one could translate the Pacific Islanders’ cognate request for ‘knowledge exchange’ into an exchange that would accomplish something (by my lights) of value. Listening to what they say is a start, and they talk about the academy. The borrowings back and forth described here are highly particular, indeed non-replicable, but I hope they shed some light on aspects of academics’ attachment to disciplines (whether or not part of interdisciplinary practice so-called). It is an attachment not amenable to management without cost.

Dr Brara’s commentary reflects just such attachment and contributes to diverse potential controversies that these further remarks of mine will certainly not have laid to rest. Thank you!

Discussant’s comment II

For and against an ‘Indian’ Sociology: A response to Marilyn Strathern’s ‘What’s in an argument?’

Dwaipayan Banerjee

It is a pleasure to respond to Professor Strathern’s observations on the limits and possibilities knowledge exchange. Her lecture reminds us of two questions that are staked in any analysis of knowledge flows. The first: what counts as ‘knowledge’ and what are the processes through which we come to an agreement on its forms? The second: on what terms can knowledge be exchanged (what kind of gift is it), and what relationships (between giver and recipient) does it presume and shape? The materials with which she answers these questions are taken from ethnographies of Melanesia and from debates within US academia. In my response here,
I am curious about how her concerns play out when we take up another context of knowledge exchange: South Asian sociology and anthropology. More specifically, I take this journal’s own history as a starting point in thinking about the politics and processes of knowledge exchange. I do this because I find that one of Strathern’s insights (the generativity of academic debate as a model for knowledge exchange) exemplified in an early moment in the history of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in a way that both complicates and furthers her argument.

To elaborate, Strathern describes how ‘knowledge transfers’ have become ubiquitous in policy discussions, driven by misguided calls to transact a one-way exchange from those who have expertise to those who need it. Against such a seamless and smooth imagination of its movement, Strathern praises habits of knowledge production that encourage disagreements, divergence and controversy. And such flows of knowledge refract the social positions out of which they are grown. Its movements are gift-like in that they trace social relations, reflecting upon existing obligations and anticipating new ties. For one instance of such knowledge flows, she takes Euro-American academia as a model that thrives and grows out of deep disagreements about its most fundamental concepts. Taking a detour through the history of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (*CIS*), I want to push this aspect of Strathern’s argument here further: that academic debate as a model of knowledge exchange is able to bear the weight of dissent over its foundational terms. I am curious about what happens to this generous understanding of academic practices when we blur the distinction between ‘Euro-American’ academia and academics that occupy their traditional sites of investigation. Strathern gestures to these fault-lines, but my effort here is to centre them, further pushing against metropolitan-periphery distinctions in academic knowledge production.¹

*For a sociology of India*

Captured as a prisoner of war in World War II, Marcel Mauss’ student Louis Dumont found himself with the time to rekindle an old desire: to learn Sanskrit. After exhausting the books his wife could send him, he asked for

¹ In an interview, Strathern clarifies that she uses the categories ‘Euro-American’ and ‘Melanesian’ as provisional constructs and that she takes the community of Indian academics at the Delhi School of Economics as part of Euro-American academia (Abraham and Arif 2013).

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permission to use the municipal library, only to be taken by the prison guard for lessons to the Indologist and Nazi-apologist Walther Schubring (Galey 1981). Upon his return home, he trained further under Georges Dumézil, who dissuaded him from a comparative study of dragons, persuading him instead to write his first book on French folklore. He began his sustained ethnographic work in India in 1949, publishing two monographs from these materials by 1957. It was that same year that, along with David Pocock, he published the inaugural issue of CIS. The opening sentence of the journal laid out its ambition; a proper sociology of India could only be achieved by turning to Indology and a study of classical texts. In other words, Dumont and Pocock were dissatisfied with the approach of most ethnographers of India at the time, who they described as overly concerned with tribes at the ‘peripheries’ of Indian civilisation (Dumont and Pocock 1957: 8). Instead, they suggested Indology as a corrective that would show India to be a civilisational unity, and the primitive tribes to be outliers to a central civilisational project.

