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## Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society

2014-03-21 08:40:32

By Aaron Seaman



[Theory, Culture & Society](#) recently published a special issue, entitled "[Social Theory after Strathern](#)." Along with a forward by Paul Rabinow, a wonderful introduction by co-editors Alice Street and Jacob Copeman, and an afterword by Nigel Thrift, the issue includes articles from a host of disciplines, as well as an interview with Strathern conducted by Janet Carsten. The details are below, but it promises for good reading....

### [Foreword to Social Theory After Strathern](#)

*Paul Rabinow*

Today, somewhat counter-intuitively, we no longer have an obvious venue for thinking-in-the world about our actuality. Despite, or because of, the endless conferences, seminars, mobility, publication outlets, new media and the like in which it is easier and easier to be connected, it is increasingly difficult to avoid the diagnostic that it is harder and harder to relate. This Foreword to the special issue 'Social Theory After Strathern' considers the contemporary problem of the inversion of connectedness and relatedness in the light of Marilyn Strathern's

oeuvre. Proceeding from a discussion of the three kinds of friendship distinguished by Aristotle, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of conceptual persona is invoked as a way of thinking through conceptual friendship and the forms of relationality that an engagement with Strathern's work requires and sustains.

### [Social Theory after Strathern: An Introduction](#)

*Alice Street and Jacob Copeman*

Taking its cue from the articles in this special issue, this introduction explores what value a critical engagement with Strathern's work might have for the social sciences by setting such an engagement in motion. It argues that Strathern's writings are a particularly fruitful starting point for reflecting on our assumptions about what exactly theory might be and how and where it may be made to travel. Through the juxtaposition of articles published in this special issue and Strathern's writings on Melanesia it explores the theorization of power in the social sciences as one arena in which Strathernian strategies might be harnessed in order to reflect on and extend Euro-American concepts. It also takes Strathern's own interest in gardening as a metaphoric base for generating novel topologies of subject and object, the particular and the general, and the concrete and the abstract. This introduction does not provide a primer for 'Strathernian theory'. Instead it reviews some of the original strategies and techniques – differentiation, staging of analogy, surprise, bifurcation, the echo, and an unremitting focus on how we make our familiar categories of analysis known to ourselves – that Strathern has used to 'garden' her theory: it can be used, if you like, as a conceptual toolkit.

### [Melanesian Ethnography and the Comparative Project of Anthropology: Reflection on Strathern's Analogical Approach](#)

*Eric Hirsch*

Melanesian ethnography has been a substantial and enduring presence in Strathern's comparative project of anthropology. The cornerstone of this project was *The Gender of the Gift*, where a model was established for demonstrating the analogies between Melanesian societies based on a system of common differences. The comparisons created in this work were centred on a real and radical divide between Melanesia and the West. Strathern's subsequent comparative work has examined the debates surrounding new social and technological forms in the West (e.g.

new genetic and reproductive technologies) through drawing analogies with Melanesian social forms; she has simultaneously highlighted the limits of these comparisons. Her intention in this comparative project has been to expand the range of concepts and language used to understand western social and technological innovations that potentially affect the world at large, so that debate is not simply circumscribed by western preoccupations and concerns. As mediated through the analysis of Strathern and the other Melanesian anthropologists she draws on, the voices and interests of non-westerners can potentially inform and even reform the grounds of such deliberations.

### [Plagiarism, Kinship and Slavery](#)

*Mario Biagioli*

In conversation with Marilyn Strathern's work on kinship and especially on metaphors of intellectual and reproductive creativity, this paper provides an analysis of plagiarism not as a violation of intellectual property but of the kinship relationships between author, work, and readers. It also analyzes the role of figures of kidnapped slaves and children in the genealogy of the modern concept of plagiarism.

