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Epilogue

Indeterminacy between Worth and Worthlessness

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On Valuation

In the early days of a discipline whose origins were inspired by the taxonomic impulse of the natural sciences, anthropology attempted to understand different human societies in relation to Western civilization within an evolutionary framework. Anthropologists thus described and organized their empirical observations in categorical bundles. Nevertheless, the data always exceeded the categories that anthropologists devised, which prompted the researchers to come up with new categories or, alternatively, disregard, silence, or miscategorize what did not fit.

Anthropologists’ attempts to develop theories of kinship offer a good example of the problems they faced: to explain inconsistencies, they multiplied taxonomies, or attributed them to process, to the fuzziness of categories, or to change over time. An early example of how the messiness of the taxonomic problems that kinship systems presented is E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) classic monograph on the Nuer, which he described as a fiercely egalitarian society fixed on patrilineal descent. After painstakingly drawing out the lineage categories, their spatial organization, and their structural dynamics of fusion and fission, Evans-Pritchard concedes that in actual practice, bilateral descent was as important as patrilineal descent, alliance was as important as descent with frequent adoptions, and that there were deep structural inequalities under the public veneer of egalitarianism, all of which he labeled “transient.” However, if one

begins with these exceptions to reanalyze Nuer social structure, the resulting picture one obtains of Nuer society at the time turns out completely different (McKinnon 2000). What Evans-Pritchard considered transient and out of place now emerges as part and parcel of the system and provides a very different perspective on the system as a whole. Likewise, John Comaroff (1980) analyzes marriage payments among the Tshidi of South Africa as an ambiguous, time-bound, and flexible relationship that entangles multiple generations (alive, dead, and yet-to-be-born) in a maze that can always be reconfigured and reinterpreted as something else, and he then goes on to deconstruct the category of marriage in African bridewealth societies.

Anthropology offers a long genealogy of concern with that which does not fit in established classification systems, or at least do not fit easily. Yet, for a long time, anthropologists were primarily concerned with “solving” the puzzle of matter that does not fit. For example, the theory of liminality developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner constructed liminality as a valuable yet temporary state, a perilous transition between stable states that would eventually reaffirm stability. For Mary Douglas, society needs matter out of place to reaffirm its coherence and order, but also to harness its potential power. While “dirt is essentially disorder” and “disorder spoils pattern” (1991: 2),

it also provides the materials for pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. (1991: 94)

And society, which she defines as form in contrast to nonform, does so by ritually taming, reconfiguring and finding a place for nonform.

It is only relatively recently that anthropologists have questioned these assumptions. Having abandoned the organic structural idea of a unique and complete social order, with its categories and oppositional structure (e.g., lineages, myths), the discipline has taken a pioneering role among the social sciences in showcasing the fact that different understandings of society coexist, but are locked in a struggle for domination, and that categories are fundamentally unstable and fuzzy. For example, the theory of perspectivism, based on Amerindian mythology and shamanistic practices, introduced a fluid categorical framework that superseded the nature-culture dichotomy. It suggested that humans and nonhumans shared a common primordial humanity, a “culture,” but differed in their physical representation, their “nature.” This view inverted Western understandings of the nature-culture categorization where culture was the variable attached to humanity, and nature was what humans shared with other species. This “multinaturalist” process supported practices of metamorphosis between species that underlined the ambivalent subjective positions of humanity in different world orders (Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2012). Drawing on ethnographies of Melanesian societies, anthropologists like Marilyn Strathern (1988) have exposed the relational, mutable, and partible character of personhood and identity, while others have demonstrated that sex-gender categories are predicated on the exchange of matter like blood and food among people, nature, and cosmology (e.g., Herdt 1984; Meigs 1984). Rather than being in transition to greater legibility, persons, objects, and categories that fail to conform to stable states can remain in protracted or permanent suspension. Matter out of place, the abject, the marginal, and the exceptional can, in fact, provide

a very different perspective on the system that marginalizes them. They thus need to be taken seriously.

