of gift-exchange cycles as being based upon the 'alienation' or 'exploitation'  
10 of 'labour' is one of the most important examples. Her claim is that both classical  
11 political theory, as exemplified by Locke, and critical political theory, as exemplified  
12 by her Marxist-feminist contemporaries, are based upon a shared 'Western'  
13 assumption of unitary individuals who own their capacities or properties. 'Labour' is  
14 in many regards the most important of these capacities. For Locke it is the basis for  
15 property claims whilst for Marx it is the central property whose commodification  
16 allows for the exploitation of surplus value in capitalist wage-labour relations.  
17 Strathern's conception of Melanesian 'partible personhood' offers a contrast to this  
18 unitary subject.

19 Yet, as [Martin \(2018\)](#) observes, both Locke and Marx can be seen as being  
20 based upon a kind of 'partibility' with 'labour' being the part of the person that must

1 be detached for the person to operate in a socially recognised manner. In addition,  
2 whereas Locke does seem to argue that labour is unquestionably the property of the  
3 individual, it is less clear that this holds for Marx. Marx may have used the  
4 hypothetical example of an individual worker who labours in exchange for wages for  
5 the first part of the working day, before working for free for a capitalist who exploits  
6 him (or eats the profit, as Strathern's migrant workers might have it) as a means of  
7 illustrating his theories concerning the exploitation of surplus value. But that does not  
8 imply that Marx thought that there was a universal capacity called labour that was  
9 the property of universal individual subjects.

10 Throughout Marx's writings there is an emphasis on the ways in which human  
11 persons and their capacities are the outcome of social relations and that individualistic  
12 conceptions of these phenomena are themselves the outcome of the particular  
13 configurations of social relations characteristic of societies dominated by market  
14 exchange. Marx never seems to explicitly deal with the question of whether or not  
15 labour is the individual property of the person who labours. But given his general  
16 insistence that human capacities are the result of social relations it seems unavoidable  
17 to conclude that the key capacity of labour must also be considered in this manner.  
18 Marx was well aware that the feudal serf or the Roman slave did not own their  
19 labour in the manner of the free labourer of industrial capitalist society. The  
20 implication to be drawn here might be that the conception of labour as the property of  
21 the discrete individual is as much the outcome of the wage-labour relationship as its

1 precondition; that the general commodification of labour relies upon the construction  
2 of a unitary owner who can then alienate it, much as the commodification of land  
3 relies upon processes of enclosure that remove multiple overlapping obligations and  
4 entailments in order to construct a unitary owner who can sell it. If labour is to be  
5 treated as a commodity (indeed the key commodity of commodities) in capitalist  
6 society then the social entanglements from which it emerges must be largely  
7 obscured, whether through conscious legal manoeuvres or through the processes of  
8 commodity fetishism that Marx describes for other commodities. It appears, as if by  
9 magic, as the property of the person who sells it. When viewed in this light,  
10 Strathern's critique of Marxist-feminist ethnographies of Papua New Guinea gift-  
11 exchange appear to be an application of the kind of historical analysis that Marx  
12 himself would have endorsed rather than a critique of such approaches *per se*.

13         By searching for the alienation of individual labour, these Marxist-feminists  
14 could be accused of assuming the very thing that had to be explained; namely the  
15 processes underpinning the social construction of labour as the property of discrete  
16 individual subjects. [As Gregory \(2015: xxviii\)](#) observed in the preface to a recent new  
17 edition of *Gifts and Commodities*, many commentators interpreted Strathern's  
18 "analytical fiction" as a geographical fact, which is a "misreading" of her work.  
19 Instead of taking Strathern's work as the basis for a geographical cultural alterity, we  
20 might see it as an example of an analysis that seeks to denaturalise the ways in which  
21 labour is constructed as individual property as a precursor to its exploitation. Rather

1 than using ethnographic work from Papua New Guinea as the basis for an essential  
2 contrast between Melanesia and the West, we might take it as an inspiration to  
3 ethnographically explore the legal, managerial and other social processes by which  
4 labour comes to appear as an individual property across the world.

## 5 Notes

6 <sup>1</sup> The date of publication on this document is unclear and the National Library of  
7 Australia catalogue lists its publication date as 19--. It seems clear from the  
8 contents that it was published at some point in the mid 1960s.

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