The cognitive machinery of power: Reflections on Valeri's *The Forest of Taboos*

**ABSTRACT**

As Judith Butler has emphasized, for Michel Foucault, power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject, intrinsic to the formation of the self. Valerio Valeri's studies of the Huaulu, an egalitarian society of forest dwellers on a remote Indonesian island, help to disentangle these two aspects of power. Foucault often cautioned that his analysis of the history of European systems of thought made no claims to universality, but scholars working in the Foucauldian tradition have seldom ventured outside Europe. Valeri's analysis of Huaulu taboo clarifies and contextualizes Foucault's insights into the formative nature of power and offers new insights into the cognitive foundations of consumer capitalism.

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We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects.

—Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures"

"Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.

—Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*

In sum, the comparative study of taboo seems to reveal, or to make much clearer, two fundamental poles in the subject's subordination to order.

—Valerio Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos*

Some years ago the late Valerio Valeri contributed an afterword to a book of mine (Valeri 1991); here I wish to return the favor. Valeri's *The Forest of Taboos* (2000) explores the role of taboo in the formation of concepts of the self, the world, and the moral order among the Huaulu, a forest-dwelling people of the eastern Indonesian island of Seram with whom Valeri lived for a total of 40 months over a period of 20 years. *The Forest of Taboos* is over 500 pages long and yet comprises only a small part of Valeri's ethnography of the Huaulu. My aim here is not to comment on the whole of his complex argument but only to pick up a single thread. Valeri took his bearings from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, under whose direction he wrote his doctoral dissertation. In particular, Valeri came to wonder "whether Lévi-Strauss, together with many other thinkers of the time, was justified in turning the critique of the unitary subject into a total eradication of the subject from analytical practice" (2001:379). For, as Valeri observed, if the human subject is allowed to vanish into discourse, then to attribute any agency or autonomy to it is paradoxical.

I do not pretend to anticipate the further conclusions that Valeri might have drawn from his own research. Instead, I offer this article as a commentary on a single topic, the relationship of Huaulu ideas about the subject to their experience of power. The Huaulu are an egalitarian society who shun contact with the wider world and resist all attempts to bring them under the dominion of outsiders or even of each other. Yet their conduct and attitudes are tightly regulated by the system of beliefs that Valeri calls "taboo." He sees...
the proscriptions of taboo as central to the cognitive processes by which the Huaulu understand themselves. In particular, it appears that the process by which they bring the subject into existence, in the sense of the knowing and embodied self, the "person," also constructs the subject in the second sense of the word: one who is subject to a system of power. Thus, the Huaulu appear to experience what Michel Foucault has called a "repressive regime," a set of regulatory mechanisms through which subjects are produced and maintained (Foucault 1990; cf. Butler 1997:58). But for the Huaulu there is no external source of power: no state, chief, clinic, or bureau to legitimate and enforce these mechanisms. Instead, Valeri suggests that the very process of subject formation by means of taboo is sufficient to create the system of power by which their lives are ruled. If so, then the Huaulu collapse the whole process of the generation of subjects and power into the domain that Foucault termed "ethics." This is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it offers an altered perspective on the general topic of power (on the paradox that, as Judith Butler observes, "power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject") (1997:15). The Huaulu clarify and strengthen Foucault's original insight into the productive nature of ethics as the bridge between social norms and the self's relationship to itself (rapport à soi). At the same time, they sever this argument from the genealogy of power conceived as arising from external sources (the state, the police, the clinic, etc.). This demonstration helps to clarify a topic that has long been seen as one of the most weakly developed areas in poststructuralist theory, namely, the historical origins of regimes of power. Second, Valeri's analysis presents the Huaulu as employing different mental operations for the construction of the subject than those Foucault identified in European society. Foucault often cautioned that his analysis of the history of European systems of thought made no claims to universality. But anthropologists and historians working in the Foucauldian tradition have seldom ventured beyond the borders of Europe. This leads to the third point, that the Huaulu encourage us to imagine a wider horizon within which the "constitution of subjects" may occur.

