

## **Creativity, Subjectivity and the Dynamic of Possessive Individualism**

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### **Introduction**

On 16 September 1975, in Reite village on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, Siriman Kumbukau dreamt a new spirit voice into being. On the same night, as his narrative reconstruction emphasized, the leader of a local politico-ritual movement for independence and self-determination died.<sup>1</sup> Siriman's dream gave him not only knowledge of a new spirit voice – a tune which the male cult could animate into a powerful spirit being through the ritual paraphernalia of the cult – but also a series of staccato images and metaphors that developed the power of the spirit and spoke of its achievements. This spirit was named Indepen.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I take up the issue of creativity by interrogating the assumptions behind its current manifestation as a tool in political rhetoric. I point to a series of underlying assumptions that legitimize, at a more fundamental level than just rhetoric, a global politics of homogenization and commodification of social products. In this climate it seems naive to celebrate people's creativity without understanding the effects of such transformations of people's action and effort in reinforcing particular models of the person, of culture and of the social. I point out that the common rendering of creativity is closely allied to property rights, and since these are taken for granted as the basis of our freedom (behind which lies a view of the state as guarantor of this freedom, foreshadowed in the writings of Hobbes and Locke), it is unsurprising that creativity is seen both as self-realization and as compatible with a liberal humanist political economy of individuals and states that regulates their interactions. Yet these understandings are the legacy of an emerging statecraft in Europe and America over the last few centuries. Certain kinds of person emerged along with this crafting, persons for whom the state was an appropriate adjunct. My aim is to call into question the analytic and political effects of discussing the cultural creativity of others. Contrary to intent, these effects may include a conceptual colonialism that exactly suits the spread of a notion of culture as something to be owned and claimed, and of the state as the proper guarantor of this ownership (Aragon and Leach n.d.).

The promise of property seems to exercise a strong hold over imaginations everywhere. It almost inevitably prompts visions of boundaries, exclusivity and control. We constantly hear these days about threats to people's intellectual property (IP), about individual cases in which people's creativity is either not being properly recognized or is threatened as intellectual property locks down cultural resources (Vaidhyanathan 2001; Lessig 2004). The debates and conflicts around intellectual property extend to patents upon human cell lines, and on medical drugs that are hugely inflated in price because of the monopolies that patents allow (Love 2003, 2006). Many have looked to ideas and precedents in intellectual property in order to protect indigenous knowledge or subject populations (Brown 2003, 2005). IP holds out the promise, on the one hand, of privatizing, and thus of profiting from, innovations in areas as basic to our survival as human genetics. Thus it brings activists and protesters out in droves. Yet ironically, much of the protest against the privatization of genetic materials also uses the language of property, and even of IP, in order to oppose what is seen as the undesirable control of such fundamental materials by a few self-interested individuals. To counteract commodification, various notions of common ownership, or of a public domain in knowledge, have been proposed (see (Vaidhyanathan 2006).

In similar vein, complaints about the appropriation of cultural materials and the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples are often phrased in terms of rightful ownership and property. IP is seen to offer protection against exploitation as well as being a source of inequality. Think of debates surrounding genetic modification. Much of the activist rhetoric against GM is phrased in terms of our common heritage, of the rights we all have to enjoy nature and its products, without some of them being ruined or hived off for the profit of multinational corporations. I want to examine how we have got to this point – at which the collectivity is pitted against the individual. What conception of the individual lies behind this kind of opposition, and how does creativity fit into the picture? What effect does a high valuation of knowledge, rendered specifically through IP law, have upon politics, and indeed upon social organization? To reveal this effect we must unravel a complex of assumptions about personhood, about nature and about society. This means situating the idea of knowledge as a kind of object that can be owned within a historical and cultural context in which it is inextricably linked to a particular view of creativity. Going back to John Locke, and particularly to Chapter 5 of his *Second Treatise on Government* (Locke 1960), I shall re-examine property claims in the liberal tradition of European and American political philosophy. My argument builds upon this foundation and looks at the construction, and some consequences, of a particular kind of liberal humanism that incorporates strongly determined notions of what creativity is, and of how it can and ought to be recognized.

