Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):
Islands of History by Marshall Sahlins
Jonathan Friedman


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I. REVIEW ESSAYS


I. INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, anthropology has taken a turn toward history, just as history has become increasingly anthropological. The two disciplines have mutually influenced each other in a variety of ways. From the ethnographization of history that has gained much popularity in France, dividing time into mentalities, historical equivalents of anthropological cultures, to the world-system-oriented rewriting of the history of the ethnographic present, the proliferation of historical anthropologies must certainly be reckoned as one of the major developments in the social sciences during the last few years. Within this growing field, the work of Marshall Sahlins stands at the forefront. Sahlins's theoretical transmutations have, like Picasso's art, reflected the changing configurations in Western intellectual culture. From neo-evolutionism to social structuralism to cultural structuralism; from materialism to cultural determinism—these are the vectors of the age, from the modernist postwar progressivism of a future-oriented West to the fragmented postmodernism of a declining civilization in search of its cultural roots. Sahlins began his career as a materialist and an evolutionist. Today he has repudiated most of his earlier positions. From the late, and very Parisian 1960s when he discovered that social and political relations dominate production rather than the reverse, he has moved in Culture and Practical Reason to a position where culture does not merely mediate between material conditions and social practice, but is the "the very organization of material production." If Marx had once turned Hegel right side up or upside down—the direction is irrelevant—Sahlins has managed the trick on himself. Why this shift has occurred, and I do not think it can be seen as a simple theoretical development independent of the goings on of our shifting reality, cannot be discussed at present. Our purpose here is to discuss its content and not its context. Sahlins's current merging of cultural determinism and history within a broadly structuralist approach represents a very significant theoretical development. He has referred to

it as "structural historical anthropology," and he and Valerio Valeri, also a specialist in things Hawaiian, have done much to argue for such an approach.

II. STRUCTURAL HISTORY AND HISTORICAL STRUCTURALISM

_Islands of History_ is about the history of islands, about their cultures and the separate histories that they supposedly engender. The book contains a number of papers and articles, all of which have either appeared previously or have been presented publicly. It can, in general, be said that this work represents a refinement and development of Sahlins's other recent work _Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities_ (1981) and that it concentrates on more specific aspects of the themes in _Historical Metaphors_ as well as explicitly addressing itself to some of the major theoretical issues of that earlier work.

As I am to take issue with a number of positions assumed by Sahlins, I think it only fair and necessary to stress the overall importance of this book. In a period when interpretative and post-interpretative approaches appear to be supplanting anthropological theory, it is, to say the least, refreshing and important that Sahlins continues to develop a theoretical perspective on some of the most important fundamental problems in social anthropology. More than that, he has been largely responsible for lifting the historical and ethnographic materials of Oceania to new heights, making them susceptible to the great questions of anthropological discourse: the relation between historical process and cultural order, between social structure and cosmological models, between structure and practice, the nature and symbolic constitution of political power, the relation between exchange, power, and cannibalism. The essays of this book raise all the crucial issues and abound with thought-provoking insights.

Sahlins states his view and the major organizing theme of the book from the very first line.

History is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies, according to meaningful schemes of things. The converse is also true: cultural schemes are historically ordered, since to a greater or lesser extent the meanings are revalued as they are practically enacted. (vii)

This statement recapitulates the conclusion of _Historical Metaphors_ in which history is envisaged as a "reciprocal movement between the practice of structure and the structure of practice." Now while there are plenty of hedges and very significant references to the limits of the notion of culture (vii), Sahlins does not develop the idea. If culture is only an interpretative scheme rather than a program, the notion of real historical process posited by Sahlins becomes itself no

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more than a *post hoc* interpretation. I don't think that Sahlins could possibly entertain such a notion of culture and have written as he has done, but it is worth reminding ourselves that such an ephemeralization of social structure (perhaps its culturalization) is a hallmark of certain British structuralists who take categories and mental constructs as the essential realities. In other words, I shall be assuming for the duration of this discussion, at least, that culture is meant as code, program, system of semantic categories that are implemented in the actual performance of social life and are as such essentially generative while by implication interpretative, since the meaning that organizes the world is at once its significance.

III. THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

In many ways, *Islands of History* represents an attempt to work out the theoretical issues that have remained more or less implicit in previous historical structural work. It is, after all, no small effort to put history into the model of cultural determinism represented in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) where the world is divided into historical (hot) and structural (cold) cultures. If history is already a cultural mode, then it is necessarily subsumed by culture and cannot, of course, entertain a further, external relation to it. Sahlins is implicitly, at least, quite cognizant of the problem, that is, that there is some objective temporal order within which he situates his structures, one that contains the two worlds of Captain Cook and the Hawaiian King Kamehameha and which is the locus of historical performance. But, as I shall repeatedly attempt to show, the effort to put structures into history is continuously inverted by the need to absorb history into structure.

*A. Clearing the Air*

The introduction and the last chapter of *Islands of History* are concerted efforts to establish firmly a theoretical framework. The introduction begins with a broadside against world-system-influenced anthropology, which supposedly assumes that since traditional societies of the hinterland are often closely articulated with larger systemic process, they can possess no "autonomous cultural logic" (viii). His point, well taken, that "cultural change, externally induced yet indigenously orchestrated, has been going on for millennia" (viii), has not, as far as I know, been denied by more global-oriented anthropologists who have openly accentuated the active role played by historically specific projects in the integration of populations into the peripheries of world systems. It is also true that "so-called dominated people" did harness European wealth to the "reproduction and even the creative transformation of their own cultural order" (viii). It is perhaps the case that Captain Cook was assimilated to the god Lono.

But it is also the case that the Hawaiian aristocracy went into bankruptcy, whether or not they so conceived it, and that an entire population of perhaps three hundred thousand was decimated, not only by disease, but by the mysterious yet undeniable consequences of a collective death wish. It has been argued that
cultural changes within the global system can and must be analyzed in transformational terms. The emergence of witchcraft and cannibalism in many parts of the colonized world in the nineteenth century, the transformation of a great many powerful African kingships into divine kingships of the castrated variety, the development of American Indian confederacies, the emergence of restricted exchange in areas previously characterized by generalized exchange, and so on, have all been the focus of a global anthropology. But the epithets “so-called dominated” and “creative transformation” seem astonishingly misplaced when one considers to just what end such articulations have invariably led. The collapse of the kapu system and the disintegration of Hawaiian culture are “creative transformations” resulting from the harnessing of European wealth to the reproduction of Hawaiian society.

The global position is simply that the ethnographic present is largely the historical product of the interaction of local and global processes, one which in phases of the expansion of hegemonic centers results in the integrative transformation of hinterland societies. Whether this takes the form of externally propelled if internally structured transformation, or of direct externally dominated reorganization, it ought to be quite evident that the hinterland is caught in the grips of a process that is largely beyond its control, and which, with all due respect to cultural variation, harbors a certain sinister finality. This, in turn, implies that there are properties of reality that are not included in the cultural scheme of things, not even in the structure of practice, but in the results and conditions of practice. A great deal of my argument centers on the stubborn failure to take such structures into account.

B. Cultural Dialectics

After expelling the nemesis of the world system, Sahlins is able to concentrate on the main dialectic, one that is quite neutral with respect to such systems, since “history is made the same general way within a given society as it is between societies” (ix). This is the dialectic we have already heard about in *Historical Metaphors*, but greatly elaborated. The issue is the incongruity in interaction between the cultural order “as constituted in society and as lived by the people” (ix), between convention and action, between denotation and connotation. The reason for the lack of fit is that practice, the lived, has its own logic independent


7. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*. 
of the cultural order which is imposed upon it. Using the Saussurian metaphor, Sahlins argues that the issue can be conceptualized as a conflict between sense and reference, between the sign defined in relation to other signs and in its reference to a reality that contains more properties than those which are salient in the sign system itself. The world of reference is the world of context, of changing material and social realities, and of a specific distribution of categories of people in an organization of power. This world of practical interest is the source of the "revaluation of signs," the transformation of culture. But we are never told explicitly what it is that structures "interests," and what it is that structures power and other social relations. If culture organizes practice, then it must also presumably organize all the rest. This principle fatally penetrates that apparently practical sphere, the performative.