The internalization of power

"As a form of power," writes Judith Butler, subjection is paradoxical:

To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what "one" is, one's very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside . . . this is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend upon for our existence. [1997:2]

Foucault linked this formative aspect of power to what he termed "disciplinary" and "regulatory" regimes. He urged historians to attend to the "micro-physics" of power (Foucault 1979:26): "how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes, which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc." (Foucault 1980b:97). One of his most persuasive expositions of this idea occurs in Discipline and Punish (1979):

Small techniques of notation, of registration, of constituting files, of arranging facts in columns and tables that are so familiar to us now, were of decisive importance in the epistemological "thaw" of the sciences of the individual. One is no doubt right to pose the Aristotelian problem: is a science of the individual possible and legitimate? A great problem needs great solutions perhaps. But there is the small historical problem of the emergence, towards the end of the eighteenth century, of what might generally be termed the "clinical" sciences, the problem of the entry of the individual (and no longer the species) into the field of knowledge; of the cross-examination, of anamnesis, of the "file" into the general functioning of scientific discourse. To this simple question of fact, one must no doubt give an answer lacking in "nobility": one should look into these procedures of writing and registration, one should look into the mechanisms of examination, into the formation of the mechanisms of discipline, and of a new type of power over bodies. Is this the birth of the sciences of man? It is probably to be found in these "ignoble" archives, where the modern play of coercion over bodies, gestures and behavior has its beginnings. [Rabinow 1984:202-203]

In this passage, as in his work generally, Foucault brings two aspects of power into juxtaposition. One consists of the "external" regimes of power. For example, in The History of Sexuality he describes the rise of monarchical power in Europe:

Faced with a myriad of clashing forces, these great forms of power functioned as a principle of right that transcended all the heterogeneous claims, manifesting the triple distinction of a unitary regime, of identifying its will with the law, and of acting through mechanisms of interdiction and sanction. [Foucault 1990:87]

The second aspect of power is subjection, assujettissement, the internalization of power as part of the constitution of the self. The two forms of power are related, according to Foucault. In his later works his emphasis shifted from historical accounts of the appearance of "regimes of truth" to studies
of the ways in which such regimes came to define concepts of the self. The former method he termed "genealogy" and the latter "ethics." Genealogies trace historical changes in the microphysics of power, as manifest in concrete events and institutions. Foucault seldom speculates on the motivations for such changes; indeed (as in the passage quoted above) he is skeptical of any Aristotelian approach to historical explanation. Here Foucault is something of a positivist: He directs attention to observable instances of power in society and traces their permutations, pausing occasionally to warn his readers that any attempt to theorize power will land them in the hopelessly compromised terrain of the "sciences of man":

If one tries to erect a theory of power one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis. But if power is in reality an open, more or less coordinated (in the event, no doubt, ill-coordinated) cluster of relations, then the only problem is to provide oneself with a grid of analysis that makes possible an analytic of relations of power. [Foucault 1980b:199]

To arrive at such an analysis, a "grid of intelligibility of the social order," it is necessary to adopt a nominalist view: "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical relationship in a particular society" (Foucault 1990:93). This "strategical relationship involves not merely the understanding, but the production of "knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called)" (Foucault 1979:305).

For Foucault, "ethics" is the study of the process by which "knowable man" is produced at the cognitive level. But as with genealogy, evidence must pass the test of nominalism: Foucault treats all statements, especially theoretical pronouncements, as evidence about the author's beliefs and mode of thought. The choice of the term ethics signals Foucault's belief that the process of self-formation crucially involves the internalization of social norms. Such norms are ubiquitous, producing not only docile prisoners but also prison reformers, therapists as well as patients, bourgeois as well as proletarian. Hence, Foucault reformulates "ethics" as the study of the self's relationship to itself, not (as in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition) the objective study of moral codes.

This relationship to the self has four components (Figure 1). The first is the "ethical substance," the part of the self or of behavior that is relevant for ethical judgment. Thus, Foucault argues that the conception of ethical substance in the ancient world differed from that of medieval Christianity or the modern age. The second component is the "mode of subjection": "the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral inclinations" (Davidson 1986:353). Such modes include submission to divine reason, or to con-

\[\text{Figure 1. Foucault's delineation of "ethics" (from Davidson 1986:353).}\]

vention, or contemplation of the demands of reason. The third aspect consists of self-formative activities, pratique de soi, which in Foucault's studies range from the confessional traditions of Catholicism to psychotherapy, asceticism, and self-help. The final component is the telos, or goal, of this self-formative activity, for example, purity and immortality in the Christian tradition. Foucault argues that these four aspects of ethics are related but that there is "a certain kind of independence between them" (Rabinow 1984:355).