This collection of ethnographic essays does just that by proposing a novel angle on the question through the lens of indeterminacy. In their introduction, Catherine Alexander and Andrew Sanchez explain that indeterminacy has three fundamental features: it is not recognized by extant systems of classification; its course in the future is unknown; and it resists and questions classificatory systems. Indeterminacy differs from other analytic tools that have been mobilized in the past. For example, in contrast to Mary Douglas, who considers purity and impurity (and its variants) as structured in reference to one another and to a world conceived as a whole, Alexander and Sanchez see indeterminacy as constituting a third, in-between modality that does not lend itself to binary classification, while both value (purity) and waste (impurity) are aspects of form. They consider “classification, as a way of apprehending reality, [as] itself essentially indeterminate.”

Indeterminacy is constitutive of classification systems based on the opposition between value and waste in that it plays a mediating role in their production, a point to which we will return presently. But the opposition is the result of a process of selection (what has value and what does not), which raises the question of the criteria upon which this selection is predicated.

“To classify is human” (Bowker and Star 1999: 1), but inherent to classification is a semantic vagueness about categories that do not fall neatly in a system of inclusion and exclusion. The category “other” is often mobilized as a loophole for such categories. Although many classification systems consist of competing or overlapping categories that exert control and moral legitimacy (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), much of what goes on in everyday life is at best vaguely ascribed to a category because its semantic vagueness is “good enough” to get on

with ordinary matters. Thinking of the binary contrast between value and waste as resulting from choices that free agents make in a process of adjudicating value is what produces indeterminacy. For example, despite its anxiety to produce order, state bureaucracy in fact often works through vagueness, as in the case of how state agents interpret the law (a system of classification par excellence) in a discretionary and flexible fashion (Dubois 2010). Classifications often make space for arbitrary application, while at the same time creating anxieties that preclude agency.

Valuation is a complex process. For example, one can distinguish three distinct principles of classificatory judgments for comparing things and people (Fourcade 2016). Nominal judgments are conceptual acts predicated on essence that generate categories and interpretive acts that fit objects into these categories. Cardinal judgments, predicated on quantities, measure difference and assess its significance. While ordinal judgments, predicated on relative positions and designed to rank objects, create inequalities. In social life, nominal judgments of kind intersect with ordinal judgments of worth and, in ideologically democratic and egalitarian societies, ordinal judgments that rank nominal difference are measured through the quantification of individual “choices” (Fourcade 2016: 182–84). Statistical ranking makes difference commensurable. Tools that measure equivalence, such as money, assess value, but they also produce hierarchies. What Jane Guyer (2004) calls “performances of valuation” involve intersecting ordinal and cardinal judgments in which negotiations over different scalar values measure hierarchically ordered qualities and enable commensuration, a process that allows for disjunctures between numerical scales that may become sources of gain. The different scales of valuation constitute a “repertoire” that is performed and enacted in different occasions (2004: 51–67). In practice, then, binary classificatory systems and indeterminacy as a “third” concept result from the failure of classificatory practices that are at best an ideal type. Indeed, many of

the cases analyzed in this volume can be understood as struggles over different, incomplete, and often vague categorical schemes.

For example, in her analysis of Russian-speaking miners in Estonia and Kazakhstan, Eeva Kesküla invokes indeterminacy to explain how this group lost its former place in society when the Soviet Union collapsed. The miners lost their social privileges as Russians, miners, highly remunerated workers, and gendered laborers in the new political and economic order. They are disrespected as anachronisms, their work is devalued, and they feel that others see them as slaves, scum, or nobodies. But they claim a different grid of valuation, which showcases hard work, sacrifice, skill, the health hazards they endured, and their contribution to the national wealth. Their social position is thus riddled with ambiguities and overlaps. The miners claim social worth within shifting regimes of value. Loss of status increases uncertainty and devalues social expectations, yet the miners are aware of their relational value position in the present order and contest it. Similarly, the transgender activists among whom Elena Gonzalez-Polledo conducted fieldwork use their experimental art to disrupt identity politics and resist institutional contexts that universalize the category transgender.