Take for example the reprint of Bougle’s ‘Essais’ in the second volume of the journal (Dumont and Pocock 1958). Rather than give that place of pre-eminence to G.S. Ghurye or J. H. Hutton (who they found unable to generate a comprehensive theory of a pan-Indian caste system), Dumont and Pocock chose Bougle for his belief that the proper subject of anthropology should be not for ‘that which passes, but that which survives’: the fundamental principles of Hindu society (1958: 32). For the same reason they appreciated Bougle’s method while they objected to M.N. Srinivas’ work on the Coorgs (1959: 41). While Srinivas found that Coorg practices had much in common with those of other Hindus, he was wary about extrapolating that the present Coorg social order was a microcosm of a broader Hindu whole. Dumont and Pocock wanted him to make exactly that more ambitious claim: that the Coorgs and other Hindu groups clearly showed that they were all bound together ‘whether they know it or not’ (1959: 42). Srinivas’ problem, the editors went on to claim, reflected a basic methodological misrecognition by Indian sociologists of a civilisational whole.

As Dumont recollected decades later, the first three issues of CIS were not well received, so much so that they abandoned their grand plan to not sign the articles, hoping to signal a collective scholarly project (Galey 1981: 19). The objections to CIS came from a range of sources and were not at all unified in their complaint. For a first example, in keeping
with their expressed openness to criticism, the editors published F.G. Bailey’s (then a lecturer in SOAS) objections to CIS in 1959. Bailey was unequivocal: by instituting the journal, Dumont and Pocock threatened to define sociology out of existence (1959: 88). His main objection was that Dumont and Pocock’s insistence that ‘India was one’ was presented as so self-evident that any argument to the contrary could only appear as an error. What then, Bailey asked, about the differences between a range of beliefs and practices in the region—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Socialism and so on? Dumont and Pocock’s response to Bailey reveals a point crucial for this essay: that CIS was not meant to be a forum of vital dissension on the basic terms of academic knowledge (1960: 82). CIS was not meant to be a forum of separate intellectual projects, each with their own theories, but rather a collective articulation of fundamentals (1960: 82). Explicitly, they articulated their hope for CIS to found the basic vocabulary for Indian sociology. Therefore, despite publishing Dr Bailey, they found his combative response contrary to the purpose and orientation of CIS. Further, they argued, the primacy of caste in India and the relegation of political and economic considerations to a secondary position was not their fancy but based on observable fact.

Reflecting the divergent objections to CIS, A.K. Saran’s 1962 critique came from an opposite orientation to Bailey’s. His problem with the CIS editors was not that they did not acknowledge the wholeness of Indian civilisation, but rather that they did not go far enough in apprehending its uniqueness. His critique claimed a deeper divergence between the East and West, one that could not be transcended even through the kind of sociology espoused by Dumont and Pocock, whom he castigated as heirs to a foreign Enlightenment tradition (Saran 1962: 54). In contrast, Saran proposed that in monistic Hindu thought, these levels were not separate, but simultaneous emanations of an ‘Ineffable Absolute’ (Saran 1962: 56).

In 1967, T.N. Madan took over its editorship from Dumont and Pocock. After some back and forth over whether this would constitute a continuation of the old journal, the prior and new editors reached a compromise in which issues of the new journal would be followed by the qualifier ‘New Series’. Dumont and Pocock’s final 1966 issue began with their ‘Farewell’. They complained that few Indian sociologists had offered contributions to the old series. With a considerable degree of self-reflection, they agreed that what they had understood as the journal’s aim—to establish the basic facts and vocabularies of an Indian
sociology—had appeared neither basic nor fundamental to many of their Indian colleagues (Dumont and Pocock 1966). In that final issue, Madan had offered a measured response to Dumont’s suspiciousness about the possibility of a ‘native’ sociology, suggesting that divisions between an ‘external’ and ‘internal’ observer were always muddled by fieldwork. Just a few pages later Dumont responded, not taking kindly to Madan’s criticism. He reiterated: ‘sociological understanding is more advanced by the social anthropologist looking to a foreign society than by a sociologist looking at his own’ (Dumont 1966: 23). Dumont substantiated this position with the claim that native sociologists could not occupy the distance required to think of social facts as things. Following this trajectory led Dumont to further distress; without the duality between observer and observed, would not sociology degenerate into many ‘sociologies’, as numerous as there were different civilisations? Did Madan imagine that ‘they’ should have a sociology of their own, different from Western sociology?