Foucault stresses that all of these components of ethics—not only the acknowledged moral codes but also the various technologies of the self—have historical origins; they are the stuff of social life. But he brackets their origins as beyond the reach of historians, focusing instead on the functional relationships among the components of the self's relationship to itself. It is here that he locates a limited potential for active agency, for social actors that are not mere automatons. For example, in the third volume of The History of Sexuality, he traces the evolution of concepts and practices associated with the "care of the self" in the ancient world:

In these modifications of pre-existing themes one can see the development of an art of existence dominated by self-preoccupation ... that revolves around the question of the self, of its dependence and independence, of its universal form and of the connection it can and should establish with others, of the procedures by which it exerts its control over itself, and of the way in which it can establish a complete supremacy over itself. [Foucault 1986:238-239]

This is not so far from the historian's own practice. The interplay of ideas, the reshaping of the ethical substance by the rapport á soi and pratique de soi, can be productive: "As the arts of living and the care of the self are refined, some precepts emerge that seem to be rather similar to those that will be formulated in the later moral systems" (Foucault 1986:239).\(^1\) Thus it appears that the objectified moral code can be reshaped by the slow grinding of the gears of cognition. For example, in the conclusion to the same volume Foucault invites readers to observe the movement of the ancient mind, as an "active attention to sexual practice" engenders a different "mode of subjection":

\[^1\text{Foucault 1986:239}\]
At the same time as one dwells on it, and as the attention that one brings to bear on it is intensified, it increasingly appears to be dangerous and capable of compromising the relationship with oneself that one is trying to establish . . . A certain style of sexual conduct is thus suggested by this whole movement of moral, medical and philosophical reflection. [Foucault 1986:239]

And the world begins to change. Although Foucault thus argues that a “regime of truth and power” can be modified by cognitive processes occurring at the level of individual subjects, he stresses that these effects are limited and do not account for the replacement of one regime with another. The “moral code” that replaced that of late antiquity “derived from a profoundly altered ethics and from a different way of constituting oneself as the ethical subject of one’s sexual behavior” (Foucault 1986:240). But where do these new “regimes” come from? What processes produce them? How much of the work is done by cognition itself, the practices of self-formation that are Foucault’s main topic? We are not encouraged to ask. Yet one cannot help wondering, why this regime rather than some other? “All the same,” as one exasperated reviewer asked, “does someone initiate the whole business or not?” (Hoy 1986:35).

We have met the enemy . . .

Consider now the exotic beliefs of the Huaulu. Valeri writes: “A couple’ of men in a philosophical mood complain, not without pride, ‘We Huaulu people have a lot of taboos,’ while older men, referring to the alleged laxity of the younger generation, mumble pessimistically, ‘We don’t have any taboos left.’ “ He continues.

Intrigued, the ethnographer pays more attention, makes systematic inquiries, asks about every possibly imaginable combination that may be declared [taboo]. Yet the subject will soon prove to be inexhaustible: the explanations given to him, puzzling; the knowledge of botany and zoology required to identify the species involved, beyond his powers . . . At each new visit he will secretly hope that no new taboo will come his way, he even stops asking, and yet he stumbles onto at least a couple every day. He will grow as bitterly philosophical as those old men whom he first heard many years before complaining about the present inexistence of taboo, but regret under his breath that they were not quite right. [Valeri 2000:xxi]

Taboo is a venerable topic in anthropology. Is it best understood as ethics or religion? A system of reified moral rules or a formal logic of incompatibilities, with roots strangely entwined in both logic and the unconscious? At the risk of being tiresome, I must repeat that it is beyond the scope of this afterword to fully engage Valeri’s answers to this large question, the ultimate ground and nature of taboo. Instead, I merely attempt to summarize his views on the question at hand, the ways in which the cognitive processes of taboo create both the inner world of subjective experience and an objectified and salient moral order, a “regime of truth and power.”