Liminality, Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and Indeterminacy

According to Alexander and Sanchez, indeterminacy differs from a number of cognate analytic categories, such as liminality, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In its original theorization, liminality always implied a transition from one stable state (e.g., childhood) to another stable state (e.g., adulthood). In contrast, indeterminacy does not imply that an entity that is taken out of a stable state will eventually be reintegrated into another. The detached fragment becomes a particle whose future configuration may be indeterminate. Here an analogy to Heisenberg's theory of

indeterminacy in quantum physics and its philosophical extension in metaphysical indeterminacy is useful (Barnes 2010; Skow 2010; Torza 2017; Williams 2008). Metaphysical indeterminacy shares commonalities with semantic vagueness but it extends its purchase to actual worlds and is therefore analogically closer to quantum physics. Hence the classical anthropological concept of liminality gives way to a position where all future outcomes are not only possible but may in reality all coexist. Contingency is the anthropological version of this multiple actuality. However, in its quantum physics version, indeterminacy is not absolute but statistically relative. In an analogous manner, contingency is not the equivalent of indeterminacy; the latter is statistically weighted (i.e., using cardinal value registers) according to past measures of actualization (i.e., empirical social facts).

One example of the indeterminacy of fragments is the debate that Joshua O. Reno explores with respect to the future determination of waste in landfills. The question is whether the radical indeterminacy of future outcomes advances the anthropological task of explaining social practices. The waste fragment eschews relations, but relations linger, and as Reno concedes, waste management regulations (and, we would add, the entire social world of formal and informal interactions and devices in which it is entangled) make certain outcomes more possible than others.

Indeterminacy also differs from ambiguity if one defines ambiguity as the possibility that an entity has several simultaneous and potentially contradictory meanings. In language, ambiguity defines a situation in which an utterance's truth value can be interpreted in different ways, although generally disambiguation is possible by clarifying context. Ambiguity also calls to mind Peircean indexicality, signs that have no meaning in and of themselves but acquire value when placed in a particular context. Yet indexes are always potentially multivalent. Semantic

vagueness addresses a similar problem, namely that of utterances that are not semantically precise, and therefore whose truth value is uncertain. In some cases, vagueness can be resolved by reference to context, but in other cases it is impossible to determine the truth value of the utterance (Kennedy 2011). These problems in the philosophy of language are relevant because they address questions of “mapping” or positioning within a semantic grid. Likewise, they discuss truth value judgments and point to cases where it is impossible to adjudicate meaning between adjacent categories, revealing the unknowable aspect of certain vague propositions. A pressing issue that emerges, then, is to determine the relevance of vagueness in classificatory systems, focusing on cases where truth value cannot be determined. The present volume addresses this through a particular construction of indeterminacy.

Lastly, indeterminacy is not uncertainty, if uncertainty is what people experience, for instance, when they face the risk of stock market speculation or when they engage in extreme sports that challenge norms of safety. Uncertainty is also embedded in the potential misfirings and misalignments of face-to-face communication, in the firm cultural belief in the opacity of other people’s minds (Rumsey and Robbins 2008), or in the collapse of political regimes that formerly provided clear answers to existential questions. Ironically, the neoliberal faith in optimal market allocation expresses the will to minimize uncertainty by focusing attention on the individual’s actual behavior, thus eliciting the tacit (often unconscious) knowledge hidden in natural communication systems (Hayek 1948; Polanyi 1967). The market makes hidden tacit knowledge transparent and allegedly minimizes uncertainty in the allocation of resources through the competitive process and the pricing mechanism. Behavioral economics and big-data analysis have compounded this theory: measuring actions supersedes the need to understand actions, and the uncertainty of the future is statistically minimized. Hence high risk (and

potential gain) accrues from countering predictable outcomes and hedging against predictable loss. For the editors, uncertainty is relevant to indeterminacy “only insofar as it reflects conditions of dissolution or category loss produced by economic and political exclusion; the material infrastructure of previous times that has yet to find its place; and, finally, a sense that future pathways are rarely as determined as grand narratives suggest but emerge as a dialogue between people’s attempts to plan and shape futures and contingent events beyond their control” (Alexander and Sanchez this volume). The value of indeterminacy as a concept, then, hinges on a critique of totalizing categorization and on causal determination of future outcomes.