C. Performance and Prescription

Some structures are prescriptive, others performative. The former, mechanical models, assimilate events to structure. As opposed to such models, performative structures adapt themselves to events, using the vicissitudes of the life stream as ever new markers and distinctions in a "structure" whose only "stability is a volatile history of the changing fortunes of persons and groups" (xii). Is this a restatement of the structuralist distinction between "hot" and "cold," or is there, perhaps, something of the "lukewarm" about performative structures? We are never enlightened on this matter, but it may be assumed from Sahlins's application of the concept—to Polynesians, who have as much of an anthropological reputation as African kingdoms for evolutionary in-betweenness—that lukewarm, heroic history is the intended meaning. As we shall see, these performative structures are themselves deducible from the cultural program, albeit one different in its functioning from the usual cold, or here, "prescriptive" (x) structures of the literature. We are presented, in any case, with the bold opposition of two major types of social action—"If friends make gifts, gifts make friends" (xi). At one level, at least, the difference "parallels the Lévi-Straussian contrast of mechanical and statistical models" (xi).

The problem centers on the relations between social forms and appropriate acts. I raise the possibility, which seems rarely considered, that such relations are reversible: that customary kinds of acts can precipitate social forms as well as vice versa. (xi)

But this is a reversibility that is itself "structurally motivated" (xi), and the end results would appear to be very similar, at least in the end, since in the case of performance, the emergence of structure is itself predetermined by the category structure into which it must necessarily be inscribed. Performatives, after all, are only effective because of a predisposition already present for or in the actors. What are we to make of this distinction? If performative structures are structured in the same way as prescriptive structures, then they are simply another kind of cultural recipe, programmed for change rather than stereotypic reproduction. If "social system is thus constructed out of passion, structure out
of sentiment” (29), this is simply because there is already a system in the passion and a structure in the sentiment.

D. Mythopraxis and Habitus

In similar fashion, the division between societies based on mythopraxis and those based on “habitus” is reduced to different forms of the expression of structure. “The issue is not the absence of structure, but its inscription in habitus as opposed to its objectification as mythopoetics” (53).

There is a common structure in these oppositions: structure versus practice, prescription versus performance, mythopractice versus habitus. It is the structure outlined in Culture and Practical Reason that opposes culture and practice and that insists that culture is everywhere determinant. These essays represent an application of cultural determinism to historical processes, an attempt to translate all forms of historical movement into an expression of culture as a “model for” the production of reality. There is, in other words, nothing that is not culturally generated!

Sahlins’s view seems to be that first, practice consists in the implementation of received cultural categories in empirical contexts whose properties are not deducible from the received categories and that therefore may channel both practice and the results of practice in novel directions that contradict the categories. Second, culture may be implemented by prescription, that is, by the direct application of rules, or by performance, whereby cultural categories are embedded in individual motives and desires. Third, culture may be implemented via the enactment of myth or via the inscription of structure in habitus.

Performance is not equivalent to habitus, in spite of its superficial similarity, since Hawaii itself offers the principal example of a mythopoetical performative culture. But a paradox immediately emerges here. For if Hawaiian practice is the willed recapitulation of the cosmogony, what is the means by which this is carried out in a nonprescriptive mode? If the ancient Hawaiians engaged in a mythopractice that did not explicitly involve the reproduction of a cosmological model, then they can only have carried it out by means of more specific individual interests, competition, and warfare, that externally reproduced the cosmological model, that is, implicitly. But this would necessarily involve something on the order of habitus, which, in turn, implies that mythopraxis can be equivalent to its opposite. The confusion comes about because of the totalitarian nature of cultural determinism. It stands to reason, after all, that if everything is generated by a cultural code, prescription and performance, mythopractice and habitus, are merely different ways of realizing the same culture in practice. In the old paradigm of “culture of” and “culture for,” Sahlins would appear to opt for the latter, and in such a big way that “culture of” is no more than a reflex of “culture for.” There is, thus, a contradiction between a realization of the lack of fit between empirical historical process and abstracted cultural schemes, and the necessity of subsuming the former by the latter.

Even if the most volatile of histories can be reduced to a cultural program,
there remains an exterior realm where culture is practiced in conditions that are not of its own choosing. Sahlins calls this the "structure of the conjuncture": "the practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of historic agents, including the microsociology of their interaction" (xiv). This is the realm in which the cultural categories are subject to symbolic risk and revaluation. But this place where culture is played out, which has "reasons and forces of its own, apart from any given symbolic scheme" (xiv), is apparently not worthy of investigation or perhaps it is simply impossible to approach. What are such "reasons" and "interests" and to what do they owe their origin? In the present work, in any case, they do not merit the status of structure, but simply event: that which is exterior to culture. On the other hand, the closer we get to the event, the more cultural it becomes. That which gives the world form is culture. All the rest appears ephemeral, except insofar as it is imprinted by culture. Sahlins's dialectic movement between the practice of structure and the structure of practice is, in spite of claims to the contrary, always presentable as a dialectical movement between cultures, that is, as culture contact. The only other conceivable externality upon which to practice culture is nature itself, in its pure materiality. While Sahlins does not indulge in such conjunctures, it is worth recalling the similarity between this general framework and some earlier versions of structuralist Marxism that employed the notion of a dialectic between social form and material and/or social conditions of existence, a model of transformation via the process of social reproduction.

As the cultural dialectic is the core of Sahlins's approach, informing virtually all of the essays in this volume, we shall return to it several times in more concrete circumstances, saving a fuller discussion for the conclusion.

IV. CULTURAL ISLANDS IN A SEA OF HISTORY

Sahlins's power has always resided in his capacity to discover structure where no one suspected it. The essays in this book reveal a profundity of insight that is afforded by a truly structuralist approach. Sahlins is one of the few who has mastered the method and brought us to new worlds of understanding. The Pacific, in any case, will never be the same. If it is possible to differ on points of theory and analysis, this is thanks to the splendid clarity achieved in these texts. Much of the argument that follows will revolve around my conviction that structuralism cannot be extended to the realm of history any more than it can be imprisoned

8. Sahlins envisages his dialectic as an absolutely general model of the relation between culture and context: "As a description of the social deployment — and functional revaluation — of meanings in action, it need not be restricted to circumstances of intercultural contact" (xiv).

9. In a recent, and as yet unpublished, manuscript ("Fiji: A Tale of Three Kingdoms." Paper for symposium, "Symbolism through Time." Werner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. Fez, Morocco, 12–21 January 1986), Sahlins has indeed attempted to reveal an indigenous historical dialectic in Fiji, where the context of warfare among three kingdoms is responsible for cultural variations on a common "deep structure." The manuscript is not clear, however, in its present state, on how structure and practice relate to one another in this analysis.
within the realm of culture. Lévi-Strauss’s stringent limitations on the applicability of the concept of structure imply that the field of social reality contains structures but is not reducible to them. The “order of orders” is not a structuralist kind of structure, nor is history, even if structuralist kinds of phenomena occur within historical processes. Sahlins’s strength lies in his discovery of structures, his weakness in their combined overextension and cultural reductionism.

V. LE SEXY SAUVAGE OU LE MONDE À L’ENVERS

Chapter one, “Supplement to the Voyage of Cook; or, le calcul sauvage” is about sex in ancient Hawaii. We are introduced here to the formidable corpus of Hawaiian love poetry, and to the numerous amorous incidents that brought British seamen and Hawaiian women into a relationship pregnant with the overthrow of the ancient order. Numerous phenomena are to be accounted for: the clear attraction of Hawaiian women to Captain Cook’s men, the seeming importance of sexual relations in Hawaiian cosmology, the relation between male sexual prowess and political power. The unified hypothesis that is meant to connect all of this is that “the structure of the kingdom is the sublimated form of its forces of sexual attraction.” Sexuality is not mere superstructure, then, for “this is a political economy of love. Love is the infrastructure” (19).

What is meant by all of this? To begin with, the Hawaiian cosmogony is composed of a lengthy series of celestial unions, principal among which is that between sky, Wakea, and earth, Papa. The universe is truly united in a great genealogical network linking the original “darkness” with inorganic, organic, and human nature by means of a metaphor of sexual reproduction. Now there is nothing particularly unusual about this kind of representation of the cosmos. But there is more to it, for many of the stories tell not merely of genealogy and reproduction as such, but of the exploits of beautiful heroes, often younger brothers and sons, even bastards, who by their superior personal qualities steal both kingdoms and women of rank from their elder rightful heirs.

