CREATIVITY AS A SOCIAL RELATION?

James Leach

Social science in general and anthropology in particular has long attended to core concerns with the structure and form of societies, and with the constant interplay of individual and collective elements. These concerns are obvious: how we understand the emergence and form of human worlds necessitates an approach to creative agency alongside the conditions under which that agency is exercised. As Marx famously wrote in 1852, 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please'. But recent scholarship in the field of anthropology has taken theorising beyond the familiar impasses of structure and agency through an emphasis on practice (e.g. Bourdieu 1977) and on to the embodied and improvisational nature of knowledge and social action (e.g. Ingold 2000, Hallam & Ingold 2007). Creativity is central here. But creativity conceived not as individual genius (an approach that generates questions about how the individual and the collective collide; one clearly linked to other assumptions Westerners make about the bounded-ness of individual minds, and the proprietary nature of the self), but creativity as an emergent (and necessary) aspect of social relations.

As anthropological study is based in a deep engagement with the potentialities and differences between human life-worlds (e.g. Descola 1994, 2005; Vivieros de Castro 2009, 2010), much of the best anthropological work has taken as its inspiration (and guiding its methodology) ideas and concepts generated in the ethnographic encounter with other traditions, traditions where those concepts of individual boundedness and self-propriety do not dominate. At present this approach is well represented by the work of Marilyn Strathern, whose reformulation of the problems of western epistemology in dialogue with the detailed practices and understandings of people in Melanesia has shown the possibilities not only for understanding other ontological systems, but for this understanding to illuminate core theoretical assumptions and approaches within western society, and in anthropology itself (e.g. Strathern 1988, 2005 etc.). So alongside the recent turn in theorisation, a long standing tradition of questioning assumptions that lie behind our theories is adding to the need to re-think creativity as more than the work of exceptional individual minds.

What this anthropology has made possible is the formulation of conceptual approaches that move us outside and beyond the recurrent divisions between persons and objects, individuals and society, creative genius and slavish replicators.

Rather than describing static systems and their properties, the understanding of social relations as creative asks us to make links between the emergence of social forms of particular kinds, and of the objects and things that facilitate that emergence. In attending to the generation, and to the reciprocal constitution of persons, places, landscapes, things, meaning, and knowledge, we require a conceptual language with which to approach things as they come into being: an understanding of sociality as inherently creative, and attention to the relations in which things are constituted and in which they necessarily have their effects.

In my own work, the topic of creativity as a social relation converges a range of apparently diverse phenomena and events from the formation of landscapes, artworks, social groups and knowledge in Papua New Guinea to creativity and social form in interdisciplinary and artistic practice in Europe; from newly emergent technologies (specifically software and the emergent objects/communities that are made possible by its functioning), to legal forms that govern and channel the outcomes of creative practice. My initial regional grounding in the ethnography of Melanesian societies has provided the theoretical and comparative underpinning. It is this stimulus from Melanesia that energises my work, drawing, as above, from what we can learn theoretically from our ethnographic engagements.

To fill in a little of this approach to creativity and emergent form, think for a moment about land in the very particular way it has its reality and presence in the lives of people living on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea (e.g. Leach 2003, 2006). Land is understood there as the significant source of creativity, and of 'knowledge'. Connections to other people through land form the basis for kinship and identity. It is relations with the land as a series of animate places and beings that generate the ritual knowledge necessary

to make the earth productive. Each place is different because of the different relations people there share with the specific entities emergent from this interaction. In sharing these particular relations to places, people share knowledge of that particular productivity, and thus 'knowledge' rather than biological substance passed on at birth has the status of something akin to shared biogenetic substance in western reckonings of kinship (Leach 2009, and see Strathern 2010).

Far from being an individual possession, such substance is by nature shared with others. The inflection this gives to the perceived location of creative work is startling: it is the relation itself that carries creative potential. And no one party can be sole proprietor of a relation other than momentarily. To comprehend this, we need to think about land not as a static backdrop to the unfolding drama of the human social and cultural world, but about how relations with and through land allow the emergence of particular places with their own knowledge and style, their own forms of making apparent in the creativity inherent in relations to others. Land then can be thought of as a kind of mediation for the social, but only if one is also willing to accept that 'the social' is a kind of mediation for the possibilities and creativity of land itself.

The fact that new places and new knowledge/myth/ritual and artistic forms are coming into being all the time on the Rai Coast alerts us then to the very different ways in which people understand their relation to valuable intangible creations (such as song, dance forms, and designs). As these emerge from specific relational nexus alongside people themselves, they are never individually claimed, but serve as exactly the basis on which people make claims of connection to others (Leach 2004, 2005a). We can learn something here. Their approach provides a stimulating contrast to intellectual and cultural property laws and precedents, based as these things are on entrenched assumptions about individual authorship, the location of creativity in the individual mind/brain, and the status of knowledge as an individually generated representation of the world (and thus not a relation with other beings and places).

Drawing Melanesia into engagements with creative practice and its management/regulatory framework in other arenas (e.g. Leach 2005, 2007) suggests that it is not only in Melanesia that we find these understandings of the social relation itself as a source of value and creative energy. There are clearly instances and precedents within practices and concepts closer to home that allow us to approach Rai Coast creativity. An analysis demonstrating creativity as a socially distributed phenomenon (with its own particular forms in different places and social contexts) is important when we come to see how emergent communities, particularly those engaging through the mediation of new technologies, come to take the shape they do.