If indeterminacy differs from the more widely theorized categories of liminality, ambiguity and uncertainty, one can also ask what it shares with them. For example, while early theorists of liminality did indeed see liminal states as transitions from one well-defined category to another, one can ask whether this was not an artifice of their own anxieties about structure, and whether, in actuality, liminal entities always emanate from a stable category and are eventually transformed into another stable category. Rather, they may well be suspended in a state that is too vague and heterogeneous to be domesticated by extant systems of classification, from which they challenge these classificatory systems. This is the case, for example, of transgender categories in Polynesia and elsewhere, which do not conform to locally recognizable gender categories but instead index a nebulous outsidership and generic cosmopolitanism (which themselves are the object of constant negotiation and anxiety) that confront the moral codes in which local gender categories are anchored (Besnier 2011). This is also the case of people in extreme exclusionary spaces devoid of future expectation such as Nazi concentration camps, where moral categories that used to frame their past social life were suspended beyond classificatory orders, a situation that does not preclude social interaction regulated both

externally and internally, albeit beyond classification (Narotzky and Moreno 2002). Thus “permanent” liminality may not be as oxymoronic as it may appear at first glance and, viewed in this light, liminality may share more with indeterminacy than it differs from it. In these examples, indeterminacy is an active situation with which people engage creatively, as the editors point out, but often strive to create some sort of predictable outcome.

Excess, Residue, Exclusion, and Hidden Connections

A particularly thought-provoking aspect of indeterminacy as an analytic category is its capacity to help us understand how some entities remain outside extant systems of classification. Thus, in Joshua Reno’s analysis of garbage landfills in the United States, the fragment of paper that escapes the rubbish collectors or the potential toxic leak from the landfill are indeterminate because they potentially undermine the boundary between the filth and danger of the landfill and the wholesomeness and safety of lived space. They are also indeterminate because the manner of their incorporation with other fragments in the landfill (or outside of it) is unknown, and the possibility that they will remain outside any category systems is open.

However, whether entities can be entirely disconnected from systems of classification is an empirical question. Thus the fragment of paper or the leak continues to be embedded in structures of social relations and in economic systems. Fragments of paper on the side of the road enable the people employed to pick them up to make a living and the leak ensures that the expertise of the people in charge of analyzing it continues to be useful. So both the piece of paper and the leaking substance are still connected to a context that provides various possible meanings. Even a totalizing classificatory system, such as the law, is in fact full of loopholes, which is the reason why the practice of the law gives so much attention to interpretation and

precedent. In Norway, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson document in this volume, the state has exerted considerable efforts to absorb the minority group of Travellers into its modernist project based on settled existence, wage work, and education, but some Travellers have contested these efforts by asserting difference in a national context anxiously predicated on homogeneity. The newcomers Roma, in contrast, have not been so successful in that the state has no interest in integrating them and many want them to “go back where they came from,” precluding any kind of mobilization in a political arena in which they have no say.

The contributions to this volume provide precisely the kind of ethnographic materials that provoke a debate about under what conditions and from what perspective an entity falls outside of a system of classification. They suggest that the terms “debate,” “struggle” and “contention” should be wedded to any discussion of determinacy: what we are witnessing in the various case studies are anxieties and conflicts over what can be determined and what cannot, about who defines the grids of classification and how, what devices and technical infrastructures support categorization and standardization, and what power can be brought to bear in the making and unmaking of particular webs of (in)determination. Indeterminacy is always in dialogue with determinacy, from which it derives its very meaning.