It is no secret that fertility, wealth, and prosperity—the principal symbolic constituents of chiefly power—are universal phenomena in so-called theocratic chiefdoms and states, “asiatic” states, and even more recently “discovered” “theater states.” The “fertility principle” so to speak is a property of stability, the legitimate authority of the priest-chief. But here that fertility is instead linked to physical prowess and political cunning, to beauty and a kind of Nietzschean aesthetic of power. But then ancient Hawaii is no peaceful theocracy, no Friendly Island. Political practice consists here in a cycle of conquest and consolidation followed by new wars of succession and conquest. The main theme is usurpation, the domination of the forces of war over those of fertility. The social structure is characterized by continual manipulation of marital alliances, “incest and exogamy, hypergamy and hypogamy” (22) in the great play for political and military advantage, and which is generative of an unstable web of cognatic kinship.

10. I borrow this term from Clifford Geertz.
In all the turmoil there is no sign of anything like a corporate kin group. Commoner families are organized into political-territorial units defined by their dependency upon a rather temporary hierarchy of chiefs. It stands to reason that in this sort of a situation, marital alliances are essential acts, not only of political consolidation, but of political survival. Marrying up is the solution for those of low rank; “finding a lord” procreates offspring of higher rank. It might be disputed that “marriage” is the wrong word here, but the social recognition of the rank and connections of the children is all that is necessary. More important is the “heroic” strategy whereby powerful youth overthrow their political seniors and both consolidate and legitimate their newly won positions by means of marriage to sacred women of senior lineages. “We can see why Hawaiians are so interested in sex. Sex was everything; rank, power, land, and the security of all these” (26).

And of course, this applies as well to relations to Europeans, especially when they arrive in impressive ships with powerful weapons. Hypergamy again is a way of capturing the power inherent in higher rank, a way of transferring mana, but also its obvious manifestations in the form of wealth and military support.

There is nothing particularly astonishing about this kind of phenomenon, even if, according to some very unsystematic observations by members of Captain Cook’s crew, it was more intense and less mercenary than in other parts of Oceania.11

What are we to make of a discussion that places sexuality at the pivot of a social strategy, but then proceeds to demonstrate that this is because of the particular configuration linking the meaning of sex and fertility to the constitution of political power? Is it to provide another case study in performative structure that is “able to reproduce a received cultural order through the free pursuit of happiness . . . by the contingencies of sexual attraction” (29)? We are presented with a large number of cases and texts in which sexual relations figure importantly, as symbols and as strategies. All of these, when analyzed by Sahlins, can be resolved into statements about the relation between fertility and power. They display the importance of biologically reproductive strategies in the accumulation of status, and the symbolic significance of the combined heroic qualities of beauty and prowess in a very competitive aristocracy. Ultimately we might expect to read something about the social foundations of these phenomena. But not so! Instead we are led in the opposite direction—toward a revival of Benedict’s cultural patterns. “As a ‘pattern of culture’ it seems worthy of comparison with the militarism of Sioux Indians or the quietism of the Hopi—dare one place an ‘Aphrodisian’ alongside the famous ‘Dionysian’ and ‘Apollonian’?” (9).

One may rightly wonder whether or not the author has been seduced by the current Geertzian fad of peddling otherness as objet d’art. But, of course, culturalism can easily fall prey to the “merchants of astonishment” syndrome that has become so popular in American anthropology.12 Whatever the case, and

Sahlins, certainly, cannot be accused of the same flashy kind of narcissism that crowds all the insight out of Geertz, there is a clear pattern here. So as not to assure ourselves that this is a special case, Sahlins provides us with a consistent picture of what the performance of culturalism does to reality. After his Aphrodisian suggestions he immediately continues, "Beyond that, the Hawaiian order is appropriately placed in that whole family of cultures, including our own, which prefer to sediment structural relations out of pragmatic actions, rather than determining the actions \textit{a priori} from the relations" (9).

What I find disappointing in all of this is that the brilliant insights into the workings of Hawaiian social life seem to be cast out, or rather recast in a cultural mold that simply reifies the original descriptions instead of getting to the heart of the matter. Rather than building on the relations between fertility, beauty, sexuality, and power that he discovers, he glosses them all into a presumed cultural paradigm ordered by sex. But we know, and he certainly knows, that sex is not infrastructure any more than warfare and tribute taking are superstructure. And what are we to make of the crucial insight that whereas "many Oceanic societies thus employ the aesthetic at the boundaries of the moral . . . beyond the control of kinship. . . . In Hawaii, beauty is placed as it were at the center of society, as a main principle of its organization" (17)? From the point of view of culture it is merely a question of difference, of alternative ways of doing things. But from a truly structuralist perspective, there is an intricate nexus of determination to be grasped, a logic of transformation that might account for difference. Could it not be that a social process that constantly disturbs the stability of kinship, political and exchange structures in an anarchic struggle for a power defined by peaceful growth and god-given fertility, is likely to produce a symbolism of heroic potency, and that this situation is not just a cultural model but something that happened historically in Polynesia as elsewhere?

VI. THE MYTH OF MYTHOPRAXIS

Both chapter 4, "Captain Cook, or the Dying God," and chapter 2 deal with questions of mythopraxis. The former is a recapitulation and deepening of \textit{Historical Metaphors} which tries more explicitly to link the confrontation between Cook and Hawaii to the structure of myth, by laying bare the correlation between specific historical events and analogous mythical episodes. But chapter 2, "Other Times, Other Customs: The Anthropology of History" (previously published as the Distinguished Lecture of the American Anthropological Association [1983]), is more explicitly central to the present collection. It establishes the culturalist theory of history. He begins by inviting us to consider the debate between so-called elitist versus popular history, and suggesting that the movement from the former to the latter is itself historical. "We should recall that the passage from an elite to a more collective consciousness actually occurred in the history of Western society, as a difference in real-historical practice" (33).

We might ask here, as we shall continue to ask, what is the nature of this change in historical consciousness? Is it also the product of a specific Western culture?
And if such is the case, what then of the discourse that we produce about such history and other histories? While Sahlins’s own discourse is resolutely objectivist, assuming that these other histories can be understood from the outside, so to speak, it is not at all clear just where this outside is located, since at the same time it is claimed that there is no place that is not inside some culture or other. In other words, in writing about other histories as produced by other cultures in a world that is made up of nothing but culture, our own discourse about them can be nothing other than an expression of our own culture. This solipsism generated by culturalism forces us to consider the possibility that our notions of their heroic history are part of our own culture but not of theirs.

Heroic history is the characteristic practice of a certain kind of society, hierarchical in form and inhabited by the divine, so that the action of the chief or king is simultaneously the history of the society and the recapitulation of the cosmogony. “The chief’s marriages are intertribal alliances; his ceremonial exchanges trade” (35). Thus the history of the introduction of Christianity is the story of the conversion of paramounts, followed by their subjects. The story of their wars is that of the conflicts of their chiefs. And the conversion of one chief of Mbau is the history of a total social fact in which Christianity meant success in war. The logic, of course, is common to a great many societies organized on theocratic lines. If wealth and fertility and power are divine functions, whoever possesses the former most certainly possesses the latter. Any god who can produce a better cannon is surely a more divine being. Similarly, the death of the king is a cosmic crisis that can easily cause successful armies to disband. History here is genealogy rather than chronology and the microhistory of the individual or the local group takes its temporal reference from the deeds of the sovereign. Finally the entire concrete history of a particular time period is always the expression of an ultimate cosmological drama.

A. Heroic History

From the cosmogony, through the chiefly genealogies, heroic history offers an already constituted field for the interpretation of social practice. The question is whether it is the source of social practice as well. There is a certain ambivalence here. From Sahlins’s earlier work on Hawaii13 it would appear that the Hawaiian confrontation with Captain Cook and his crew consisted in incorporating them into their cultural categories and then proceeding to treat them as participants in a scenario pre-inscribed in the Hawaiian cosmogony. Everything would have worked perfectly if the English had not had their own script. Similarly, “For Maori, ontogeny recapitulates cosmogony” (59).