Valeri distinguishes between two fundamental poles in the subject’s subordination to order (“subjectification” in Foucauldian terms) within the framework created by a comprehensive system of taboos. One pole emphasizes consumption and determines which objects are compatible with particular subjects. The other pole is based on the subject’s performative competence or ability and determines which actions are appropriate with which others. Valeri explains:

The former pole involves the subject’s subordination to an order felt as external to society. one to which society (or the subject as its member) must conform in his or her consumption. The latter pole emphasizes the subject’s subordination to an artificial, man-made order internal to Huuulu society. This—and the fact that many acts of which the internal order consists are ritual responses to the threatening phenomena of the outside world or of the body as participating in it—shows that the external order is felt to be more encompassing than the internal one. Although human order is at the center of the cosmos and is a response to it, that order is in the end dominated by the cosmos just as it is contained in it. Hence, any adequate form of relationship with the cosmos requires an adequate knowledge of it and the inference of what forms of contact and behavior are necessary. [2000:381]

Why should this be so? Valeri suggests that taboos proliferate to help maintain a global order of which the subject “is as much a part as the object” (Valeri 2000:381). Hence, to violate a taboo is to violate something of oneself. Taboos related to consumption—the first pole—define relations of compatibility between subjects and objects in terms of closeness or distance, similarity or difference. Negation, a refusal to consume, is used to express identity. An example is the Huuulu taboo on the consumption of dogs by hunters. Dogs are used for hunting, but they are also potentially edible.

It is taboo to treat the dog as food because it is identified as food maker, and as enemy because it is identified as friend . . . The dog evokes a type, the hunter, with which the Huuulu closely identify . . . If a possible food object, such as the dog, represents the subject in a relatively global form, then it is taboo. If it does so only by attributes or partial aspects, it is not. In the first case, the symbolic appropriation of the animal, not to mention its cooperation, is emphasized over the digestive one; in the second, vice versa. [Valeri 2000:372]
The Huaulu social universe is populated by classes of different types of subjects (for example, males and females, the living and the dead) of which individuals are instances. But “the subject is not just part of a classificatory order with animals and plants; it is also part of an order that is essentially human, internal to society and its acts” (Valeri 2000:380). The natural order of the cosmos exists independently of human actions, though they may threaten it, whereas the social order forms a whole that exists because of “a complete set of exclusively human acts” (Valeri 2000:383). This domain, the realm of ethical social action, has more to do with performance than with consumption: with initiation rites, feasts, and funerals, for example. This is Valeri’s second pole of the subordination of the subject to an imagined order, in this case, the order of the human social world. Here the logic of taboo insists on a relationship of interdependence among subjects, whose very being depends on the satisfactory performance of a whole series of acts, in the correct sequences, by other Huaulu. Thus, for example, women are subject to menstrual taboos; these take the form of avoidance, like other taboos on food or corpses. But women “are not just objects of taboo like animals, but also subjects . . . they may even declare that they follow certain taboos out of compassion for their men” (Valeri 2000:356). The human world includes the most complete and fully realized subjects, but the natural world includes beings that are also partially realized subjects, like birds, which participate in their own nonhuman society. Through these gradations of subjection, the natural world becomes permeated with morality and meaning, which in turn doubles back on itself to validate and universalize the ethical principles defining Huaulu subjection.

But the Huaulu are aware that their “universal” moral code is theirs alone. The most global form of the subject constituted by taboo is Huaulu society itself, which is indexed in misoneistic taboos intended to maintain the distinction between the Huaulu and powerful “others,” like coastal traders and Islamic farmers. By the logic of Huaulu taboo, the traders are to cloves (their principal crop) as farmers are to rice and Huaulu are to hunting. Consequently, the consumption of rice and cloves is taboo for Huaulu, as are other products of these alien worlds such as literacy. Thus, adherence to the whole regime of Huaulu taboos is portrayed as a conscious choice. There is no question that Huaulu often find the strict regime of their taboos burdensome, yet they choose to follow them because it makes them Huaulu. The two halves of the Foucauldian model are thus joined: To be Huaulu is to choose to submit to the strict regime that is the Huaulu “mode of subjection.” “We have met the enemy,” says Pogo, “and he is us.”

