Labour Reading Group 31.10.2013:

Ingjerd Hoëm' s introduction plus Penny Harvey's comments.

Ingjerd's introduction:

General: "What is Labour in the Pacific?"
Taking the opportunity to make a brief survey of the current literature on 'labour' in the Pacific region, I discovered what I had long suspected: there is very little on the subject. In itself, this is interesting. What I did find was a rich literature of the "survey" type. The Chapter "Labour Mobility in the Pacific: Creating seasonal work programs in Australia" by Nic Maclellan and Peter Mares (Ch 8 in the Volume *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands*, Ed. Stewart Firth, ANU e-press, 2006) is an excellent example of a fact-based presentation of temporary work and its effects on migration in the region. This kind of literature is useful as a starting point for anthropological projects, presenting us with an update and overview of macro-trends on the ground. On a more analytical level, an article by Satendra Prasad in *The Journal of Pacific Studies* (from 2000, Vol, 24, No1, 77-98)"Linking economic globalisation and regimes of labour regulation. Trends in the Asia-Pacific region", pays attention to labour market institutions, and relates state regulation (and de-regulation) of labour to processes of accelerated growth. Again, such literature may alert us to phenomena of significance for our studies, but need be coupled with ethnographic documentation for us to see what these trends represent locally. The only anthropologist at Auckland University engaging with research on labour, Cris Shore, carries out research in Europe (see for example Tess Altman and Cris Shore 2010 "Social Welfare and Democracy in Europe. What Role for the private and Voluntary sectors?", RECON Working Papers, ARENA, UiO).

Looking for such literature in current anthropological writing from the Pacific, what I found fall into two main headings: Migration and trans-national relations (exemplified by the volume *Migration and Transnationalism, Perspectives from the Pacific*, Eds. Helen Lee and Steve Tupai Francis, ANU e-press 2009), and Economy (an excellent example here is "Churches and the Economy of Samoa", by Cluny and La'avasa Macpherson, published in The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 23, Number 2, Fall 2011, pp. 303-338. University of Hawaii Press). The anthropological works under both of these headings in general combine ethnographic in-depth knowledge of the area of study with sociological quantitative methods, thus representing a distinct approach that is not so common in the social or cultural anthropology of Northern Europe.

The two articles that I selected for today's discussion however, bear more close resemblance to the anthropological studies of labour that we have looked at so far, although the article by Frederick Damon somehow defies common standards of genre and categorisation.

1. The article "Making a Life: Getting Ahead, and getting a Living in Aboriginal New South Wales" is written by Lorraine Gibson at Macquarie University. Her article is a study of the relationship between aboriginal people in Wilcannia, and the changing labour market. What for me is the most interesting point in her presentation is the demonstration that this relationship has changed historically. A major shift has occurred from a situation where people had access to and participated in temporary or more long-term farm-work to a situation where people find it increasingly difficult to enter the labour market as it now requires skills acquired through higher education. Hence people are caught in a cycle of welfare and "betterment projects", that represent resources for the "aid-workers" (creating jobs for them, and channelling economic resources into the local community) and for those "in need of betterment". For the last category, this welfare offer comes at a certain price, to use the system of social benefit as a resource, amounts to a life "on the dole", as a permanent underclass. Gibson links her argument at this point to deeper lying differences in the life-projects of the people involved. For most aboriginal peoples in this area, she argues, to "become someone", i.e. personal achievement, is not a goal in this kin-based community. Rather, a person's well-being and motivation is tied in with the group - the relevant roles defined by life-stages and demands of the significant others, and from this participation material support follows.

However, and importantly, this orientation did not constitute an insurmountable barrier to participating in manual labour when it was available locally. It is tempting to speculate that it wouldn't represent a qualitative hindrance for participation in white collar jobs either, as long as these does not demand a person's full time and dedication to a life-project taking him or her away from family and kin. In other words, I speculate that the impasse described by Gibson and many others, describing a situation of growing dependency and marginalisation of Australian aborigines, be read as a reflection of an organisation of labour according to race and class in Australian society.

2. The article " 'Labour Processes' Across the Indo-Pacific: Towards a Comparative Analysis of Civilisational Necessities", is written by Frederick Damon at the University of Virginia. The article compares what the author calls *labour processes* in three different social systems, commonly identified with three regions: Austronesian (South Pacific), East Asia (China) and Western. His main project is to follow Feuchtwang and Rowlands in their attempt to create "a notion of history that seem genuinely attentive to the significance of long term pasts and their singularity." Central to this project is, at first somewhat surprisingly to me, the category 'civilisation'.
However, when looking at how Damon approaches it, as modes or techniques of relating to and transforming the material, and as "conditions and qualities of work", a comparative project emerges. A qualitative difference emerges based on how cultures deal with what he sees as the mimetic quality (creating redundancy or self-similarity) characterising social life in general. The difference then becomes between those cultures where this quality is valued and elaborated upon, and where it is utilised but denied.
I shall return to this point, but before I do so I wish to state what fascinates me with this article: the potential that I see in it for challenging current regional

models of culture areas, pointing beyond the earlier studies demonstrating the existence of gate-keeping concepts and theoretical bias in the literature (cf. e.g. L. Abu-Lughod on Zones of Theory in the Arab World.) A way to achieve this, he seems to argue, is through compiling ethnographic studies on a large scale, and then look for emergent patterns. This approach demonstrates a background in structuralism, but as he comes up with three different, basic modes of orientation, as manifest patterns of production and reproduction of the world, it may just be possible that we are on to something more dynamic. His interest in 'materiality' makes him look at the labour process as "contextualised practice in accordance with the structures defining culturally defined purposes of production and their correlative exchange processes" (p 172). This means that he approaches labour processes as entwined with aspects that many would relegate to studies of aesthetics and ontologies, that is, aspects that commonly fall under the rubric of 'religion', beliefs or ideology.