Here we are introduced to the story of Hono Heke, the Maori warrior whose rebellion against British colonization took its scenario from an origin myth. The myth tells the story of Tane, younger brother of the gods, who by “an act likened to parricide” (60) separated Sky Father from Earth Mother, and propped up the sky with four poles, thus making it possible for his human descendants to take

13. Sahlins, Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities.
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possession of the Earth, descendants who themselves are the progeny of Tane's intercourse with his Mother Earth. This myth is explicitly connected to all acts of conquest, and the occupation of territory by the setting up of an enclosure containing one or more poles symbolizing claims to tribal lands. Thus, when the British colonists set up the flag, or more specifically, the flag pole, at their settlement, they could be understood as new conquerors from overseas, just as were the Maori themselves in a previous epoch. Now this was, of course, the case, and the ensuing battle of the flagpole is not nearly as exotic as it might appear in the text. The cultural clincher in the discussion occurs in a specific battle where a group of Maori attack the British settlement as a decoy enabling Hono Heke and a small band to mount the hill above the settlement to once more cut down the mythical flagpole.

What is implied here is that for the Maori, the flagpole is identical with their own poles, and thus signified that "their country had gone from them" (62). The English, of course, very obligingly set up a new flagpole every time one was cut down. Whether their action is to be conceived similarly as a case of mythopraxis or as something more mundane is not clear from the facts of the case. And if the English had seen through the Maori cultural scheme, and forgot about the flag altogether, would this have made their colonization unproblematic? It is true, of course, that the English flag is not part of an elaborate cosmology linking the origin of the world with current politics, but the symbolic raising of the colors, as a claim on territory, a claim to sovereignty, was quite sufficient for Maori mythical consumption. In this respect it might be argued that the Maori rebels must also have been acting symbolically with respect to the Union Jack. For the myth of chiefly conquest of the original people of the land also connects the setting up of the fenced altar, tuahu, containing the upright poles embodying the mana of the land. In light of the relation demonstrated by Sahlins between the poles and the act of occupation, it does not seem possible that the flagpole was the only thing that Hono Heke cared about.

B. Questions of Method

If we take mythopraxis to mean the actualization of the cosmology in human life, so that "social structure is the humanized form of cosmic order" (58), a relation between the script and the performance, then I think it is safe to say that the concept is identical to simple cultural determinism. It is Durkheim inverted, for whom cosmic order was the sacred expression of social structure. In either case there is a serious reductionism, one that empties the dependent term of the equation of all properties. The problem can be stated simply: Are there any societies whose members act out their origin myths? It is commonly assumed that ritual action is an organization of action by means of a mythical scheme. But there is more to social life than ritual. Mythopraxis would appear to be ritual writ large, as the entirety of social activity. In other words, mythopoetical societies are literally texts in action. In this they can be and are opposed to a cultural order characterized by habitus, a term used by Bourdieu to highlight the structured nature of social practice, not merely in so-called individualist societies, but
in any social formation.\textsuperscript{14} The concept represents an attempt to transcend rule reductionist models of human action that pervade both functionalist and structuralist literature. Even if it might be argued that the concept of \textit{habitus} fails to overcome the structuralist impasse, insofar as it reinstates structure as a principle that generates action, Bourdieu does make it quite clear that social practice, which is always an \textit{individual} practice, does not consist in the \textit{application} of rules or cultural schemes, but in the "intentionless invention of regulated improvisation"\textsuperscript{15} in a social field that provides the conditions of existence of a given structure of practice over time. Sahlins, however, not content with the \textit{absolutely generalist} argument made by Bourdieu, remolds it to fit into his culturalist scheme. In a series of interpretative remarks \textit{habitus} is presented as culture as "lived."

Their lives are run on an unconscious mastery of the system, something like Everyman's control of the grammatical categories, together with the homespun concepts of the good that allow them to improvise daily activities on the level of the pragmatic and matter-of-fact. (51)

The association of \textit{habitus} with what can only be interpreted as linguistic competence is not, I think, what Bourdieu has in mind, especially in light of his critique of modern linguistics as an archetype of rule reductionism.\textsuperscript{16} After all, the notion of an "unconscious mastery of the system" is not significantly different from the cognitivist reduction of culture to grammar. In Sahlins's interpretation, mythopraxis and \textit{habitus} are merely two expressions of the same cultural determinism.

Here is a main distinction of structures, crosscutting the others to which I alluded: between those that are practiced primarily through the individual subconscious and those that explicitly organize historical action as the projection of mythical relations.

Culture can either be "inscribed" directly in unconscious motivations, or objectified in an explicit system of rules. For Bourdieu, of course, culture is not \textit{inscribed}, but representational schemes are produced and reproduced on the basis of the emergent social forms that crystallize for longer or shorter periods into structures of \textit{habitus}. And the emergence of structures is beyond culture as such. Bourdieu might even be criticized for the opposite of cultural determinism, since he conceives of a realm of pure practice, in which culture is merely an instrument, a symbolic capital in a struggle for power.

Now if Bourdieu can be made to stand on his head with such ease, what then of the Maori, the Fijians, the Hawaiians? Let me make a few suggestions here. Mythopraxis is best conceived not as a generative scheme, but as an interpretative or definition space within which practice finds its meaning. Social practice is organized around currently meaningful situations and strategies, all of which

\textsuperscript{15} Bourdieu, \textit{Le sens pratique}, 79.
\textsuperscript{16} Bourdieu, \textit{Ce que parler veut dire} (Paris, 1983).
are defined in terms of a context of contemporary social relations. The fact that a usurper of the throne can find a mythical significance to his activities in an origin myth does not detract from the fact that the immediate content of his strategy and the definition of the social situation in which he finds himself may be quite unlike that described or supposed by the myth. Even if the situation is comparable, this could very well signify that the repetition of the cosmogony is rooted in a continuity in social structure rather than in the attempt to carry out an identical program. In a system where the categories of social relation are identical with those of the cosmology, social praxis always finds its immediate meaning in the cosmic order, which does not necessarily imply that the latter determines the former. Mythopraxis is, thus, a modern myth, a product of a culturalist bias that assumes by definition that the categories of social practice are an imprint, an inscription of a system of representations. In the example of Hono Heke, we might suggest the following internal logic:

1. For the Maori, the British flagpole is a sign of a claim to territory.
2. The Maori have nothing against British settlement as such, since it brings prestige-goods, weapons that are highly valued by those who are able to obtain them in their own social relations.
3. Hono Heke rebels against the claim to sovereignty by the British but not to their presence. Hence, his focus on the flagpole itself rather than on the British presence in general.
4. The Maori rebel interpretation is supported by the reaction of the colonists who stubbornly resurrect the pole each time it is cut down, thus demonstrating their claims to more than the right merely to be present.

Now all of this can be referred back to an original myth which supplies a larger cosmological rationale for the Maori struggle, but which is not its cause. The fact that the rationale is constantly invoked by the Maori says more about the congruence between their practice and the myth than about the ultimate cause of their behavior.

The same kind of argument might be made for the death of Captain Cook. Was the broken mast of his ship and the return to his hosts a mythical threat to the Hawaiians, in the sense that the god Lono had decided to reconquer Hawaii, or did he mess up an entire ritual protocol upon which the chiefs depended? We can never know what the motives of the Hawaiians were at this point since there is no direct report. What we do know is that Cook’s crew was asked to leave so that the Makahiki ritual could be closed and that their return was not relished. But we also know that Cook’s usual procedure of kidnap-the-chief-when-the-going-gets-rough was the immediate cause of his death. In other words, there is reason enough on the Western side to account for Cook’s death without having recourse to the inevitability of a mythical scenario, even if the latter provided the explicit and immediately given interpretation of the outcome.

Our claim, then, is that mythopraxis is itself a myth, one that results from the conflation of an interpretative scheme with a plan of action, of historical text with historical action. The only way that mythopraxis can be saved is by
demonstrating that it is somehow equivalent to a social movement, a project that has become the core of a group's identity, organizing its historical action in terms of an explicit model aimed at the transformation of reality, a ritual become historical. Now while there might certainly be some truth to this, there is little in the historical material that would indicate that it is the case, and Sahlins has not seen fit to take up the problem in such terms.

VII. STRUCTURALISM AND SOVEREIGNTY

"The Stranger King; or, Dumézil among the Fijians" is a broadly comparative essay on the nature of chiefly and royal power. Its argument is a development of some of the relatively unknown theses that have emerged in the work of Luc de Heusch during the last two decades, on the nature of the appearance of state power in kinship based society. While there is certainly a tradition here, stretching back to Hocart and Frazer and including the seminal work of Dumézil on the symbolism of kingship among the Indo-Europeans, de Heusch is the first to attempt a structuralist synthesis of the relations linking kinship organization, the definition of incest, and the symbolism of power.