Of particular interest, from a comparative perspective, is Valeri’s analysis of the cognitive machinery by which the Huaulu achieve a rapport à soi that is also a rapport aux autres and, indeed, à tout. Taboo relies on negation, a decision not to consume such things as rice, cloves, and dogs. The act of negation ratchets up the level of awareness since it requires a conscious ethical choice. Thus, one is who one is, if one is a Huaulu, “by virtue of a certain amount of non-being” (Valeri 2000:411). Valeri attempts to clarify this logic by contrasting it with that of Western consumerism, “ruled by the rallying cry ‘Shop until you drop’” (Valeri 2000:412). The logic of consumerism appears at first as the inverse of taboo: Self-formation, or perhaps one could even say, self-assertion is achieved by the positive act of consumption. Whereas the Huaulu hunter must choose not to eat dogs, in consumer society one is encouraged to consume, because “the more we consume, the more we are noticed, watched and talked about” (Valeri 2000:413). Indeed the greater and more prestigious the items of consumption, the greater we become. Yet taboo and consumerism are not really mirror images, as Valeri notes, because the cognitive machinery is a little different. Whereas taboo requires a conscious ethical choice, consumerism may work best when it is largely unconscious, as when advertisers gently guide professors to the purchase of Volvos. Sidney Mintz has chronicled the historical origins of Western consumerism as a kind of anti-taboo system that connected social identity with the consumption of particular items. At first this was confined to a few luxury items, like sugar, but by the end of the 19th century it had begun to extend to clothing and other “consumer goods.” As this system reaches maturity in late capitalism, “there is nothing left for the consumer to classify,” as Adorno and other Frankfurt School theorists complained, “producers have done it for him” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1982:125). One can become nearly any type of social subject, even for oneself, by the appropriate patterns of consumption. But these identities come ready-made, so to speak; they are available for purchase, and in case of any ambiguity their appropriateness can easily be checked via the mass media. Consumerism thus lacks the first of Valeri’s poles of subordination to order, namely, subordination to an ethical system embodied in both nature and society. Instead, nature is fully consumable (as we are now endeavoring to demonstrate). One could say that for the Huaulu, rapport à soi is achieved by conscious subordination of the self to this “order felt to be external,” for consumers, vice versa.

But perhaps we as anthropologists should not try to make too much of the Huaulu case. They number fewer than one thousand persons and inhabit one of the most remote corners of Indonesia. Nor does the absence of an “external” repressive regime leave them free from repression in Foucauldian terms: An ontology of status differences is produced by their ethical code. Perhaps they are merely “premodern,” a remnant population that will inevitably soon yield to the simple but irresistible logic of consumerism and shop until they drop. If so, the fact that their repressive regime appears to consist of a self-imposed ethical system
may merit only a footnote. But perhaps the Huaulu are not quite unique?

“Wealth-power,” consumerism, and the subject

On October 20, 2001, at a Kwakwaka’wakw (Southern Kwakiutl) potlatch at Alert Bay, British Columbia, Christopher Cook’s aunt bestowed one of her names on a granddaughter. Another Kwakwaka’wakw chief, who spoke for Cook, explained to the 500 assembled tribal members and guests that Cook’s aunt had been worried about her health recently, implying that she was anxious to transfer the name before she died. Then, about thirty of her kin danced their thanks to the chiefs. This was one of many incidents—including speeches, masked dances, feasting, and the be-stowal of names, songs, and gifts—that took place in a potlatch Cook gave for his father and brother, who had died within four days of each other. “Taking care of business in the Big House” took two full days and cost Cook $55,500, a large fraction of his income from several years of salmon fishing.

Where Huaulu ethics oblige submission to a universal moral code, traditional Kwakwaka’wakw ethics impose an even heavier duty: the regeneration of the world. This ethical system has been in dialogue with capitalism for more than 150 years. Franz Boas wrote copiously about it, beginning in the 1880s, and Christopher Cook spoke eloquently on the topic at his potlatch, as he explained why he had chosen to impoverish himself by giving away great quantities of cash and consumer goods, including boxes of macaroni, blankets, and towels. For Cook the question was personal: Must one’s identity be formed by consumerism, or can the temptations of wealth be domesticated and contained within a more complex and capacious ethical system? Among the Kwakwaka’wakw, it seems that consumer capitalism has yet to gain a decisive victory, despite a cultural penchant for shopping on a truly heroic scale.