## **Passions, Human Nature and Self-interested Individuals**

The background to intellectual property lies in the notion of property itself, understood as a way of connecting people with what they produce. The notion has its origins in European and American political philosophy and statecraft, from the Renaissance onwards. In his book *The Passions and the Interests*, Albert Hirschman (1997) traces some of the most significant moments in the emergence of the state formations appropriate to a particular kind of property-owning individual. The process that Hirschmann documents is epitomized by Amartya Sen, in his preface to the book, by way of the following story: Imagine being pursued by a group of people hostile to you, bigots in fact, intent upon your murder because they have taken against you on the basis of the colour of your skin or of your religious belief. Fortunately, your pocket is full of high-value coins. You throw them into the air, and your pursuers turn from their collective aim of murdering you to scabble around and collect as much of the cash as each one can.

It is a pithy and memorable rendering of an apparent truth – that self-interest overcomes other kinds of motivation. But Hirschman is concerned to highlight the particular conditions of emergence of this apparent truth, and how its form is determined by those conditions. In medieval understanding, he argues, human beings were thought to be driven by ‘passions’. Religion, and the absolute authority vested in it, held these passions in check. At this stage passions were almost always seen as sinful or destructive, to be controlled or restrained by the morals and doctrines of the church and the monarch. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a shift occurred. As states grew in population and complexity, and as new discoveries undermined absolute confidence in religion as the basis for all knowledge and authority, there was a loss of faith in the capacity of religious precepts to keep people’s passions at bay. It was noted at this time that some passions are more destructive than others. In the scenario that Sen narrates, the recognition by each and every member of the mob of their own *self-interest* saves you from a nasty fate. It is the rational and self-interested acknowledgement that collecting the cash will serve them better than indulging in murder. Here the ‘passion’ for individual gain – a ‘rational’ passion – overrides a less healthy, irrational passion for inflicting harm on another on grounds of prejudice.

Hirschman traces a trajectory of thought in which passions could be pitted against one another to suppress the worst and most destructive of them. The seventeenth century saw the elaboration and recasting of those passions supposed to be governed by reason as *interests*, so as to yield the dichotomy between brute passion and rational self-interest that subsequently became enshrined in the conventions of European thought. It is rational to pursue one’s own advantage, and even if brutish elements such as avarice and greed were part of the picture,

they could be harnessed by proper planning. The crucial move, according to Hirschman, was the idea that governments which took into account people's rational self-interest were more likely to succeed than those which relied merely upon suppressing 'passions' of every kind. This development is apparent in the writings of the political philosophers to whom he refers and in corresponding changes in laws and institutions. Giambattista Vico, writing in the early eighteenth century, put the idea in this way:

Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which lead all mankind astray, [the state] makes national defence, commerce, and politics, and thereby causes the strength, the wealth, and the wisdom of the republics; out of these three great vices, which would surely destroy man on earth, society thus causes the civil happiness to emerge. This principle proves the existence of divine providence: through its intelligent laws the passions of men who are entirely occupied by the pursuit of their private utility are transformed into a civil order which permits men to live in human society. (Vico 1953: 132–3)

As Hirschman comments, the expansion of commerce and industry around this time was heralded as a source of rules of conduct that might substitute for the religious precepts of medieval times, imposing much needed discipline and constraint on both rulers and ruled (Hirschman 1997: 129).

The complex of changes in notions of the passions, and of what was needed to regulate or nullify their destructive influence, was in turn based on the emerging ideal of scientific observation, applied to human beings as part of the natural world. The philosopher Spinoza professed in his *Ethics* of 1677 to 'consider human actions and appetites just as if I were considering lines, planes or bodies' (Spinoza 2000). Spinoza makes the notion of 'man as he really is' – that is, a consideration of *human nature* – the basis of his recommendations for governance. For him, how 'man really is' can be ascertained through the kind of scientific study that is more usually associated with the physical world. Hirschman also points to Rousseau, who, in the opening pages of *The Social Contract*, writes that his work has come from an examination 'taking men as they are, and the laws as they might be' (cited in Hirschman 1997: 14). Although Spinoza, Rousseau and Vico no doubt had different ways of conceptualizing human nature, the principle that one could base a prescriptive philosophy of the state upon a study of that nature was thus firmly established. Through this study the idea of interests, which substituted for that of passions, came to be narrowed in its meaning. Adam Smith took up this meaning of interest and famously outlined his vision of how, through the pursuit of individual wealth, society would be made a better and constantly developing place. Through such influential arguments, rational self-interest came to mean the interest to pursue wealth. Rational self-interest became economic interest.