The assessment of his analysis of the Chinese material, I shall, as Damon himself also asks for himself - to leave to others more qualified. In brief, he finds that an *elaboration of skill* is dominant, to the extent of becoming an art form (p 185).   The Austronesian patterns of production and reproduction, comes in the form of a complementary dualism (frequently gendered, always relational, sometimes hierarchical and sometimes egalitarian). Damon's analysis here is based on the works of James Fox, whose analysis of social dynamics in the peopling of the Pacific as characterised by a pattern of precedence, and that creates local difference, is commonly accepted.

The Western pattern of production and reproduction that he describes, is the odd one out in this comparative venture, in that its labour process works to set people apart from the process itself and also from its products (c.f. the theory of alienation). He draws on Paul Rabinow's work in order to describe how this separation or distanciation is a driving force behind the development of increasingly refined tools, which contribute to separate people, not only from the fruits of their labour but also from the labour process itself. A substitutability and de-skilling of labour follow from this. (And sports emerges as an arena set apart for "skilling" at the same time as this quality takes over the labour process in the west.) Adding to this is the denial of the quality of self-similarity, as expressed in the immense drive to produce new, unique things, replacing the old at an accelerating speed, but – according to Damon (arguing against P. Rabinow's research goal of describing the 'particularity of practices', p184) in reality producing more of the same, only on a different scale.

In conclusion, firstly my initial impression of a scholarly division of labour within Pacific studies, where we have on the one hand studies of "economy, migration and globalisation" and on the other studies of "cultural areas, of seemingly exotic practices such as the *kula*-network", has been confirmed.
Secondly, it seems, from the reading of the two articles presented briefly here, that there is great potential in trying to wed the two traditions of scholarship. What happens for example, when, as is often the case with many development and aid projects, or other trans-national economic enterprises, two qualitatively different labour regimes meet? There is a great need for this kind of ethnographic studies in the Pacific.

Thirdly and finally, Damon's attempts to use the comparative approach explicitly *in the same manner* on the labour processes of the West as the two others that he studies is a refreshing attempt to engage with large scale comparison, albeit of a somewhat idiosyncratic kind. To what extent his approach is empirically based, and how sound his generalisations are, is open for discussion though.

Penny's comments:

Hi everyone - yet again two more very interesting articles - I really wish I was with you to discuss these - especially to hear Ingjerd's response to these articles - I found the discussion of the 'boat' as social form quite fascinating - but how does it look to an area specialist? I found Damon's depiction of 'the West' quite unconvincing by contrast - which left me suspicious!

Gibson - I found this a fascinating and sensitive piece - beautifully written and somehow unflinching in its presentation of what it takes to not work - what people accepted in terms of 'going down' together if that is what it takes. There was something very refreshingly unromantic about the account - where the value of not working was only ambiguously positive - the historical conditions of not working so strongly present - and yet the determination to find some autonomy by refusing work clearly liberating too. I wondered about how we might take forward the tension between being and becoming - and whether the Deleuzian focus on becoming is challenged by this ethnography. I suppose in the end I found myself thinking about what it takes to 'become' kin - in the sense that being kin also has to be worked at - you don't go to work because you have to attend to kin, to prevent a family quarrel, or be with those you need to be with - -- but the work of being kin is about acting on the world with effort - but is quite separate from the work of employment where 'the world' and 'the effort' are of a different order - how might we think about the separation of work and labour in these terms? These questions are also relevant to the other reading - where I wondered how comparable the labour processes chosen acutally were.

Damon - I was very appreciative of the comparative scope of this article and the questions that drove the enquiry fitted well with the conceptual challenge of the previous piece - to think in terms of specific orderings of human sociality - in ways that challenge how we might imagine the associations between labour and social formation, or labour and personhood. However, as I read on I became less convinced as the argument seemed to rely on a structuralist reading that had to assume cultural singularities - even homogeneities. I am OK with this up to a point - but I think it was handled better in the previous piece - where ambiguities and limits were openly part of the argument. I lost trust in Damon's approach when asked to accept that the relational forms of a California biotech company stand for 'western' labour practice (Rabinow is presented on page 192 as ethnographer of the present - but surely he is ethnographer of a biotech company - his other work on 'the contemporary' is far more complex and would not assume a single model) - and I wondered if we are comparing like with like when we look at craft practices in E. Asia alongside machinic technologies in 'the West'? What about western craft traditions? Or what about Elizabeth's work in the Phillipines - how might Filipino and Korean labour in the shipyards be

understand - or does this become 'western' by virtue of the capitalist context of production?

I also wondered (page 175) how the current crises of western social organisation (financial crisis, environmental/climate crisis, crisis of the welfare state, etc.) fits the idea that in the West crises are understood to be external to society .... these 'crises' are internally produced - what difference does that make to the model? Or put another way (page 178) - does the social system create and understand itself? Is the social system getting a new view of itself?

On page 183 I found the argument about sport and substitution unconvincing - and it made me begin to think about domestic labour - and how domestic labour would fit this model - surely feminist analysis showed this to be labour that is skilled and painstaking - despite not being valued as such.

Nevertheless the article gives some provocative models and images for thinking through how a focus on labour practices might inform broader values and social arrangements. The extent to which people see themselves as situated in totalising structures is an interesting question - but not one I would look to answer with these broad comparative categories. My choice would be to look at infrastructural systems - for a different sense of what a 'whole' might be, and how such 'wholes' might be understood - or to look at institutions (surely the EU sees itself as a 'whole' - if it sees itself at all that is!).