According to Boas, the conflict between Kwakwaka’wakw and white ideas about commodities were already a source of much tension when he arrived at Alert Bay in October 1886. By then European and American traders were busily acquiring Kwakwaka’wakw masks and other items of material culture that could be sold as commodities. The population had been decimated by smallpox, and the Canadian government and missionaries were trying to suppress Kwakwaka’wakw religion, especially the potlatch. Boas was asked by the Kwakwaka’wakw why he was interested in the potlatch:

We want to know whether you have come to stop our dances and feasts, as the missionaries and agents who live among our neighbors try to do . . . . It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbors. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, we shall observe ours. (Rohner 1969:33)

As Boas discovered, the distribution of property in the potlatch is not a simple matter of gift giving. Instead, it is a complex process that links the augmentation of chiefly personal identity to the renewal of cosmological forces. Part of the complexity derives from the belief that there are a limited, fixed number of subjects in the world, who cycle through animal and human incarnations but retain identities indexed by their names. Since the number of these “souls,” or subjects, is finite, each one is precious. Souls are unevenly distributed among the creatures of the sky, ocean, earth, and forest, and they can be both lost and stolen.

Thus, all creatures must work conscientiously to perpetuate their species by ensuring that souls are properly reincarnated within their own domain of existence. This can only be achieved if all beings act morally by performing rituals of regeneration for those creatures taken as prey (see Boas 1930:205–7; Goldman 1975; Walens 1981). The Kwakwaka’wakw’s preservation of inherited names was but one aspect of this intricate ritual calculus for restoring the souls of the dead to their initial positions within the cosmic scheme. [Masco 1995:59]

The Kwakwaka’wakw ethical system placed the weighty burden of ensuring the regeneration of the natural world in human hands, more specifically, in the hands of the chiefs. The rank and the reputation of a chief was based on his ability to embody and enliven one or more souls in addition to the one he was born with. Proof of these powers came from his ability to accumulate “wealth” from the world, in particular from other subjects like salmon who chose to give it to him. The potlatch (“to give”) provided a venue to demonstrate the extent of this wealth, thus indexing a chief’s more-than-human ontological status, and subsequently to prove his ethical worth by giving it away (as the animals had given it to him). Thus the Kwakwaka’wakw understood the acquisition and distribution of wealth to be a cyclical process, in which the self-formative activities of individuals acquiring names and wealth were the fundamental basis for world renewal and social prosperity. A chief should strive to win more names through inheritance, marriage, and warfare; to prove his power by the accumulation and distribution of wealth in potlatch; and gradually to divest himself of these names to his heirs so as to preserve them for another generation and die a commoner (Boas 1925: 229–230; Goldman 1975:58–59). As anthropologist Joseph Masco has written in a recent study of the potlatch, “An understanding of the total value of material goods in pre-colonial Kwakwaka’wakw society is contingent on recognizing the role that they play within a symbolic economy which employs material items as a metaphor for spiritual wealth” (1995:16).
But as capitalism began to permeate Kwakwaka'wakw society, chiefs lost their unique status as the only individuals able to amass wealth and a dilemma surfaced: Should commoners who acquired wealth through their interactions with the whites be permitted to give it away and acquire the kind of greatness formerly reserved for hereditary chiefs? According to Boas, the Kwakwaka'wakw found a solution by creating a new category of rank based entirely on the distribution of wealth in potlatches. Twelve “Eagle” seats were invented for this purpose. Boas (1921:784) hints that the choice of “eagles” as the emblem for this new rank suggests an ironic commentary by the hereditary chiefs on the generosity of the nouveau riche, because eagles are physically powerful birds who steal carrion from other birds and leave behind only scraps for other birds to eat. The “Eagle” seats provided a way to incorporate the novelty of wealthy commoners in the system of Kwakwaka'wakw ethics. But, it proved impossible to reserve the seats for commoners because the “Eagles” represented symbolic riches that hereditary chiefs might desire as they would any other name, to augment their personal status.

A second innovation was the adoption of sheer quantity as a measure of “wealth-power,” as demonstrated by the famous example of Hudson’s Bay blankets. As the blankets were all identical, rank could be indexed only by quantitative comparisons. According to Boas (1921:883), 9,000 blankets were given away at a single potlatch in 1869. But the blankets did not replace the animal skins that had an iconic relationship to the souls of the animals that bore them; instead, they added a new dimension to augment the display of power and generosity at the potlatches.