Sahlins invokes, as does de Heusch, the political philosophy of the late Pierre Clastres, to the effect that the state is a foreign body that had to be imposed upon society. The origin of power is seen as an act of violence and of the transgression of the rules of the kinship order. For Clastres this is a problem of world historical proportions, one that is not bound to culturally specific symbolic configurations. And Sahlins, in spite of his theoretical cultural relativism, adheres, in this case, to a classic structuralist universalism.

He is not so concerned with Clastres's "controversial thesis of populist resentment" (76), as with the structure of state power that it identifies:

The political dimensions of the structure in question, the ideology of external domina-

17. F. Alberoni, Movement and Institution (New York, 1984).
18. Luc de Heusch, Essais sur le symbolisme de l'inceste royal en Afrique (Brussels, 1958); Le pouvoir et le sacré. Annales du Centre D'Etudes des Religions 1 (Brussels, 1962); Le roi ivre ou l'origine de l'état (Paris, 1972); Rois nés d'un coeur de vache (Paris, 1982).
20. A word about Clastres is in order before proceeding. A common interpretation and critique of his work is based on a serious misrepresentation of his concept of power. Society against the State (1977) is not about primitive society's premonitions concerning the eventualities of state power and an attempt to prevent social evolution. His approach is very much more structural than that. Primitive societies, at least those of South America, upon which he bases the entirety of his discussion, are said to practice a kind of anti-power that takes the form of socially castrated chiefs who, while occupying the locus of social power, are in their practical relation to society a negation of that power. The chief is thus reduced to a symbol to be manipulated by society, a practical negation of that which he represents. The power negated in such societies is not something belonging to an imagined future, but a continuous presence, an immanent danger that requires a never ending struggle. Marcel Gauchet has developed Clastres's ideas even further in an important essay where he suggests that the very self-representation of society as society implies a symbolic structure of power as external force, a Nature upon which society is dependent, that is the basis for both the practice of anti-power and the potential form of the state (Gauchet, "La dette du sens et les racines de l'état," Libre 2 [1977], 5–43).
tion and social usurpation, are well known to anthropological studies of archaic states and proto-states. The famous works of Sir James Frazer and A. M. Hocart on divine kingship document a worldwide distribution of the same basic scheme of power, from the Fiji Islands and the Americas through India and the classical world. (77)

This essay carries on the discussion embarked upon by de Heusch, Adler, and other "neo-Frazerians." The latter opposed the supposed ethnocentrism and functionalism of the political conflict school represented by Evans-Pritchard, whom they have criticized for reducing divine kingship to a mere ideological expression of power politics in lineage society. Divine kingship is seen here as a symbolic structure of power that can be understood entirely in terms of its internal properties. The king is a stranger who comes from another country, from overseas. He is a warrior whose function it is to usurp the kingship from its legitimate heirs, the autochthons, "original people of the land." He is a transgressor of sacred tabus, associated with both incest and cannibalism. He represents politics, violence, war, and destruction as opposed to peace, the sacred, and fertility. He is as male as to female. The relation between the king and the indigenous people takes the form of an alliance between the foreign man and a daughter of the ranking elder lineage of the people. A certain dualism inheres in this relation, one that opposes political chief to religious chief, younger to elder, wife-taker to wife-giver, mother's brother to sister's son.

Traces of this scheme of things can be found throughout the history and ethnography of the world, from the myth of the founding of Rome or the dualism of Mitra-Varuna to the royal rituals of Central and South Africa. These traces, are, of course, embedded in different contexts, some of which would significantly alter the commonalities of the universal scheme that Sahlins underlines. Dumézil himself located the dualism of sovereignty within the famous tripartite scheme that he thought was peculiarly Indo-European. While it is certainly true that the mythology of the Indo-Europeans contains a great deal of the kind of dualism that is common to both Fiji and Central Africa, the social distributions of political authority are quite different insofar as in the latter two cases, a dualism of male/female, fertility/warfare, autochthons (land people)/invaders (sea people), wife-givers/wife-takers provides the global symbolic structure of a polity that is divided into three in Dumézil's scheme.

Sahlins's insightful discussion of the diarchic myths of the foundation of Greek and Roman kingdoms raises important questions since these myths display such strong resemblances to their Oceanic and African counterparts. The various myths of the foundation of Rome recount the often violent establishment of dual sovereignty between invading warriors and local agricultural people (for example, the Latins) cemented by the gift of women from the latter to the former. Similarly, it might be argued that the Indian pair Mitra-Varuna, representing the same kind of division of power between violence and peace, politics and ritual, ex-

presses a comparable dualist definition of the state. But such myths are not incorporated into the social organizations of India and Rome in the same way as they are in Fiji. They might indeed refer to an earlier social structure, and Dumézil himself suggests a former "couple raj-brahman." But in the historic material, Mitra-Varuna form a unity and are both associated with the priestly class, in opposition to the kings, whose authority is secular and whose god, Indra, while replicating many of the warlike traits of Varuna, is of absolutely inferior status. While one might wish to argue that an original Indo-European social and cultural system similar to those of Polynesia, Africa, and perhaps the rest of the world may someday come to light, it is quite clear that the Indo-European universe from which Dumézil gathers his data, while containing elements comparable to the Fijian case, is as different as is dualist from tripartist cosmology and divine kingship from brahmanical rule.

The analysis of Fijian kingship is developed from the major works of Hocart. The archetypal Eastern Fijian chief or king is supposed to be a fair-skinned stranger who arrives on a shark and is taken in by a local chief whose daughter he marries, engendering in this way the future line of paramounts. In the report of a chiefly installation, the successor arrives by sea and is led along the path of bark cloth, the "path of the god" (85). He is symbolically put to death by his hosts by means of kava. The "sea chief" is thus captured by the indigenous people of the land and converted into a paramount via his submission. The paramount represents the foreign patriline, wife-taker to the people, and, consequently, their sister's son as well. "The line of conquering chiefs becomes the sister's sons of the conquered people" (87). Thus the duality and the ambiguity of chiefly identity, descendent in the patriline of the invader warriors, and descendent in the matriline of the fertility gods of the land, lays the ground for the transformation that characterizes the Fijian variations on sacred kingship. Sahlins posits two transformations that define a final base structure of sovereignty. The first inverts the initial relation between warrior and priest: In the ritual of installation, the chief, "brought from the periphery of society to the center" is now "marked off by sacred tabus... where he 'just sits,'" while "the ancient inhabitants become his war dogs" (87). The domestication of the warrior provokes the inversion of the original structure.

While it is easy to get the impression from Sahlins's discussion that there is

23. Ibid., 77.
24. Sahlins does, in fact, argue that there is a third term in the Fijian structure, generated by "the conjunction of chief and people, sea and land" (99) which parallels the Indo-European scheme detailed by Dumézil. But, as we shall argue, this "tripartite pyramidal scheme" (99) is an extension of dualism and is everywhere resolved into a dual structure.
26. Hocart, "Chieftainship and the Sister's Son."
only one chief, embodying two opposing principles, it is quite clear from Hocart that diarchy is prevalent in the Lau Islands, and while the Northern States display triadic forms, these are all reducible to transformations of dual power that he links to the dislocations of nineteenth-century warfare. The basic model is one in which there are two ruling lines, chiefs of the land and chiefs of the sea at every segmentary level, that maintain several different variants of alliance and succession, all of which are compromises between elementary structures of kinship and a shifting balance of power. There are also notable variations in the symbolic configurations of the chiefship, from a simple ritual/political dualism to complex divisions of functions and inversions of signs.

But Sahlins, in his Hegelian fascination with the number three, pursues his dialectic of duality through a final permutation in his attempt to show that “The logic of the whole lies in the generative development of the categories, by which alone may be motivated all static and partial expressions of it” (103).

The conjunction of sea and land, chief and people, produces a synthesis, “the sovereign power.” “The fully constituted global structure is a tripartite pyramidal scheme, composed of the same three functions Dumézil determines for Indo-European civilizations, if not exactly in the same arrangement” (99).

In this final fusion, the chief comes to represent both male and female and all the other opposed principles of the diarchy. His immobilization introduces the necessity for a third part, a new “sea people” who can carry out the function of warfare that the chief has relinquished. But what and where is this necessity? Have we not just been informed that the land people have become the sacred chief’s “war dogs”? While it is true that an opposition between people of the land and the nobility is a common representation, there are invariably chiefs of both land and sea. And unless the data are severely misleading, single paramounts would appear to be singularly rare occurrences, molten products of the heat of war. Now the heat of war is certainly a feature of mid-nineteenth-century Fiji, but it too is reduced to a cultural force in Sahlins’s discussion.