## **Labour, Projects and Natural Reason**

This development of a notion of human nature as a basis for moral philosophizing about how best to regulate human behaviour through the state also set the agenda for another great thinker, John Locke. Of course, as MacPherson (1962) points out, Locke did not himself *invent* the ideas of property on which he expounds. In fact, much like an ethnographer, Locke saw himself as recording the current state of ownership and rationalizing it in his treatise. In other words, there already was a cultural reality to the particularly clear expression of the doctrine of possessive individualism provided by Locke.

For Locke, land held an archetypal status in the development of property. Through analysis of land use and improvement, one could hypothesize a movement from the common inheritance of all mankind to individual ownership. There was a particularly obvious moral justification for a transition from holding the earth's resources in common to the private control of land. The justification ran along the following lines, which are important for my argument later on. Locke posits that the earth was given to all mankind by God for its common use and enjoyment. (In fact, it was given to his sons, who gave it to their sons, and so on.) 'Natural reason', Locke tells his readers, determines that every man has the right to preservation, and for that, he needs sustenance. But how can any man guarantee access to that which sustains him when the earth and all its products are the *common* heritage of all mankind? Spontaneous creations of nature are obviously owned by everyone. But in order to make them of use, they must be appropriated. Thus for Locke, reason shows that a man must appropriate a fruit that has fallen to the ground, and make it his own, if it is to be of any use to him. It cannot belong to another, since by nourishing this particular man – by sustaining him – it helps to achieve the end he has a right to achieve, namely his survival.

And so Locke arrives at a further principle: 'every man has property in his own person'. Through appropriating things that are commonly owned, these things become a part of him. Crucially, by mixing his labour with nature, with things that are already there in the natural world, he makes things his own. In the very act of appropriation, Locke argues, property comes about. It is the labour of picking up the apple, not the eating of it, that makes it the property of one person: 'if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. The labour put a distinction between them and the common' (Locke 1960: 288). The addition of labour makes a common resource into property *irrespective of others' consent*. Locke does say that reason also demands that people only appropriate enough for their needs, and thus do not waste common resources. He also discusses the advent of money and how some people could own more than others. But the important aspect for my exposition here is succinctly developed below:

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Though the things of nature are given in common, yet Man (by being master of himself and *Proprietor of his own person* and the actions of *Labour* of it) had still in himself the great *Foundation of Property*; and that which made up the great part of what he applied to the Support or Comfort of his being, when Invention and Arts had improved the conveniences of Life, was perfectly his own, and did not belong in common to others. (ibid.: 298–9)

Land was the archetypal property for Locke because through labour it could be cultivated, tilled and made productive. The importance of the plough, and thus of agriculture as a stable and enduring relation to the land, was vital. To own land it must be appropriated. And this required the mixing of labour with land. Notice that the idea of a *project*<sup>3</sup> comes in here. Land is turned from a common resource to private property through the project to cultivate it. Human beings own the fruits of their labours and endeavours as the outcomes of their projects. Here we already see the beginnings of the current emphasis on mental labour and intent as crucial to property. The emphasis is placed upon a kind of mixing, of intentional directed action with products of nature that are literally ‘given’ to all – a common heritage.

Possessive individualism had far-reaching implications for Western political philosophy, as Pocock (1985) has observed. Pocock concurs with MacPherson in suggesting that the assumptions involved predate Locke. In fact he traces elements of it to the Bible, where God’s chosen people were given the Promised Land to be handed down from father to son through the generations. As he points out, ‘other people’ were those who wandered away from this land, roaming an earth that was nobody’s to own. By the seventeenth century, as we have seen, theorists were constructing the notion of ‘natural rights’ on the basis of an examination of human nature. To do so, they envisaged the ‘state of nature’ as a primeval condition of human existence. And that condition was characterized by the image of an individual as a kind of wanderer. Pocock goes on to argue that for the political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was not until primeval individuals started to appropriate things that they needed any kind of law, and it was because they had no law that they existed in a state of nature (that is, without civilization). The individual thus *preceded* property in Enlightenment political philosophy. In the state of nature an assortment of individuals roamed the earth’s surface. But appropriation, in Locke’s account, led to property, which led to rights, which led to governments to enforce them. It resulted in systems of institutionalized values. In effect, the human individual as a sociable creature was defined by his property, and the individual who had still to appropriate things from the common was not yet fully human. The savage was a primeval rather than a possessive individual: ‘the essential step into humanity was taken with the acceptance of law and government, and it was premised that this step could not