The comparison of the various ethnographic contexts represented in this collection conjures a question that we consider important: what is the entity that lacks determinacy? Different indeterminate entities pose different questions. For example, the figure of the “repatriate” or *oralman* in Kazakhstan (Alexander), people of Kazakh origin whom the state invites to migrate “back” to the country, is indeterminate in several ways. The *oralman* does not find a place in the state’s dominant discourse of progress “from a fixed past to a desired future,” both because the *oralman* is a backward country bumpkin and emerges from a larger world that

the state strives to be part of. The figure also falls between the cracks of census categories, as the *oralman* is at once neither Kazakh nor immigrant, but both. In addition, repatriates often lack state-issued identification, a lack that can be as empowering and liberating as it can be restrictive and precarious. Seen as a property of an entity (a person or a figure), indeterminacy is a matter of ontology. But all these modes of indeterminacy can be also understood as characteristics of relationships, between the *oralman* and the state in particular, but also between the *oralman* and an “ordinary” Kazakh, in which case indeterminacy is no longer a matter of ontology, but of shifting social relations, which in our view calls for different questions.

Thus people who do not belong and objects that stand outside recognized classification regimes are invariably embedded in webs of relationships of their own. Such webs can connect the person or object to the system that expelled them in the first place, as in the case of refugees from the Middle East and elsewhere in the contemporary moment, who are suspended in indeterminacy in Western Europe (unwanted by Eastern and Southern Europe, yet forced by the Dublin Convention to remain there); yet they are still connected to the national contexts whose wars they are escaping, they become connected to NGOs and solidarity networks that provide support, and they create structures of their own. The indeterminate can produce their own system of classification and their own expulsion, as is the case of Polynesian transgender who lay claim to a larger world of morality that exceeds the provincialism of the local. Indeterminacy as a feature of relationships provides a different perspective and raises different questions from indeterminacy as an ontological category.

Indeterminacy showcases the future in primordial fashion. If something is determined, then what is going to happen in the future is known or at least knowable; in contrast, indeterminacy is the negation of a clear path toward the future. This is where the contrast

between indeterminacy and uncertainty becomes productive: uncertainty is contained by the management of risk, whereas indeterminacy does not assume that the future can be controlled, because the risk is unknown. However, thinking in terms of risk implies an a priori binary contrast between gain and loss that generates either good or bad results of action (by an individual rational agent) within a moralized framework. An alternative is to abide by the assumption in physics that indeterminacy, devoid of its moral orientation, does not lead to risk but instead to outcomes that are unknowable but can be circumscribed through empirical calculation, thereby minimizing the unknown.

This is the essence of the debate about the future of waste between sociologists Myra Hird (2013) and Zsuzsa Gille (2013) that Reno animates: for the former, what will happen to a landfill is ultimately unknowable because its contents are indeterminate and its future is completely open, which presents a paradox for political activism focused on making waste determinate; for the latter, we know enough about what may happen when waste leaks and poses a danger to the environment to swing into action. Knowledge about anything comes in many forms and is always partial and situated (Haraway 1988), and knowledge about the future of waste is no exception; we may not know what the chemical reactions are going to be from waste leakage, but we know at least that there is going to be a reaction, upon which we can base an activist politics. The fact that the future is unknowable does not imply that our actions, particularly political ones, are not projected toward certain goals. Likewise, it does not imply that evidence about past social facts is irrelevant in the attempt to know the future outcomes of present actions.

At the same time, human actions generate material results, be they in the form of infrastructures, objects, regulations, and so on, which are embedded in historical processes that

are themselves complex and multi-faceted. Thus in the same fashion that indeterminacy is about the future, it is also about the past. Our projects are always embedded in and informed by pre-existing structures, webs of relations, and selective memories of moralized outcomes of human actions. Indeed, what is particularly thought-provoking is the power of our actions to articulate a knowable past with an indeterminate future, yet this power is bounded by the fact that the result of our actions (and their interpretation) can differ significantly from the intentions that underpinned them and for differently situated actors.