A. Cannibalism as Will and Idea

The origin of the chief, we recall, was the warrior, who in this case turns out to be more violent than at first assumed. For he is a man-eater! Whether this is an extended metaphor on the definition of power as eating or something very much more specific is not as important as the fact that in the period formative of our image of traditional society, cannibalism was rife, a principal constituent of Fijian warfare. Most interesting here is the way in which cannibal victims figure in the exchange relations among chief and people. If the triadic structure suggested by Sahlins consists of a flow of wives from land people to chief to sea people, there is, apparently, a distinct flow of cannibal victims in the opposite direction. Now there is a significant and, as far as I know, little investigated relation between the symbolic constitution of exchange and tribute, sacrifice and cannibalism, such that cannibal victims are prestige-goods of last resort, often figuring in origin myths of exchange and tribute. But the chain of symbolic sub-
stitutes does not account, except purely intellectually, for the actual practice of systematic cannibalism.27

Sahlins posits this tripartite cannibalistic structure as the ultimate Fijian model, a deep structure.28 But is this not an exaggeration of culture? In the ordinary dualistic representation of Fijian chiefdoms, the “face of the land” is opposed the “edge of the land,” as inner is to outer, land to sea, chief to sau (second chief). The dual relation is that which is dominant, no matter how many titles there are. Hocart is quite explicit about the fact that Northern Fiji is characterized by a dualism overlaid by a triadic structure, but one which is brought about by dichotomization rather than by a Dumézilian trichotomization of functions. The dual division between the immobile chief and the active warrior, between peace and war, fertility and destruction is reproduced on all segmentary levels—thus the equivalence of the oppositions, divine king (sea)/war king (land), people of the land (peace)/people of the sea (war). The triad, divine king (sea)/warrior king (land)/people of the land, is of course, simply a double dichotomy, as Sahlins has himself remarked;29 in spite of the ambivalent relation between sacred chiefs and war chiefs, the opposition sea/land is continuously replicated in the polarities of political and ritual power and nobility and people.30 This is equally true of Sahlins’s example of sea chief/land chief/sea warriors, where the latter opposition is reducible to the couple chiefs (land)/warriors (sea).

I don’t wish to appear fanatical about dualism here, and I certainly would not argue that it is a question of the social expression of mental principles, as Needham does.31 On the contrary, I have suggested that the asymmetric and ambivalent dualism of Fijian and even Tongan diarchic forms is related to the nature of hierarchic generalized exchange that plays such an important role in the political organization of these societies.32 The wife-taker/wife-giver asymmetry that founds


29. Ibid., 22.

30. Compare this to Dumézil’s trichotomy which in its Indian version is closest to the Fijian Structure. Here we have the priestly function, combining the opposed celeritas and gravitas of Mitra/Varuna, itself ranking above the warrior function represented by the lesser god Aryaman, opposed, finally to the people: Brahman/Kshatia/Vaishya: order + violence/war/agriculture:sacred rule/secular rule/people. The dualisms here, between sacred and secular, order and violence, rulers and people are contained within a larger scheme of encompassment that is not reducible to a process of dichotomization. Whether the sacred Fijian chief represents the land in relation to his sea warriors, or the sea in relation to his subject commoners, the same dualist oppositions organize the representations.


the diarchy and, in the case of male mobility, splits the local group into a female-indigenous side and a male-foreign side, defines the necessary relation between generalized exchange and dualism. The hierarchy, of course, favors concentric tendencies, and it is here that the magic triad is always immanent.33

In other words, turning two into three is not called for by the mechanisms involved. And the mechanisms themselves would appear to be more historical than cultural. The dislocations that multiply the oppositions seem to lie in the external realm of nineteenth-century military conflicts. The stories of shifting alliances, nobility on the run, and the elimination of divine kings and their clans may be culturally organized, but certainly not culturally determined, not the mere working out of the temporal structure of the self-determining code.

B. The Logic of Culture and the Logic of Practice

It is worth elaborating on this problem by way of some parallels. First consider the logic of the domestication of the foreign king. The king moves from periphery to center. He is poisoned and reborn as a god of the land. His violent essence is thus pacified and he, immobilized. This implies a necessary inversion whereby sea chiefs take on the function of feasting, wealth, and fertility while land chiefs take on the functions of war. But this is only one of an array of possibilities. Sea chiefs might well remain war chiefs in a balanced relation to the chiefs of the land. They might combine the elements of divine kingship and political supremacy, while the priest chief functions more as a combination of religious representative of the land, prime minister under the king, and interregnum regent. The indigenous chief might function as the divine ruler leaving the political functions to the stranger king. An historical example from Central Africa sheds some light on the universal variations I have in mind. The Kongo kingdom at the time of European contact shows striking similarities to Fiji, even though its scale is far greater, perhaps on the order of Tonga. It has a diarchic structure, represented as the conquest of the indigenous people of the land by a foreign group of men whose leader is unable to take power until the indigenous king bestows the sacred relics of the land upon him. The king, represented as a beautiful younger son, a conquerer, is ritually defeated by the priest-chief of the land, his elder, as a central part of the coronation. He is also, traditionally, wife-taker to the indigenous people.34 At contact, the king would appear to be a very powerful and active personage, directly involved in all three political affairs. The priest chief functions as chef de terre, royal proxy, and interregnum regent. The divinity of the king is not in question, but it is associated with activity rather than passivity. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at least, there would seem to be a rather clear balance of power between the two sides of the diarchy. But two centuries later, after the fall of the kingdom, or rather its fragmentation into

warring chiefdoms, the situation is very different. Here amidst the ravages of the slave trade and with the rise of a new class of enriched warrior aristocrats, the king has become the classic model of the passive, even pacified, divinity.\(^35\) He is isolated, surrounded with massive taboos and is quite the equivalent of the Fijian chief “that just sits.” This historical transformation suggests a possible interpretation of the Fijian material in which fragmentation and warfare, perhaps because of and most certainly exacerbated by European trade, may have provoked a particular configuration of power that takes the form of an inversion of an earlier dualism. There is some evidence that chiefdoms that were autonomous and at war in the mid-nineteenth century may have been organized in larger hegemonic networks in the more distant past,\(^36\) networks that might even have been more peaceful.

If there is a certain “deductive” coherence in the kinds of transformations suggested above, it cannot be understood in mere cultural terms, for there is a logic in the relation between cultural change and the change in conditions of existence that are not themselves included in the cultural order. The sacred immobility of a divine king in relation to his active double is not the outcome of the application of a model, but rather a set of properties of a social form, a unity of cultural practice.

In this sense cannibalism cannot be understood as simply culture any more than as simply a consumption of protein. Sahlin's is again clear about the structural relations linking the cannibal act and exchange, sacrifice, and the totality within which such acts find their meaning. Power as people-eating, the accumulation of “soul force,” all of which maintains the necessary cosmologically defined cycle of social reproduction, is a truly widespread representational configuration. But the physical realization of the metaphor, the enactment of the origin myth is something else again. The Arapesh represent the origin of the exchange of pigs as a “civilized” substitute for an earlier exchange of sons and daughters to eat,\(^37\) but they certainly do not practice the sport. There are examples from the Kongo Kingdom of aristocrats offering themselves to the king to be eaten and cannibalism is a definite part of the cosmology. But the large scale market for “meat that talks” in the late nineteenth century, where the consumption of cannibal victims was strongly felt to be a necessity for spiritual and physical survival in a disintegrated social world, is a specific phenomenon that can only be grasped in its historical context. Even in Fiji, cannibalism would seem to be a prerogative of those most ferociously engaged in war.\(^38\)

Yet we are told that “the exchange of raw women against cooked men is paradig-


\(^{38}\) Sahlin's himself notes how at least one kingdom, Verata, looked with abhorrence upon the practice of cannibalism and possessed none of the ceremonial paraphernalia usually associated with it. (Sahlin, “Fiji: A Tale of Three Kingdoms,” 64; W. T. Pritchard, Polynesian Reminiscences (1866) [London, 1968]).
matic of the entire chiefdom economy.” In other words, cannibalism is not merely a possibility, a realization in specific conditions and in a specific form of an underlying structure, but a cultural program. And the cultural program is itself a set of categories. Are we being reductionist in sensing that the cannibal act is not the mere acting out of a semantic recipe, but a practice predicated on a structure of desire and not of categories? Could it be that the constitution of experience is not of the same order as the structure of language?