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be taken without the preceding or accompanying step of appropriation' (Pocock 1992). Primeval individuals had not appropriated the land through modification and improvement and thus did not develop laws, arts and sciences as the codified expressions of organized social relations. These social relations, when they did eventually emerge, were based on the fact that appropriation converted individuals into property owners. In other words, to use Pocock's phrase, 'property [...] was their name for relationship' (ibid.: 42). Human society is based on the ownership of property, as relationships between individuals *came into being* because of the appropriation of resources and the need to institutionalize that appropriation. 'The enlightened mind was bent upon the separation of spirit from matter, of appropriator from the substance appropriated' (ibid.: 43). So through their projects, human beings modified and improved their environment, and thus owned it as property.

For a contemporary version of the peculiar dilemma of how to regulate the passions and interests of individuals intent on maximizing their personal wealth in the absence of strong state regulation, we may turn to Garret Hardin's famous article on 'the tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). Hardin took it as self-evident that people are all possessive individuals, acting in their own rational self-interest. Based on this assumption he argued that any resources held in common are likely to be either over-exploited, and therefore depleted and degraded, or underused and degenerated through lack of investment. According to Hardin, on the one hand a 'rational' user of a common resource will make demands on that resource until the expected benefits from that appropriation are overtaken by the costs of exploiting it. Because each user is an individual, and ignores costs imposed upon others by their use, individual decisions culminate in tragic overuse and, potentially, the destruction of open-access commons. On the other hand, common ownership is seen as a hindrance to economic development because it is in no one's rational self-interest to invest labour or resources in improving common land when others who stand to benefit need nevertheless not reciprocate. The bogeyman image of the freeloader is central to concerns about the commons and their rational exploitation. It is a classic economist's argument.<sup>4</sup> And we can see how, from being a theory of human nature, the notion of possessive individualism became a foundational assumption in making policies for governing 'economic life' that persists to this day.<sup>5</sup>

As Elinor Ostrom (1990) points out, the model presumes that all individuals are selfish, norm-free and motivated by short-term gain. Yet we know that there are many systems of land tenure, for example, that do not follow from these kinds of assumptions about persons (Crocombe 1971). Property tenure in the mode of possessive individualism is specific to our cultural and social history, and to the imaginative projections we make. And so, therefore, is the idea that a common resource will inevitably be misused by individuals. A commons in land of the sort

Hardin imagined is a product of a particular kind of retrospective or historical imagination. This is pertinent to Pocock's point. For Hardin's image of the commons and its users is suspiciously similar to the notion, advanced by earlier theorists, of the state of nature and of the primeval individuals who inhabited it. In this picture, individuals pursuing rational, self-interested projects will care only for what they own. Enclosure and cultivation make possible the material fulfilment of individual projects.

These distinctions, of mental from material, and of one individual's interests from another's, conjoin with the notion that invention and innovation are the driving forces behind civilization and progress. In the overall trajectory that came to be described as modernity, progress comes exactly through the inception and realization of new projects, with attendant modifications to the environment. From this point of view, if modern civilization is the most successful and powerful form of human organization that has ever existed, it is precisely because it is founded on an 'accurate' reading of human nature. This view amounts to a form of evolutionism and clearly marks a self-perception, among its adherents, that elevates them above traditional and tribal peoples. Modernity, they say, allows competition to thrive, and thus generates progress as individuals compete to outdo one another.

