Foreword - Ownership and Nurture

James Leach

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Ownership and nurture. What if we begin here, rather than with the Lockian assumption of a commonly given nature, appropriated by human labour? What if ownership did not take as its template a world of human subjects in rightful control over objects but the nurture of kin or animals? What if nurture also implied superiority and capture? Or it implied mutual dependence, or an externalized capacity for self-definition? What happens when power over other persons is absolute and institutionalized? Or objects directly constitute human persons through their ability to inscribe human qualities? Or when owning an object comes in many different forms, when, in fact, 'the form and nature of transactions defines the relationships between the objects and transactors involved'? Well, for a start, we will need to think again about what ownership and belonging implies, how it is achieved, and under what circumstances.

Imagine for a moment that everything you are, your very flesh and blood, your body and all you know, come from specific other people. (Is this so far fetched?). It is those other people who have laboured to produce you, who have dedicated their capacities and efforts towards the production of your body. The substance with which that body is made and sustained, the foods that give it solidity and have grown it, the knowledge that allows you to do anything at all, is what connects you to those others because it is in them in which it has its origin. And your status as a human being is dependent upon the recognition of this reality. That you do not 'own' you body because it is always the outcome and interest of others. That in turn, what you do with your body, what motivates 'you' to create or make or choose is not only influenced by the on-going history of your emergence *in relation* to other people and powers, but actually *only possible* because of these relations. Close family take different roles in constituting the very body you operate. More distant kin provide other elements appropriate to their relation and interest in you. Your body is always their interest, and whatever you can produce has to be thought about in terms of what and how you can acknowledge and reciprocate, sometimes through nurture yourself of distant others, their interest and involvement. In this scenario, knowing and acting on this is what it *is* to be a human being. And just as you are owned and owed to others, all those whom you yourself -- in your extended form of already being many other people -- nurture, feed, advise, offer company or land or labour to, are parts of you.

Now think of how 'ownership' appears under these conditions. A complex system of overlapping and intertwined interests results in nothing like private property, or common property, or communal ownership. The complexity in the abstract is boggling, but when lived, 'ownership' manifests in daily motivations and care giving, it manifests in long term projects to make public displays or reciprocations, in positive obligations and positive enmities, in the give and take and morality of kinship that is also 'economy', 'politics', 'creativity'. And this is only one, imagined rendering of a possible foundation for 'ownership', one made possible through close ethnographic analysis in a contemporary small language group on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. The expert analysis of South American societies, contextualised within a comparative anthropological frame, fosters just such a generative exposure of complex conceptual and social relations where responsibility, multiplicity and belonging, ownership and nurture, are key. It allows us to rethink what it is to be human.

Within this volume we find different versions of belonging and its rationale in South America rendered so eloquently that reading becomes a matter of conceptualising the coming into being of different social forms, based on understanding principles that shape their emergence. Acts of nurture, morality, obligation, dependence, control; practices of self and other, figure in distinctly Amazonian ways. They are examples that help us rethink bodies and personhood and to reconceptualise the cosmological basis of different forms of ownership. The chapters offer detailed and sophisticated studies in which we are given insight into many different versions of ownership in the kind of depth that invites fundamental questions.

It is important that we do not assume that what we see in any case is a version of the familiar. This makes it possible to approach ownership as the general, inclusive category *to be defined* in close attention to the ethnographic material at hand. The excitement and interest of doing so is the depth in which one must delve into a social form to reveal and make present the possibilities of conceiving human being in these diverse and vital manners. 'Property' is not the general term, as property is already part of the particular histories of several modes of conceptualising, institutionalising, and practicing ownership over both people and things. To clearly define a version of property as a particular historically situated form of ownership makes it possible to compare a Roman notion of the person (for example), the state, responsibility etc., with forms of control over the person, or the power of disposal over persons, in Amazonian societies. In each case, this 'property' is a specific case of power and control over a special category of person. In the latter, this was not a matter of 'economic' gain, but the production of kin and the incorporation of the life force of the 'other'. That makes it a distinct form of ownership that might have correspondence to Roman property but cannot be simply said to 'be' 'property'. It remains to be seen if projecting Amerindian captivity onto the category of slavery does or does not eclipse the originality of the indigenous relational structures of dependency.

In turn, to realise the specificity of 'private property' as a particular form incorporating possessive individualism and a construction of a particular subject/object distinction is also to locate it within a specific history. Not to propose it as a universal form, but to be able to be specific about elements such as spirit's distinction from matter, the role of the state as guarantor, or the reliance on the notion of nature, and the effects of these on people's relations with respect to 'things'. This volume offers insight into many other forms of ownership in which 'private property' is clearly an inadequate conceptual tool with which to approach them. That is not to deny possession, appropriation, inequality, objects, subjects or any other factor we might chose to isolate as analyst could or do exist in other forms of ownership. But it offers a healthy corrective to the dominant view of private property as the universally practiced human institution. Many other modes of being human are thrown into relief, made apparent through the choice of ownership and nurture as the key references the authors explicate. To focus on these terms helps to distinguish private property from other modes. As Melanesianists theorising the person have long understood, it is in the specific configuration of factors, produced by and producing the social, political and economic organisations they partake of, that is of interest, not advancing or refuting the universal validity of one or another mode.

To be specific about one form of ownership and its *historical* situation is to open up the genuine possibility of comparison across forms, times, and regions, and to invite enlightening explication of the composition of particular social forms. Possessive individualism is a historical reality, a historically emergent form of personhood. As a historical reality is it also not an inevitable outcome of humans' interactions with their environment or each other. For all Locke's appeal to the rationality of property, of it appearing a natural consequence of the need for survival and therefore appropriation, that very sense of its fitness and naturalness emerged from a series of assumptions about origins, a cosmological imagination that could only ever be one version of possibility. Chapters collected here present other cases, other origin points, and therefore specific cosmological imaginations with their own obvious (to those involved) ramifications in the right and natural connection between persons and persons and things.

In eschewing conventional notions of property through an attention to a wider category of ownership what we see is how embedded ownership is in assumptions about the person, the political, growth and support, and the subject. These assumptions become visible through ethnographic analysis that confounds simple binary oppositions between subjects and objects, or labour and nature. What follows is a further realisation that distinctions between common and private property, collective and individual ownership, property in persons and property in things, are also inadequately narrow for the lived realities of ownership. As is shown in these chapters, who one is, how that is calculated, what forms connections to others (and the powers of the world) take, have inseparable, form-generating presence in the practice and conceptualisation of being human. Intelligent and imaginative engagement with complex ethnographic realities opens the possibility for actually seeing the composition of 'ownership' as a multifaceted and almost primal factor in different modes of being human. Of course. Power, control, agency, action, responsibility and creativity flow from the organisation of people in relation to one another, and in relation to things. This inevitably involves connection. Whether one own spirits or sprits own one, the connection is undeniable and fundamental. The variability of connection and the effects these modes have is part of the variety and diversity of human being. That profound truth is made visible in these engrossing chapters in superbly generative ways. They offer multiple possibilities for understanding an 'ownership relation in the Amazonian sense of the word' and in that provide irresistible ground for further comparative effort.

James Leach, July 2015