If I have dwelled at such length on “The Stranger King...” it is precisely because it begins to lay bare the fundamental problems of the entire approach. The chapter is full of structuralist insights but they are consistently integrated into a culturalism that is, in my opinion, diametrically opposed to Lévi-Strauss’s insistence that the fundamental totality for the sciences of man is praxis. It is true, of course, that Lévi-Strauss has consciously specialized in “superstructures,” but he has not, and would not, I think, presume to treat them as some kind of historical totality. When he, for example, accounts for the distribution of mythical variants and not merely their existence, he proceeds by way of the dialectical relation between social practices and mythical representations. This should be all the more so when we are dealing with representations of political authority, where it is not a mere question of discourses in their context, but of symbolic forms that are embedded in social relations, that is, as properties of practice. Sahlins tends, instead, to embed social relations in symbolic forms. It is in this way that warfare, cannibalism, variations in diarchy or even its suppression can be understood as expressions or moments in the “generative development of the categories... the internal diachrony of structure” (103), whose properties are cultural-symbolic and not social.

VIII. FINALE: MARX IN CULTURALIST CLOTHING

Sahlins winds up this collection with a theoretical exploration of the major issue of the previous essays, the relation between “structure and history,” a well-worn theme of the Parisian 1960s. The chapter begins straightaway with a play on Hawaiian categories, and on the historically established and mythostructured analogy: Chiefs:commoners::British:Hawaiians (139). The Hawaiian understanding of the contact situation was not able to contain the reality which it encompassed, and so it was transformed. The chiefs, practicing the above analogy, early took on European names, clothing, and life styles in a heated competition. But there is another logic involved, not discussed by Sahlins. The identification with Europe was equivalent to the absorption of foreign mana, the mana of the more highly ranked, associated with the source of power and wealth, and patently a reality made concrete in the British presence. This all seems clearly similar

to West African royals and chiefs who claim descent from Mecca and take on Arab names, to situations in Central Africa where aristocrats took on Portuguese names and titles, to the general illusion often found throughout the ethnographic world that dominant groups claim separate ethnic origin from the indigenous people. If power is defined as coming from an external source, those in power have every advantage in identifying with it. Is this the application of a specific cultural model or the working of a social logic? But there is more involved than models here, for the example of King Kamehameha who “never tired of asking passing European visitors if he did not live ‘just like King George’” (140), gave up much of the European paraphernalia as he approached the end of his life, making it clear that his position was not in any way dependent on a foreign extravagance.

The conclusions that Sahlins draws from his discussions entail not only “a theory of history” but a “criticism of basic Western distinctions . . . history and structure . . . stability and change” (143). He argues that history is always structural, just as structure is historical, and that “culture functions as a synthesis of stability and change, past and present, diachrony and synchrony” (144). This is the core of the dialectical model where the practice of received categories alters their content because the world does not conform to our cultural presuppositions. To claim that this is somehow against the grain of Western thought is clearly somewhat of an overstatement. After all, such dichotomies have been criticized from classical Greek philosophy to Spinoza and nineteenth-century dialectics. Sahlins’s own dialectic of culture and praxis is itself unmistakably reminiscent of a whole tradition of European thought that he has not seen fit to acknowledge. Most recent, and close to his own approach, are certain of the variants of structural and structuralist Marxism represented by Godelier, Rey, and even myself.42 Sahlins takes the dialectic further in addressing himself specifically to cultural form, something which has also been part of the critique of materialist reductionism in Marxism.43

But Sahlins’s culturalism, much more than a recognition of cultural form, gives his dialectic a very particular content. This becomes clear as he closes in on the “relation of cultural concepts to human experience, or the problem of symbolic reference” a “phenomenology of symbolic action” (145). The absolutely core

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42. Many one-time structural and structuralist Marxists have developed beyond their original conceptions, criticizing the implicit “logic of the productive forces” of all varieties of Marxist models, the failure to take into consideration the dominance of the imaginary structures of social life and recognizing the nonlocal character of social reproduction (Friedman, “Marxism, Structuralism, and Vulgar Materialism,” Man 9 [1974], 444–469; Friedman, “Marxist Theory and Systems of Total Reproduction,” Critique of Anthropology 7 [1976], 3–16).

43. Friedman, “The Place of Fetishism and The Problem of Materialist Interpretations,” in Critique of Anthropology 1 (1974), 26–62; L. Colletti, “Marxism and the Dialectic,” New Left Review 93 (1975), 3–29. “Relations of production come to be fetishes because fetishes come to be relations of production, because a social structure . . . comes to dominate the process of reproduction, an element whose internal properties do not correspond to its material functions” (“The Place of Fetishism,” 57). “Social reproduction only takes place through social forms and society lives its reproduction in these forms” (59).
question is whether the relation of "cultural concepts to human experience" is one of "symbolic reference"? Sahlins's very Boasian answer is that human social experience is the appropriation of specific percepts by general concepts: an ordering of men and the objects of their existence according to a scheme of cultural categories which is never the only one possible, but in that sense is arbitrary and historical. (145)

Is this to say, then, that the relations between people take their structure from a cultural model? It would appear so. Then social life in general is the same as a game or a ritual or perhaps a movement, insofar as it is an implementation of a program. The other half of the dialectic is that in practicing these symbolic plans we enter a context that has "its own reasons" that subject the symbols to new referents and alter their meaning. In the crunch, Sahlins falls back on the same dichotomy that he hoped to have superseded, between structure (cultural) and event, which as Sahlins defines them, are quite irreducible to one another. And yet he denies precisely this when he insists that "all structure or system is phenomenally evenential" so that "event is the empirical form of system" (153). Now if this were really the case, there could be no dialectic of structure and event since the two are related as essence and appearance. There is absolutely no way of knowing what Sahlins has in mind here. Perhaps it is the old structuralist notion that the appearance of structure in observable social forms depends on the way it interacts with its environment, so that a given structure always appears as a set of variants or transformations generated by a dialectical interaction. If so, then the "event as empirical form" is no more than another more mystifying way of expressing the dialectical dichotomy between structure and practice. If we read this text without resorting to such strained interpretations, however, it is a tricky way of having one's cake and eating it, since it quite frankly eliminates the opposition between structure and event which is the explicit basis of Sahlins's model.

Is it best, then, simply to forget this little aside as a mere disguise of the real issue? I think not, for in the final analysis, while events can and do have properties and "reasons stemming from other worlds (systems)" (153), their significance is a projection of the cultural structure. Thus "the event is a happening interpreted" (153), and we are back at the start of our discussion (9). If events are interpretations, and still have a life of their own in some other realm of reality,

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44. Sahlins seems here to be playing with the distinction between the abstract and the concrete: "As a set of meaningful relations between categories, the cultural order is only virtual. It exists in potentia merely. So the meaning of any specific cultural form is all its possible uses in the community as a whole" (153). This, of course, is merely a restatement of the relation between langue and parole, deep structure and final string. The unanswered question is the nature and locus of the "virtual." If it is grammar, then we presumably carry it around in our heads. If it is structure in the Lévi-Straussian sense, it is, I would argue, embedded in social process as properties of both intended and nonintended forms. The circular space of generalized exchange is not part of a cultural plan, but a deducible aspect of social practice. It may be the case that it is we who make the deduction, but the social space in question is certainly just as much a part of the cultural life of the society in question as are marriage rules.
what then is the nature of such realms and why are they so manifestly irrelevant as structures in their own right? What kind of totality, after all, have we got here? Culture appears to be a sign system that in its practice and transformation assumes the form of events whose only significance is the result of their interpretations within the culture that generates them. Here is the answer to the seeming contradiction between Sahlins’s presentation of structure and event as opposed, on the one hand, and event as a mere manifestation of structure, on the other. If events are only such by virtue of being interpreted within a cultural scheme, then the opposition between structure and event is merely an aspect of a total process which subsumes all practice within culture. All the “other worlds” and “reasons of their own” are only significant as “happenings interpreted.” They have no autonomous existence in Sahlins's understanding. In spite of all efforts to provide a dialectic of culture and practice, we are left in the end with only culture. In spite of all attempts to place culture in history, he always and everywhere reduces history to culture. Is this, then, the Marshall Touch, like the poor, old Lydian king; everything he gets his hands on turns to culture?