### **Culture and the Creation of Civilization**

In its contemporary usage, as Roy Wagner (1981) has pointed out, the word 'culture' has a marked and an unmarked sense. 'High culture' is the civilizing influence of great art, of fine architecture, of the objects we find in museums. For Wagner, this kind of 'Culture' is closely linked to the prevalent understanding of civilization as a process, and project, of cultivation. Just as land and agriculture are improved through developments in the projects of settlement, intensification, specialization, and so forth, so human society is improved and developed through the cultivation of its public life, its institutions and its symbols. Wagner directs our attention once again to the political and moral philosophers of the Enlightenment. Through property, as Locke tells us, people came to have leisure to create institutions, and these in turn allowed the specialization of labour and the development of the arts. High culture and civilization develop together.

When anthropologists go to other parts of the world, however, and are confronted with unfamiliar behaviour and with objects and institutions they do not readily comprehend, their first inclination is to create a system of meaning analogous to that through which they would explain the emergence of their own forms of life. Agricultural practices are tied to belief systems, kinship is tied to economy, exchange is tied to kinship and myths. By placing any unfamiliar element or



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practice in its proper context, making it part of a wider whole, anthropologists overcome their feeling of dislocation and create the cultures of those observed. They find the *human projects*, and their backgrounds, which make order out of the apparent chaos in front of their eyes. This, in Wagner's (1981) terms, is 'culture' in the unmarked sense. It is a whole system of human creations. Culture then comes to have an existence of its own as the ultimate human project, the project of making the world that people live in. Culture as it is currently understood might be seen as the ultimate public domain, the final resource for any mental creativity that humans can engage in, as well as their creation.

The conceptual world Wagner describes, and which I have elaborated in a particular way for my own purpose here, is the world that has come down to us in part as a legacy of Locke and others. The understanding of humans within it as natural beings with a project called culture or civilization, is one in which certain human societies have progressively managed to dominate and control their environment. The notion of cultural development is crucial here. It is through manipulating plans and ideas – by using the intellect – that we are thought to have achieved this domination.

The intellect, then, is highly regarded, a hugely valuable element in human potential. Imagine if one could own the intellect. That would be tantamount to a particular kind of self-possession (which is what we have), or possession of another person (which we do not have). But while we may be in possession of ourselves, and thereby of our intellect, this is not to say that we own them as 'private property'. They belong to us without being property. We cannot dispose of them as we wish, and IP law is explicitly not the ownership of ideas, let alone creativity as a process or ability. It is an ownership of material expressions of ideas. So self-possession, which Locke talked about, is not possession of *property* until the self mixes labour with something in the world. We have property in our own person, Locke says, but this is not quite the same thing as property in the material world. The idea or the mental work, realized in the material world, is related closely to our definition of the human subject.

### **Creativity and the Person**

John Liep has recently argued that creativity is a preoccupation of modernity (Liep 2001: 3–5). The kind of economy that supports the university in which I currently work, and the activities that make the UK one of the major economies of the world, is based on services, but also on knowledge. In a knowledge-based economy, neither labour nor even material resources are of paramount importance. What is held to be crucial is rather people's ability to think creatively, to innovate, to invent and to develop. Accordingly, educational policy places a

strong emphasis on developing creative potential. What does it mean, however, to say that every individual is potentially creative? Why is it so important? One answer lies in what is called 'personal self-fulfilment'. One uses one's own internal creativity to remake one's sense of worth in the world. The mechanism seems to be through producing and developing things, which in turn 'develop' the self. Thus, artistic endeavour is supposed to make a more rounded and fulfilled person, and so on. Perhaps the contemporary interest in creativity does indeed signal a preoccupation with the creation and recreation of the self, of the person. If that is so, then it is happening in a very specific way, which produces very specific kinds of person.

The relation that defines the self as a person is a subjective intervention within the world, which makes a difference to that world. This recreates the self in the same movement by which it objectifies something beyond that self. One knows one's capacity and one's 'self' through what one sees of oneself in the world. Each time a novel object is realized, as an element externalized from the person, the distinction between the self and the world is recreated. It is the very materiality of the expression that recreates the person as a locus of intelligence and agency (J. Leach 2004b: 162).