It is a common observation that the whole area of knowledge is being radically recast in the current era of globalisation and digitisation. The concurrent emergence of free software as a model of production and collaboration (Ghosh 2005, Weber 2004), open research journals, online social networks (Benkler 2006), and the digital preservation of heritage, and the multimedia presentation of art and performance (e.g. Morphy et al. 2005) rely on new modes for the presentation and circulation of things, practices, and understandings (Castells 1996, Brown 2003). This is made possible by the transformation of knowledge into kinds of information available for encoding and transmission through information and communication technologies (e. g. Gurstein 2000, Leach & Wilson forthcoming). But while being swept along in the current of technological change (E. Leach 1968, J. Leach 2005d), we should ask questions about how the particular forms of mediation, and their metaphysics, shape both persons and knowledge. While some people once excluded from the circuits in which knowledge was produced are becoming integral parts of its production, others such as indigenous knowledge holders, or contemporary artists, are often still excluded, or participate on terms dictated elsewhere.

The reader may note a shift in language in the above paragraph from 'creativity and emergence' to 'knowledge production' that illustrates the way a productionist metaphysic lies behind the contemporary visibility of 'knowledge' in western discourse and its valuation under intellectual and cultural property regimes. Attention to forms of collaborative work highlight the specific inflections that different cultures and communities give to the location of creativity, and how forms of ownership come to structure, and be structured by, institutional expectations and legal precedents. The great promise of ELMCIP in charting and documenting alternatives is more than apparent in this regard. Indeed, it is the reciprocal effects of making things on persons, and of those processes on the organisation of relations between persons that give shape to community relations or the emergence of specifically skilled or knowledgeable actors.

The whole area of knowledge production and its relation to assumptions about creativity in knowledge economies then needs opening up to further scrutiny. For many people assume they know what is meant by 'knowledge production', and huge effort is devoted to securing the correct conditions for this form of (economic) productivity. But the way knowledge and creativity are conceptualised under such regimes is narrow and problematic. It tends to exclude many kinds of knowing, and undervalue the importance of exactly the kinds of emergent and relational, process based, forms that anthropologists see all around us. As new communities enter the field of knowledge production, we urgently need to understand the kind of knowledge they offer. I take an example close to the anthropological heart.

Always a contested and fraught area, Indigenous Knowledge (IK), or Traditional Ecological Knowledge have never been more relevant and yet more vexing than now (Descola 2008). From the potential contributions to sustainable livelihoods, appropriate medical and technological development, knowledge of and care for biodiversity, and the possibilities for sustainable resource management systems, 'indigenous knowledge' systems are under scrutiny. Yet the status of indigenous knowledge is complexly entwined with social and cultural modes of creation and transmission, with the politics and history of colonial and settler societies, with epistemological questions as to veracity, applicability and relevance, and with ontological issues about status and effect. Far from being a hindrance these entanglements provide an opportunity to rethink knowledge and creativity more widely. Science and technology studies have, after all, been demonstrating similar entanglements in scientific knowledge for some time (Law & Mol 2002, Knorr Cetina 1999).

Indigenous knowledge holders are increasingly demanding recognition for their practices without that recognition undermining the position of their knowledge as socially embedded processes. Intellectual Property has proved an inadequate route to solving these issues (see Brown 2003, Dutfield and Posey 1996, Hirsch and Strathern 2004). Moreover, the problem will not go away. For at least the last twenty years, scholars in anthropology and philosophy, the history and philosophy of science, in ecology, resource management, botany etc. have struggled to understand the epistemological basis of indigenous knowledge (Viveiros de Castro 2010).

There is a fascinating conjunction here, and the possibility for the mutual illumination of two comparable (not isomorphic) spheres of social action. Contemporary artists are also currently making claims to the status of knowledge producers, as their creative processes generate spatial, structural, emotional, physical, linguistic (etc.) forms of knowing. Fascinatingly, not only is the 'knowledge' of contemporary dance, (for example) unfolded in time and in relationships to specific others, it is also marginalised as a knowledge form in orthodox western understandings. The location of creativity, and of effect, is in the temporal unfolding of relationships. Describing these processes provides comparable, alternative historically located, inflections on contemporary knowledge and social form.

A cross-cultural confusion about what to do with indigenous knowledge and creativity lies in conventional approaches to the production of agricultural staples or the production of artefacts in indigenous Papua New Guinean societies, for example. The confusion is based on assumptions about the separation of knowledge from relationships between people (Morphy 2007). That is, standard Euro-American conceptions of knowledge view it as representational of the world of nature (Shapin & Schaffer 1989, Latour 1993). Yet indigenous knowledge is often embedded in, as if it were in fact, relations between persons and beings of different kinds (Morphy 1991, Strathern 2010). From horticultural practices that seem to rely on superstition and ritual, to the embedded making of complex and valuable indigenous art works in life-cycle events, the entanglement of social and practical, natural and cultural, productive and decorative have proved impossible to separate (Heckler 2009, Sillitoe 2009). In fact, indigenous people themselves resist such separation (e.g. Green Gold Rush 2009). That in turn has tended to undermine the possibility of recognising Indigenous knowledge as commensurate with scientific or other forms of modern knowing (Crook 2007). Similarly, while the contemporary arts are highly valued in Western societies, a significant number of their practitioners are seeking to clarify and demonstrate the potential knowledge contributions their process-based, relational forms of creativity offer.

A series of questions follow, perhaps the most pertinent being that of where we are going to find resources to think about, understand, value, and utilise such creativity. How do we approach 'it' in a way acceptable to its source communities, and that avoids the old

issues of appropriation, distortion, and confusion over its status, while making its value available and apparent?'

The possibilities for developing a new approach are dependent on thinking of knowledge and creativity as social dynamics, as coming-into-being based around the emergence of persons and things as social processes that inform and shape institutions, politics, and cultural development. I am delighted to participate in the activities and debates around ELMCIP as these make material contributions to this effort through the focus on the way the social, as a creative force, is mediated and remediated in various ways.

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