The gigantic industrial infrastructures erected in Bremerhaven, Germany, in the late nineteenth century and over the course of the twentieth century, are a particularly telling example (Ringel this volume). Some of the structures in question, such as the Emperor's Lock, were considered utter folly when they were originally built because of their unnecessarily grandiose proportions, yet they ended up having a new life when megaships emerged that were in need of large berthing facilities. Postindustrial downturns made other structures obsolete and they were abandoned, until they were made economically productive again for urban renewal and tourism. In contrast, the city's "scrap houses" are today deemed too derelict to do much with, and they just stand there—but who knows what novel use may be found for them in future, in the same way that the outsized shipping facilities are ridiculous at one moment and a godsend at another? As Marxist theorists of urban gentrification (e.g., Harvey 1973; Smith 1996) have demonstrated, capital accumulation takes place when the build environment is devalued, tenants are dispossessed, and urban space is revalorized. In order to produce value from inner-city centers, they first have to be depleted of value and alienated from their original purpose. These examples illustrate the constant transformation over time of the meaning of categories, objects, and

practices and the temporal fragility of the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable, the determined and the undetermined.

Worthlessness, Waste, Value, and Worth

As matter and metaphor, waste is provocative. If we understand waste as removed from dominant systems of value, it also appears as a space of creativity that may produce other values, a position of hope that may challenge dominant classification systems with other forms of recognition. Indeterminacy thus emerges as a Janus-faced category, signaling both the displacement to an outside realm and the opening of domains of possible worlds. But how does it relate to value if valuation is understood as a multiple and overlapping grid of classificatory systems involving nominal, ordinal, and cardinal judgments, with their vagueness and loopholes? Is waste opposed to value? How is the production of value predicated on the production of waste?

In Elisabeth Schober's account of scavengers in Subic Bay, Philippines, unwaged workers order and classify the waste that they sell to intermediaries, a task that their leader Glenda defines as having value in market terms: "Remember, it has capital. Yes, it's all garbage, but it has capital." These are people who have been dispossessed of their former means of livelihood (fishing, agriculture) because of land and water grabbing and later of the possibility of wage work. As a result, they have gravitated to the landfill near a Special Economic Zone to make a living by scavenging. Their lives are devalued as they are excluded from other means of making a living and they are defined by others as a surplus population. But they define their work as "work," a category that commands recognition and respect and is validated by the anthropologist and the left-wing activists who guide her. Moreover, they are aware of the value

work commands both economically, as it reenters the chain of value through intermediaries, and politically, as they leverage their power to disrupt peace and drive away investments. One could argue that the agency, power, and hope of their politics is not so much one of indeterminacy as one that rests on the tension between worth and worthlessness, value and waste. As they become worthless according to a regime of value focused on waste and squalor, they reconfigure other forms of self-worth and produce other kinds of economic and political value, through struggle and negotiation, which are partially linked to capital.

Tensions between worthlessness and worth-making are central to understanding how capitalist accumulation works (Alexander and Reno 2012). Marxism captured some of these tensions with the concept of surplus population, but even more so with the concept of primitive accumulation, which David Harvey (2003) further expanded as accumulation by dispossession. Enclosures produced people who had become worthless unless they entered into a particular relation with the owners of the means of production. This situation benefitted people at the upper end of a scale of social worth now measured in cardinal terms of aggregate wealth.

Simultaneously, other scales of social and moral worth emerged based on respect for work and solidarity, which competed with scales of valuation based on wealth. This is but one possible story of world actualization, and we are not advocating for a teleological modern grand narrative. But it is about relationships that are formed and transformed through shifting connections, overlapping grids of meaning and vagueness, rather than about ordered totalities from which fragments (physical, semantic) are detached, suspended in an indeterminate position, eventually to be recognized by other imagined ordered worlds. As Alexander and Sanchez suggest in their introduction, “the will to control through fixity, numbering, containment, and classifications, is typically manifested through the modern state, which expels, [or] forcibly assimilates ... those

who do not fit” (Alexander and Sanchez this volume) makes the exclusion and displacement of indeterminacy a potential space of opportunity, creativity, and hope. The will and the struggle to control, we argue, is also based on multiple grids of value and systems of valuation overlapping, conflicting, and connecting, claiming transient power through ambiguity and vagueness, eschewing fixity to assert control.

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