In the context of a different debate, Carol Delaney (1986) has pointed out that these conceptions of creativity are aspects of our monotheistic heritage, thereby highlighting the gender implications of the modernist version of creativity. She points out that Adam was the genitor of the line of human beings who, partaking in God's divine creativity, were able to recreate themselves. They knew themselves as God's people because of this ability to project themselves into the world through their progeny. Culture, agriculture, all those elements in our history and society that impose form upon the world, are described as versions of the primordial creativity that Adam embodied, of man planting his seed in the receptive earth, and knowing himself through his own reflection in the response. Delaney argues that the idea of 'paternity' is central to our culture and society, a core symbol around which both gender relations and relations of production are organized. This idea also has a strong influence on that of ownership, since it was God's earth (he created it) that was given to Adam, who then passed it down the male line to his descendants. Creativity, Delaney tells us, is in the image of paternity. And paternity in this construction is an act of adding life or spirit to inert but receptive matter. The current centrality of the intellect to our notions of creativity thus has a gendered dimension. Delaney's argument is that the idea of forming and transforming matter through mental work symbolically associates one gender with creative power and the other with its reception (see de Beauvoir 1953).

Presently, the UK government vigorously promotes innovation. It designs educational policies to develop flexible and creative individuals. The notions that

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the world is changing fast (through technology), and that people must change and adapt to keep up, are very familiar (E. Leach 1968; J. Leach 2005). Indeed, creativity and change appear caught in a relation of positive feedback: the more creative we become, the more change is embodied in technology, and so the more creative and flexible we must become to keep up with technological development. The rhetoric of creativity valorizes and celebrates entrepreneurs who, through their individual genius, can change the world. They are rewarded for this. The particular way in which creativity is imagined in these constructions of flexibility and adaptability is as an ability to meet new demands, and to combine experiences and elements of knowledge in ever new ways.

The current anthropological obsession with hybrids and creative mixings in culture could be understood as another instance of this valorization. Yet hybrids are nothing new. Property for Locke is a hybrid, a combination of the labour of a person and a natural resource. The contemporary interest in hybrids, however, is all about hybrids in ideas, in the meetings of cultures and the forms that emerge from them. Culture, then, is both a human creation and the source of human creativity. It is supposed that the whole history of ideas and knowledge is available to each and everyone as a resource from which to make new combinations, and thereby to invent and innovate. But in this general conception, what motivates the work of combination, of innovation and creativity? In choosing to cite Hardin, to dwell on the emergence of possessive individualism, and to discuss creativity through the lens of intellectual property, I have sought to show how ownership and reward are thought to motivate the work of creation. My discussion of subjectivity was intended to make this point plain. We define ourselves and our humanity, or civilization on a broad scale, through our ability to manipulate and control the material world. On an individual basis, self-expression and fulfilment emerge through creative activities such as painting or writing.

Now in IP law, it is the particular form of ownership that is the focus. Granting property in inventions is said to provide the motivation for people to create and innovate. However, IP law also works in another important respect. For once property is granted to the inventor or creator, the invention or creation can circulate. Instead of keeping knowledge secret to prevent others using it, IP law allows others to use knowledge, while at the same time ensuring that its origin is acknowledged each time they do. These two factors together – reward and circulation – are the most prevalent justifications for IP. Through the accumulation of knowledge and its development over time, science advances. If individual scientists kept all their discoveries to themselves, no advance would be possible.

The issue of reward suggests that we examine how people's labour, the outcome of their work, is attached to them (Biagioli and Galison 2003). This can perhaps best be done through establishing the particularity of the form of the person involved. In this form the person is conceived as an internally specified

being, endowed with natural rights, and capable, as an individual, of labouring and creating elements in the external world to facilitate their survival, their own development and the development of a system of institutions that collectively make a 'civilization'. Other aspects are also given as internal components specified at birth: a position in a kinship system, a gendered body, and so forth. The person is partly defined by the attributes, or internal properties, that they possess. This kind of human subject controls objects in the world. The subject is defined as that which possesses attributes and controls objects.