A. Madame la Culture

Do clothes make the man? If Sahlins’s model is, in its outlines, reminiscent of a structuralist-Marxist dialectic, its cultural guise does much to transform its basic nature. In certain respects, perhaps crucial, we witness a rapprochement with a kind of Hegelian-Fichtean world view. Sahlins overcomes the dichotomy of structure and event by reducing, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, the latter to the former. There is no World-Culture equivalent to the World-Spirit, so we are still safely within the bounds of a realist history inclusive of different cultural forms. But within any cultural realm, and cultural realms are all there is in history, the world proceeds according to Hegelian principles whereby every aspect of social process is encapsulated within culture. We might all agree on avoiding the “twin anthropological (or historical) errors of materialism and idealism” (154). But cultural subsumption, even if it is in the last instance, remains the complementary equivalent of another famous last instance. The question is whether the “burden of ‘reality’” has its “real effects” always “in the terms of some cultural scheme” (154), or whether social reality is constituted of structures of meaning, but not constituted by such structures. The difference is by no means trivial, since it implies that structure is embedded in lived experience in a variety of significant ways, not merely as plans or grammars, but as the actual form of experience and the constitutive identities of subjects; that cultural schemes are not for the most part programs of action, but properties of reality that observers abstract and often reify; finally that the so-called burden of reality is not something which is at once external and at the same time subsumed by cultural categories, but is an immediate aspect of the totality of praxis as well as the structure of the conditions of praxis. Generalized exchange circles to business cycles, Kondratieff curves to gumsa-gumlao oscillations— all are just as real and as structured as

any culturally planned behavior, even if they are not expressions of any culture's intentions.

My argument is felicitously illustrated by Sahlins's final onslaught on the practically medieval scholasticism of Hindess and Hirst\(^\text{46}\) which they themselves totally devastated in a subsequent publication.\(^\text{47}\) They “eliminate” the value of history by the simple claim that “historical events do not exist [in] and can have no material effectivity in the present” and that the conditions of existence of social relations in the present “necessarily exist and are reproduced in the present” as well.\(^\text{48}\) Sahlins's answer to this is that “culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past” (155). Now as I understand Hindess and Hirst, they are making a mere existential point: that the only way that past existences can have any present existence is by their reproduction in the present, in other words by a practice that is situated in the present. To counter that the present is organized by the past is to miss the point, since it begs the question of why, how, and who. The unproblematical use of culture as that which imprints the past on the current situation eliminates the conditions of practice. Why should anyone organize the present in terms of the past? What is it that makes for the fact of empirical, temporal continuity of cultural form even where it is transformed? Is it because we walk around with theories for our practice, recipe books for our social existence? Or is it, as I would suggest, because the conditions of our existence, our social relations, and even the constitution of ourselves as subjects, are structured and transformed in the very flow of events that is our praxis and even more, the process of social reproduction in which our praxis participates. The continuity in history is not that of events, but of relations, and it is a continuity that is not easily susceptible to a past/present dichotomy. Events are, by definition, discontinuities, as opposed to processes of social reproduction which are, by definition, continuous. In the cultural determinist framework, there would not appear to be any such relations and processes. If there is only culture and its practice, its generated events, then it is perfectly understandable that history must be conceived as the repetition of the script, the imposition of the past on the present.

The dialectic of which I have spoken is one that is located between a total social praxis and its conditions of existence. This praxis includes, like habitus, strategies and intentions that in their specificity are by definition cultural. Sahlins's dialectic is located between culture and its conditions of existence, that is between cultural form, abstracted from practice, and its implementation. It is, as such, a mere aspect of social praxis! And the division of praxis into code and event, sense and interest, is truly arbitrary, as if every “sense” did not have an “interest” and every “interest” a “sense.” The only segment of a larger world that impinges itself upon the cultural subject is the immediate environment of action. All the other, nonintentional properties of reality that are essential to our

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dialectic are only interesting to Sahlins insofar as they effect changes in the code itself. They never achieve the status of structure, for example, social structure, structures of identity, structures of reproduction. 49

There is a clear unity in all of these dialectically unified oppositions; culture/practice, structure/event, "pre-existing concept and unintended consequence" (152). They are all based on the relation of the individual subject to intended actions. Instead of a universal principal of practice, such as maximization, there are particular paradigms of significance that are the source of intentions. Thus, events are produced via the individual practice of the code. And if things don’t turn out looking like the code itself, because of the burden of reality, the only thing left in the end is the code, since reality is always subsumed by culture. Sahlins would no doubt protest that I have not understood him. He would refer to his explicit statements to the effect that “objective properties” and significance are “two sides of the same thing” (150). I have not argued against his intentions, with which I am in complete agreement, but with what I see as the impossibility of carrying them out within a cultural determinist framework. For instead of envisaging material and symbolic properties as part of a single process, containing more than either culture or practice, he sees materiality as an appendage to culture in action, only relevant as a perturbation of the cultural scheme.

As I understand it, culture is applied in Sahlins’s fashion where we can speak of a project, the acting out of a scheme. This occurs in a very limited way in ritual where a certain bracketing makes it possible to mold a situation, perform a play. It occurs in its fully dialectical form in social movements, whose cultural projects seek to reorganize either a segment or all of social reality according to an “a priori” scheme. It is not unusual that social practices can assume the form of ritual, that presidents can act out old movies, that whole societies can act out original myths, in the right circumstances. But not all the time! Unless he argues that social systems are either rituals or movements, which surely have some of the qualities of the relation between individual intention and action, I don’t see how Sahlins can maintain such a model of the nature of society and history.

Is not the dialectic of culture and practice an artifact of the anthropologist’s relation to his object? If our cherished otherness is no more than cultural difference, 50 and we abstract what it is that is different from its concrete events, and translate it into a way of producing those events, we arrive, naturally, at some notion of culture as code, grammar, program. They do what they do because they are what they are. Different cultures—different histories, different cultures—different social forms, different rules—different games. Behind it all, the empty

49. There is an interesting parallel here with the work of Giddens. Just as Sahlins tends to reduce culture to codes, Giddens reduces structure to rules. In both cases, we are left with a universal subject and a set of paradigms of action which are applied to an external reality that in turn generates unintended results (A. Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory [London, 1979]). The dialectic of structure and practice is encompassed by Giddens’s “duality of structure.” Lurking behind both paradigms is a more elaborate methodological individualism.

subject of capitalist civilization, different islands—different worlds whose relation to reality is understood in terms of the game; role playing, rule using, and, by implication, cultural practice, where society is the spinoff of individual intentionality, and where the only tangible being is Madame la Culture, subject of history.

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I was a foolish undergraduate, although perhaps no more so than any other. I had been to an English public school at a time when a great deal of funding became available from an educational foundation to improve the teaching of science, and in consequence I was taught science. Indeed, I am not sure that I was taught much else. I finally arrived in a more civilized world, that of the Department of Philosophy at one of the older Scottish universities. I did not know then what it was to think or write in nonmathematical ways, but I had puzzled much, and with hindsight my puzzles seemed to have been philosophical. I felt sure that I was in the right place. The set text for the first course was John Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. "How tremendously clever of them," I thought, "to give us all the answers first". I painfully learnt how wrong I was.

It has been a long time since then, but not long enough ordinarily to justify reminiscence. Studying Paul Veyne's position, however, has taken me back to those early days. Veyne is an historian, and his style is largely rhetorical. The book illustrates its points, and argues them through, with examples which only much erudition could provide. With some other authors such a presentation may be irritating, because it can forfeit the opportunity for rational philosophical argument, obscure accurate observation with unnecessary detail, and embody a fallacious generalizing from the particular. Worse, such things are often accompanied by logical vagueness (and even contradiction), incontinent metaphysical commitment, and ignorant epistemology.

Yet in Veyne's case I have been carried along by the prose, and plainly much of the credit for such an effective style of writing must be due to the translator from the French, Mina Moore-Rinvolucri. Veyne's book is persuasive by virtue of its warmth, charm, and the infectious self-confidence with which the assertions are made. His examples are illuminating rather than merely informative. Moreover, while the book is not written in the exacting style of an analytical philosopher, it displays much understanding of the issues of analytical epistemology, and expresses what seems initially to be an analytically clear position.