### [Language Trails: 'Lekker' and Its Pleasures](#)

*Annemarie Mol*

This is an article about bodily pleasures, words and some of the relations between them. It is a turn in a conversation between the author ('me') and Marilyn Strathern ('Strathern'). It talks theory, but not in general. Instead, this theory gets situated in traditions; specified; in relation to concerns; and exemplified with stories to do with the term lekker. This article is in English, but lekker is not an English term. It is Dutch. The stories come from long-term field work in various sites and situations close to home for the author, who is also Dutch. They were driven by a concern with fostering bodily pleasures in contexts such as nursing homes and dieting practices where nutrients and calories are granted more importance. The difficulties of translating lekker (tasty? pleasant? delicious? fun? nice?) are used as a set of intellectual resources. In contrast to Strathern, the author insists on the fleshy particularities of the practices where lekker is spoken. Along with Strathern, the author seeks to escape nature/culture divides. Inspired by Strathern, the author follows lekker around merographically – that is, along iterative trails and between sites

and situations that are connected, but only partially so. In homage to Strathern, finally, the author plays with the question of who the collective subject of anthropological theory – we – might be, and who belongs to the others that form its object – they.

### [The Coming of the Corporate Gift](#)

*Jamie Cross*

Corporate gifts – from philanthropic donations to individual reward schemes – attract considerable attention from scholars for the kinds of moral, economic and political logics that motivate them. This article considers the gifts that transnational corporations give to producers and draws from Marilyn Strathern's writings on exchange and personhood in order to reverse dominant analyses. Focused on the gifting of gold coins to industrial workers at a global manufacturing unit in India, it brings together field-based observations with a diverse field of literature on the gift in anthropology. Against an analysis that sees the corporate gift harnessed directly to a corporate bottom line, this article proposes an alternative accounting that uses Strathern's notions of 'elicitation', 'revelation' and 'detachment' to explore the contours of knowledge, personhood and relationality in the transaction. If corporate gifts have powerful effects, the article argues, it is because they establish difference between the person of the giver and the person of the recipient and because they materialize actions, desires and capacities that accrue to and transform the recipients rather than simply because they are vessels for the interests of global capital. As social theory confronts the political economy of corporate giving, Strathern's writings prompt provocative questions about agency and power that challenge the hegemonic status of the modern corporation.

### [Law after Anthropology: Object and Technique in Roman Law](#)

*Alain Pottage*

Anthropological scholarship after Marilyn Strathern does something that might surprise lawyers schooled in the tradition of 'law and society', or 'law in context'. Instead of construing law as an instrument of social forces, or as an expression of processes by which society maintains and reproduces itself, a new mode of anthropological enquiry focuses sharply on 'law itself', on what Annelise Riles calls the 'technicalities' of law. How might the legal scholar be inspired by this approach? In this article, I explore one possible way of approaching law after anthropology, which is to

find within law's own archive a set of resources for an analogous representation of law itself. Drawing on the historical scholarship of Yan Thomas, I suggest that the Roman conception of law as object offers an engaging counterpart to the anthropological take on law as a specific set of tools or, technicalities, or as a particular art of making relations.

### [Unexpected Properties: Strathern on the Relation of Law and Culture](#)

*Carol J. Greenhouse*

This article takes up Marilyn Strathern's formulation of a law/culture 'duplex' – her term for the complementarity of anthropology and law as means to each other's ends. She draws attention to the limitations of the duplex, and urges us to consider ethnography as (in part) a project of unwinding its entwinement. As a step toward that end, the article returns to classic texts by Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski – texts that were foundational to the emergence of anthropology, and to the establishment of law as an object of study for the social sciences. Re-read in light of Strathern's insight, what has been widely taken as their relativism emerges instead as their defense of political community as a subject for ethnography, and (accordingly) the basis for a theoretical check on law conceived globally – within states or as colonial overrule. The article concludes with a discussion of the contemporary relevance of that position.

