

# Afterword

*James Laidlaw*

This rich collection of papers is strikingly diverse thematically and in terms of intellectual style. This is partly because, as the contributors to the volume exemplify, the range of scholars on whom Susan Bayly has exerted a strong intellectual influence has been wide, and the threads they have chosen to follow from her work have led them in highly divergent directions. So, it was an insightful decision on the part of the editors to propose the concept of ‘intellectual exchange’, and it has exerted a rather productive gravitational pull on the contributions to the volume, resulting in a rich cross-cutting pattern of common themes running through the chapters. It has been able to do so, perhaps, because the editors have construed both ‘intellectual’ and ‘exchange’ in generously capacious terms. And the contributors have generally followed them in this. They have shown the richness of insight that may be gained from acknowledging that it is not only those assigned to do so in a specialized division of labour who engage reflectively with ideas, and nor is it the preserve of the affluent or leisured classes. And it is not only the conventionally ‘cosmopolitan’ who find themselves having to reckon with ideas (including concepts, values, narratives and so on) from different and conflicting frameworks and exercising reflection, judgement and sensibility as they do so. Susan Bayly’s own ethnographic writing, exemplified in the two pieces here, consistently impresses for the patience and generosity with which it takes seriously the discriminations and differences, the distinctions and value judgements that matter to her interlocutors, and discerns a subtle life of the mind even in unlikely circumstances. In fact, the changing and often contradictory requirements of ideological conformity in an authoritarian regime turn out rather demanding to *require* intellectual ingenuity, moral imagination, emotional discernment, and what Bayly calls the bridging of worlds. ‘Intellectual exchange’ turns out not to be a luxury, but a necessity.

In their Introduction, the editors have done an impressive job of highlighting the ways in which the contributors have severally addressed their theme, so there is little that I could add in that regard. It might be of interest, however, if I raise a couple of questions about what might happen to the notion of intellectual exchange at the edge of what might count as ‘exchange’.

As editors and contributors have noted, exchange comes in many forms, not all implying bilateral interaction or balanced reciprocity between equals. Several contributors describe intellectual exchange in hierarchical relations, including but not limited to pedagogy, and relations that are in other respects asymmetrical. They have described various forms of gift giving, commerce, tribute and patronage, swapping and substituting, adopting and adapting. But (broadly speaking) intellectual converse is sometimes spoken of as a matter of sharing, which as many anthropologists have long emphasized is not best understood as a form of exchange at all, because that implies relations between separate parties, whereas sharing is a form of mutuality that occurs within and indeed works to constitute a 'we' as a singular subject. Perhaps because the rubric of the volume is exchange, only a few contributors (e.g. Sarbadhikary) mention sharing and the specific sorts of relations it engenders. I wonder: what might it add to our understanding of the (broadly defined) intellectual dimension of human sociality, if we observe that some of what happens to ideas (including concepts, values, narratives and so on) is that they are shared, and if we ask how is that different from when they are exchanged? This might be understood less as a call for a complement to the anthropology of intellectual exchange that is proposed and developed in this volume than as a suggestion that it be rounded out in a particular way. It would involve perhaps blurring the boundary of the 'exchange' in 'intellectual exchange', but might nevertheless enlarge our understanding of what one might think of as the intellectual dimension of human social life.

The distinction between exchange and sharing is relevant also to my second question, because it concerns a feature of exchange that is necessarily absent from sharing. It is easy to think of exchange as something that happens between parties whose existence and identity are postulated as being anterior to the transaction: you have two or more parties, and some object that is transferred from one to the other, giving rise to a relation between them. But it was an elementary observation of structural anthropology that this is not the only way in which to understand things. In the venerable domain of kinship and social structure, for example, whereas functionalist 'descent theory' took the existence of kin groups as given, and asked how they solved the problem of reproduction and managed relations with other such groups, 'alliance theory' took the practice of marriage, conceptualized as exchange, to be constitutive: it is through their relations that the parties come into existence as the things that they are. Both ways of seeing things have their merits, and some sorts of circumstances are illuminated more by one and some by the other. Anthropological accounts of intellectual life – this is conspicuously but not exclusively so in the anthropology of religion – tend towards the functionalist model: distinct 'religions', 'systems', 'cultures' or 'traditions' exist and are transmitted and reproduced through time, with contact, exchange, conflict, influence, borrowing and so on being processes that happen 'between' them. None of the contributors quite puts things this way, but repeatedly in reading the chapters in this book, it seemed to me that the analyses offered looked more like the structuralist

'alliance theory' account than the 'descent theory' picture. By foregrounding the processes of intellectual exchange themselves – rather than the different traditions and how they are transmitted, reproduced, bounded, mixed or hybridized – the social productivity of exchange itself comes into view. The entities between which exchange takes place are the emergent outcome of the relations. It is not just that worlds are bridged, but that some worlds are brought about by the activity of bridging. This is perhaps most explicit in Magnus Marsden's chapter, where he argues that at least some versions of 'the Islamic' consist not, as influential models in recent anthropology have assumed, in the transmission and boundary-policing of more or less bounded 'tradition', but in the very activity of exchange, which brings incommensurables into relation and creates and maintains 'a lived realm of thought, agency and relationality'.

Something like this picture emerges in a number of the other chapters in this volume, and one way in which the rubric of 'intellectual exchange', which is already amply vindicated by the rich array of analyses presented here, might prove to be of further theoretical importance in anthropology, is through a more relational and processual complement to the more usual way of imagining the 'entities' that frame intellectual life.

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