There is a distinct connection here with ideas of creativity. And there is an interesting problem too. The subject is defined by control of the object world. It is because of projects (that is, subjective interventions) that the world is manipulated and improved. But one cannot be one's creations, for creations which one controls are by definition objects, and therefore no part of the subject. How then are they connected to the person who created them? Locke had an answer, as we have seen. The imaginative constructions of the history I have sketched out are not, however, matched elsewhere. Thus Pocock (1992: 47) describes how in Aotearoa/New Zealand, before European colonization, there were a number of 'food gathering groups moving across an unappropriated land surface to which they relate themselves ... through song, dream, ritual and other forms of mythopoeic appropriation which may be hardly possessive at all.' In such places, knowledge is often a kind of claim over land which is not based on possessive individualism. How can this be? For an answer, we need to destabilize the divisions between the mental and the material, and between persons and things, which are the twin foundations of possessive individualism. The rest of this chapter works to this end.

### **Ownership and Creativity without Possessive Individuals**

Joel Bonnemaïson (1991) tells us that on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu, people are strongly rooted in places. In myth they were the children of stones and stumps of trees, and these stones and stumps are the basis of all magic. Gardening requires garden magic, and garden magic is specific to particular places. It is localized through the stones that are the ancestors of people in that place, and the basic power for gardening. Thus different kinds of yam appear in different places as the outcome of different kinds of magical input. This is equivalent to different kinds of person appearing in different places. Bonnemaïson describes a 'biomagic heritage' in each place, and the more imbued with local magical power a crop or a person is, the more highly it will be valued on Tanna. The resource here is a mixture of knowledge, history and emplacement, all of which are enfolded in the land. Thus land both is and is not the resource. Land is not a resource

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without the knowledge of how to make it productive. So Tannese people enter into alliances with magicians. The knowledge needed to make land productive is part of a complex arrangement in social groups, and between them, whereby land and people become parts of one another.

Building on such indigenous understandings, Robert Lane has written that ‘it is inappropriate to speak of land “ownership” [in the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu]. Land is rather one component in a total system in which people are another component’ (Lane 1971: 249). Reciprocity, basic to social relations, applies between people and land. Individuals do not make rational economic calculations of how best to exploit the land in their own interests. Rather there is a complex understanding of the interconnections between people, places, knowledge and authority. Such tenure systems might be described as ones of ‘multiple ownership’ (J. Leach 2000a), as multiple interests are apparent in any one piece of land or piece of knowledge, or indeed in any one person. But by multiple ownership I mean something quite different from common property or common ownership. We are not looking at an undifferentiated resource in which all people have equal rights of access. Instead, people have different kinds of rights and claims, depending on their proximity, input, age and authority. Neither persons, land, nor knowledge are independent of one another.

On the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, the names of ancestors, and of mythic characters, are powerful. Spells are cast in the utterance of these names. People wisely said they would not reveal them to me as their ethnographer, as I might then be accused of stealing powerful knowledge and profiting from it. But they would not even tell me stories – that is, narratives of the exploits of mythic ancestors – which they did not specifically own (J. Leach 2000b). There is no power or value in these narratives according to Rai Coast people. They were afraid, however, that if the true owner of the story heard that I knew them, then the person who told me would be fined in pigs and wealth for this transgression. What possible use or value could there be in the narrative of a story that everyone knows anyway? To answer this question took some analytic work. In sum, it is because of the way people are connected to one another, through living in the same places in this area (J. Leach 2003), that knowledge of that place, its history, the ancestors who lived there and how to make it productive by invoking the right spiritual and agricultural procedures, is a way of belonging to it. Knowing the stories of the land is in many ways owning it, or rather, making a claim to be a part of the kin group which lives there (Pocock 1992). Knowledge of a place is one thing. But if, as Bonnemaïson describes on Tanna, knowledge and a place are parts of the same valuable complex whole – that is, if they are dependent upon one another – then new ideas, or what the modernist outlook would regard as innovations or manifestations of creativity, also come to look very different.

## Indepen and Creativity

When people in Reite dream new spirit voices, entities that are the basis of their sacred music, ritual transformations and horticulture, they do not claim authorship over the creation, or that they composed or invented the item. Instead, they displace agency from themselves and say it was the ground itself – and through the ground, the spirits – that gave them the knowledge. This displacement, far from being a disavowal of ownership, is in fact a *strong claim* to their recognition as central to a particular place, to its generativity and productivity (Strathern 2005a). But it is a claim made on very different premises to those of possessive individualism. The claim is not of individual mental labour, but of positioning on the land, and in a kin group, which is what made it *appropriate* for this new and valuable song to come to that person. There is no individual mind at work, no creative genius, hence the claim is not an individual one. Songs are owned and guarded, but by whole kin groups. Being spoken to by the land and by the ancestors of a particular place gives a composer authority and prestige in that place. The creation was not a project of an individual, but can be turned towards the projects of a kin group who wish to amaze and affect others around them by the beauty of their spirit voices (Strathern 2005b: 147–9).