### [The Image after Strathern: Art and Persuasive Relationality in India's Sanguinary Politics](#)

*Jacob Copeman and Alice Street*

Publicly-enacted blood extractions (principally blood donation events and petitions or paintings in blood) in mass Indian political contexts (for instance, protest or political memorial events and election rallies) are a noteworthy present-day form of political enunciation in India, for such extractions – made to speak as and on behalf of political subject positions – are intensely communicative. Somewhat akin to the transformative fasts undertaken by Gandhi, such blood extractions seek to persuade from the moral high ground of political asceticism. This essay seeks to shed light on how and why these extractions have become such a means, with a particular focus on blood-based portraiture. What makes such portraits – chiefly of politicians and 'freedom fighter' martyrs – interesting from a Strathernian point of view is their immanent persuasive relationality. The insights of

Strathern can help us to explicate these objects' dynamic relational features, while reciprocally, the portraits may help us to illuminate and clarify the very particular and interesting nature of the way Strathern treats (and creates) images.

### [Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore](#)

*Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing*

How might Strathernian comparison extend anthropology beyond human exceptionalism? This essay explores how a fungal spore might guide attention to more-than-human nature. The exercise allows us to reflect on knowledge tools we use for understanding human as well as nonhuman social relations.

### [Analogic Return: The Reproductive Life of Conceptuality](#)

*Sarah Franklin*

One of the most important lessons the work of Marilyn Strathern has taught us about knowledge practices is how they stand alone or intersect according to their context. In turn, this has helped us to develop a more dynamic account of knowledge formations as they both travel and stand still. Indeed it is the vacillation between movement and stasis that explains how essentialisms can either anchor cultural systems of thought or become unmoored – a process Strathern has tracked across both cultural and epistemological contexts. In this paper I use the biological sciences as a context in which to track the process by which analogies 'travel back' to remake both their object and its epistemology, or 'habits of thought'. Indeed, context itself can change, and be changed by, what I am calling analogic return – something we might also consider in relation to scale or perception, or as one of the world-making practices out of which we constantly remake ourselves, now more literally than ever in the context of new genetic technologies and stem cell science.

### [An Interview with Marilyn Strathern: Kinship and Career](#)

*Janet Carsten*

The interview was conducted in September 1996 in Cambridge. Marilyn Strathern (MS) and Janet Carsten (JC) had been colleagues at the University of Manchester's Department of Social Anthropology until September 1993, when Marilyn Strathern left to take up the William Wyse Professorship at the University of

Cambridge, where she remained until retirement in 2008. Janet Carsten joined Edinburgh in October of the same year, where she is presently Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology. (Supplementary questions, reflecting back on the earlier interview, were put to Marilyn Strathern by the editors of the special issue in 2013.)

### [Afterword: Struck Dumb? Marilyn Strathern and Social Science](#)

*Nigel Thrift*

Marilyn Strathern has produced a remarkable body of work that not only demonstrates range and tenacity but also has produced a host of inspirations that have made their way into the world. This Afterword to the special issue 'Social Theory After Strathern' dwells on the subject of the modesty of what Strathern is proposing and how it relates to space, noting that her work enables us to forge new practico-theoretical combinations and works of diplomacy between incompatibles which show up the limitations of each party even as they forge new understandings – an approach that chimes with a move towards a more spatial view of knowledge. Theory, to echo Strathern's gardening metaphor, needs to leave room not just to prune but to grow, the two being inter-related, as she points out. This Afterword also proposes that the extraordinary ability of anthropology to be inside and outside at once might serve as a model for what the social sciences need to become if they are to stay relevant in a world which cannot be reduced to a cipher for theory but still needs to learn from theory – theory which is precarious but spreadable, theory which establishes a rapport, but a rapport with friction built into it.

#### **AMA citation**

Seaman A. Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society. *Somatosphere*. 2014. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=7457>. Accessed March 21, 2014.

#### **APA citation**

Seaman, Aaron. (2014). *Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society*. Retrieved March 21, 2014, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=7457>

#### **Chicago citation**

Seaman, Aaron. 2014. Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society. Somatosphere.

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7457> (accessed March 21, 2014).

**Harvard citation**

Seaman, A 2014, *Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 21, 2014, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7457>>

**MLA citation**

Seaman, Aaron. "Social Theory after Strathern -- A Special Issue of Theory, Culture & Society." 21 Mar. 2014. Somatosphere. Accessed 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7457>>