At Christopher Cook’s potlatch in 2001, several more dimensions were in evidence. Very large quantities of ordinary consumer goods worth tens of thousands of dollars were handed out to the guests. The goods selected for this distribution appeared to have been chosen with an eye to their use-value rather than their brand identity: Armani and Calvin Klein were not much in evidence. Instead, prestigious items were all handmade: Silver bracelets and ornate button blankets and quilts were bestowed on special guests. Cash was given in proportion to one’s rank: $20 to senior chiefs, $10 for lesser nobles, and $5 for everyone else. The most valuable gifts were the ancient inherited names, often with songs and masks attached to them, such as the one conferred by Cook’s aunt. As to the meaning of these gifts, Joseph Masco has argued that in the modern era, this suggests a shift of emphasis from Valeri’s first pole of subjectification (rapport à tout) in favor of the second (rapport aux autres), correlated with the decline of traditional Kwakwaka’wakw religion and also with the transition to a capitalist economy. Although this is very plausible, it is also evident that for the participants in Cook’s potlatch, the entire process was meant to enhance a sense of identity based on achieving rapport à tout, by referencing the manifold benefits produced by adherence to the Kwakwaka’wakw ethical code. This point was brought home to me when, conscious of my identity as a wealthy white, I attempted to wave away the gift of two five-dollar bills and a basket of useful things. These gifts were simply placed on my lap, as my startled neighbors whispered that to decline them would be an insult to the chief. Later, chastened, I admired more five-dollar bills sewn to the tail of a dancing sea serpent.

Psychoanalysis in reverse?

It is clear that a Huaulu system of taboos would be a poor match with a market economy based on capitalism. How could one possibly keep track of all the things that one should not consume? Similarly, on purely logical grounds it would seem that Kwakwaka’wakw beliefs also ought to be incompatible with a consumer economy, because the system provides for only a small, fixed, and relatively inflexible stock of subjective identities. Instead, the inspired idea that sheer quantities of things, like Hudson’s Bay blankets, could index “wealth-power” provided a way to encompass capitalist acquisition within the Kwakwaka’wakw ethical system. As Marshall Sahlins has written, the blankets “when publicly distributed made quantitative comparisons of their qualitative differences. The expansion of capitalist trade opened new vistas of social greatness to Kwakiutl chiefs” (2000:453). Similarly, the Eagle Chiefs, the sea serpent, and even the anthropologist festooned with cash may enlarge our sense of the possibilities of the subject’s relationship to consumer capitalism on the margins of the world system. Perhaps, as Sahlins has argued, the expansion of capitalism is more tightly coupled to religious values than even Weber realized.

But the question of the ethical basis for consumer capitalism is logically subordinate to the larger problem of the subject’s relationship to power. Valeri himself was rather skeptical of Foucault’s formulation of this problem, arguing that Foucault had merely transformed “the Nietzschean critique of Kant and its Heideggerian aftermath . . . into pop-philosophy and some exciting (if not very reliable) history” (2001:375). But though he preferred the simple clarity of Lévi-Strauss’s statement of the problem, Valeri agreed that the demise of the unitary subject “created paradoxes that threatened to make anthropology theoretically indefensible” (2001:375). Thus, for Lévi-Strauss as much as for Foucault, “structures were not made by the subject, but on the
contrary made whatever was left of it—and it was unclear what was left of it beyond a surface effect of the interplay of structures in their incessant transformation" (Valeri 2001:379).

Here I have argued that Valeri’s own work opens a new perspective, by shifting the argument from abstract philosophy to anthropology, more specifically, to a comparative analysis of the cognitive machinery by which subjects produce themselves. It is interesting to compare Valeri’s perspective with that of Frankfurt School scholars, whose work in some ways closely parallels Valeri’s. Where Levi-Strauss simply left the subject out of his analysis, the Frankfurt sociologists offered a historical account of the ways in which the spread of mass consumer culture gradually imprisoned the subject in a hall of mirrors in which genuine critical self-awareness became increasingly difficult. This view was essentially an extension of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism: In late capitalism the individual acquires personal social identity by the consumption of commodities to which subjective meanings have become attached, thus short-circuiting a more genuine (Kantian–Hegelian) process of reflection. Consumerism works against critical self-awareness: as Leo Lowenthal lamented, it is “psychoanalysis in reverse” (Jay 1973:173). Consequently, in consumer society rapport à soi lacks authenticity; it consists of nothing more ambitious than consumption itself, the relatively mindless acquisition of consumables that function as signs. According to Adorno, the process of objectification that begins with commodity fetishism ends with individuals who lose all awareness of themselves as other than objects defined by the productive process and consumer culture. Even outside the domain of work, the same processes of objectification occur, as the occupations of “leisure,” “recreation,” and even the arts are absorbed into a cult of consumerism:

With the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men—even those of the individual to himself—were bewitched. The individual is reduced to the nodal point of the conventional responses and modes of operation expected of him. Animism spiritualized the object, whereas industrialism objectifies the spirits of men. [Horkheimer and Adorno 1982:28]

Adorno’s view resembles Valeri’s in that it provides a historicized account of the process of subject formation. But Adorno sees the imprisonment of the subject in late capitalism as an effect produced by powerful and somewhat mysterious external forces. Capitalism somehow produces the appropriate mode of subjection to itself. In contrast, Valeri presents us with a case in which the “external regime” is the unambiguous product of the subject’s own cognitive processes. Valeri thus restores a large measure of active agency to the Huaulu subject and shows how the “external regime” that governs behavior is produced by Hegelian operations of mind. Where Adorno sought escape from consumer-capitalism’s hall of mirrors in the purest products of Mind, such as Schoenberg’s 12-tone music, Valeri shows us the Huaulu carrying out the many mental acts required to construct their own hall of mirrors. In so doing, he offers an intriguing perspective on the question that motivated his personal journey from academic philosophy to the forests of eastern Indonesia: Is “a history of the triumph of individualism an adequate account of the notion of subject—or, for that matter, an adequate account of modern society?” (Valeri 2001:380).

Notes

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to David Suzuki and Christopher Cook, my hosts at the potlatch; to Janet Hoskins, James Greenberg, Tad Park, Thérèse de Vet, Carol Lansing, Linda Forman, and several anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, and to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford for time to reflect.

1. Judith Butler also highlights the potential for agency that emerges in the cognitive processes set in motion by the internalization of norms:

In what many have come to see as a finally utopian gesture in Foucault, this proliferation of the body by juridical regimes beyond the terms of dialectical reversal is also the site of possible resistance. . . . Criminal codes which seek to catalogue and institutionalize normality become the site for a contestation of the concept of the normal; sexologists who would classify and pathologize homosexuality inadvertently provide the conditions for a proliferation and mobilization of homosexual cultures. [1997:59]

2. The taboo on buying and consuming rice and cloves is less strict than that on planting them, which is absolutely and universally taboo because rice production indexes a whole form of life viewed by the Huaulu as opposite to theirs. It requires more work and more servitude to the plant throughout time and, in any case, techniques and relations that one learns from others and that partly turn one into those others (an agriculturalist or planter of a commercial crop instead of a hunter). In contrast, merely buying rice or cloves, just like any other product one finds in the market, allows one to maintain a greater distance to ensure one’s identity. [Valeri 2000:358–359]

3. Mintz argues that tobacco, sugar and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could become different by consuming differently. . . . It is closely connected to England’s fundamental transformation from a hierarchical, status-based, medieval society to a social-democratic, capitalist, and industrial society. [1985:210–211]

Sugar, he points out, was an ideal substance for fetishism. “the first exotic luxury transformed into a proletarian necessity.” Mintz concludes that “we are what we eat: in the modern western world, we are made more and more into what we eat, whenever forces we have no control over persuade us that our consumption and our identity are linked” (1985:211).

4. In a recent study of clothing that mirrors Mintz’s analysis of sugar, Diana Crane argues that
as the first widely available consumer good, fashionable clothing was coveted both as a marker of achieved status and as a means of indicating a person's social status within a social stratum. “Consumer” fashion, which replaced “class” fashion, is much more amorphous and unpredictable than class fashion. [2000:239, 246]

5. “The term ‘potlatch’ derives from Chinook jargon and means simply ‘to give’ ” (Drucker and Heizer 1967:8).
6. Or so one might conclude from Joseph Masco’s recent analysis of the history of the Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch. Masco writes that by the 20th century, “commodity-capitalism was the means of achieving social success.” Yet the potlatch persisted:

What for the early nineteenth century noble had been a conversion of symbolic into economic capital (in the potlatch) was inverted into a twentieth-century transformation of individual material success into mytho-social power.... Gone was the ritualization of everyday life which linked individual and group morality to the stability of the physical universe in a totalizing symbolic scheme. ... By distributing property (now primarily in the form of commodities, not religious symbols), the noble demonstrated a continuing moral commitment to the whole of Kwakwaka’wakw society. [Masco 1995:70]

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accepted December 20, 2002
final version submitted January 16, 2003