If you are made up of – and manifest physically – other people’s work, input, substance and knowledge, then you do not in fact own yourself or anything you produce as an individual. There is no project that is not already the project of other people as well, because they are part of you as a person. In fact, complex exchange systems that substitute persons for wealth show that there is nothing else to a person than their make-up in the work and thought of others. People, if you will, are the projects of other people. Knowledge in these places is similarly constituted. It does not come from any single creator, just as the person does not come from a single progenitor. Knowledge is part of what people are. The references here to land tenure are intended to throw into relief the assumptions of possessive individualism, particularly as Locke took land to be an archetypal case. The comparison shows that one can own knowledge, and land, and other people, without that ownership being property, or implying possessive individuals. The dreamer of a new song in Reite distinguishes himself and gains authority through connection, not through exclusive control over an object. His claim is to being an essential part of the place’s identity, viability and power.

When Siriman unveiled the spirit Indepen by cooking pigs and providing meat for the male cult of his affines and kin, he used all the power and authority available to him in order to draw spectators from as wide an area of the Rai Coast as possible. He did so because, to his great excitement, the spirit appearing through him on that vital and memorable night marked him out as the local representative of a new

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political order for the country as a whole, the order of an independent state. The spirit's value to him was not one of self-expression, much less of economic gain. It had nothing to do with him as a possessor, or as a creative individual. In fact, he was possessed by the spirit rather than the other way round. His position as the head of his particular place-based kin group was elevated to national significance due to his connections to Yali, the emergence of the nation that night, his ancestors and their power for generative agency, and those others who, coming to eat the pork he provided, would in future have a relationship, through him and his kin, to the nation as a whole. These connections were the basis of his claim, not what he set his claim against.

The unarticulated admonition contained in this chapter is that anthropologists should be very careful when they celebrate the creativity of 'other cultures', lest that celebration should perpetrate a kind of conceptual colonialism, portraying others as making and owning the same kinds of value, and as being the same kinds of person, as anthropologists themselves. Such a move feeds directly into efforts to make cultural productions across the globe part of an encompassing version of culture and ownership, one which sees value in objects, in static items transacted as commodities or protected as heritage. We need to be more imaginative. If Papua New Guinean statecraft were to take account of those modes of personhood articulated by Pocock and others, if it were to 'take man as he is, and the law as it might be' in the specific sense of different kinds of person, and different modes of ownership for the state to administer and guarantee, a different form of state itself might emerge. Indepen is particularly apposite to this argument, as indeed is the notion of an 'independent' understanding of what is creative. Just as in colonialism, the power of colonizers was employed to force native people's acceptance of an alien set of social institutions and norms, primarily through an alien conception of property rights, so neocolonialism asks emerging nations such as Papua New Guinea to behave as if their culture was the same kind of creative force that we imagine our own civilization to be. In such a transaction they are bound to lose out.

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## Notes

1. This leader's name was Yali Singina. See Lawrence (1964), J. Leach (2003), Errington and Gewertz (2004).
2. A Tok Pisin word that abbreviates the English language root, it was part of a phrase on everyone's minds that night: 'Independence for the new state of Papua New Guinea from Australia'.
3. This term is mine, not Locke's.
4. Hardin's original article spurred a huge literature on the ways in which commons *have* been managed successfully (see Ostrom et al. 1999).
5. For example, in November 2003 I spoke at a 'Research Strategy Seminar' organized by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, entitled *Intellectual Property Rights in the Arts and Humanities*. One of my co-panelists, Hector McQueen (Professor of Intellectual Property Law Edinburgh University), cited Hardin's article as unassailable evidence that creativity and cooperation do not occur without the promise of private reward (J. Leach 2004a).

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