Conveniently, Saran’s critique provided ample material for Dumont’s warning against a flourishing of infinite ‘sociologies’. Rejecting Saran’s accusations of an Enlightenment positivism, he returned an accusation of ‘cultural solipsism’ (Dumont 1966: 26). In this accusation, he went as far as to take Saran’s claims as the same as that of Hitler’s: both believed that cultures were impenetrable and so distinctly different from one and other that they shared no unifying ground (Dumont 1966: 26–27). Sociology, Dumont stated instead, could by principle only be of one kind (Dumont 1966: 24). The proper role for (the future) Indian sociologist would then be to contribute to this tradition, while in the meantime Indian society continues to provide ‘datum’. In a short conciliatory conclusion to this inaugural volume, Madan left Dumont’s critiques of Saran to a side. At the same time, he could not resist responding to Dumont’ claim about the inferiority of the perspective of a sociologist looking at their ‘own’ society, asking synoptically: ‘What in that case happens to Max Weber?’ (Madan 1967: 91).

In the early issues of the new series, a third line of critique emerged from J.P.S. Uberoi that diverged from both Bailey and Saran (Uberoi 1968). It is this line of critique that I find most persuasive for my purpose here. In their inaugural issue, Dumont and Pocock had pre-emptively guarded against a likely future criticism of their project: how appropriate was a turn to classical Indology at a time of decolonisation? Should sociologists not further the cause of social reform in the present, rather than focus on an

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abstract past? Rejecting this idea, they argued that reformers were often ‘desperately superficial’, and that it would be best to keep any reformist intentions outside the bounds of disciplinary sociology (Dumont and Pocock 1957: 22).

Uberoi attacked the failures of this vision in his first line: ‘The aim and method of science are no doubt uniform throughout the world but the problem of science in relation to society is not’ (Uberoi 1968: 119). In a subtle move, Uberoi went on to distinguish ‘scientism’ from ‘science’. Scientism assumed that the aims and methods of science were separable; science understood that the problems of research in a new postcolony were not the same as those in the metropole. It was imperative then that any sociology of knowledge should link its aims to those of a recently decolonised society. Crucially, he took to task ‘false cosmopolitanisms’ that emphasised a widely and uniformly ‘shared point-of-view’ between the coloniser and colonised. While they appeared anti-colonial, these imaginations of a shared unified science carried on colonial harms by suppressing the need of a sociology conceptually responsive to Indian conditions. That is, the dependence created by a ‘scientific internationalism’ and global institutions cloaked the deepening dependence of Indian scholars on foreign ideas. Uberoi’s essay comprehensively dismissed the possibility that there could be a reciprocity of scholarly perspectives across a vast geopolitical divide. Much like Strathern’s diagnosis of the UN Working Group, Uberoi took to task jargon familiar to him at the time: ‘international anthropology’, ‘international exchanges’ and ‘two-way cross-cultural research’ (Uberoi 1968: 121). Rejecting such an ‘international anthropology’, Uberoi proposed a national approach.2

Uberoi’s radical critique was precisely the nightmare of fundamentally divergent sociologies that Dumont and Pocock had feared. At the same time, Uberoi’s position was immune to their challenge that such a flourishing of many sociologies would inevitably turn ethnocentric (such as Saran’s). In a characteristic manoeuvre, Uberoi embraced theories and methods that were not ‘home-grown’ in a strictly ethnic or geographical

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2 While I have emphasised the national stakes as they appeared in the early issues of *CIS*, Uberoi’s claim does not predetermine the ‘nation-state’ as a determinant locus for different conceptual viewpoints. Indeed, in the present, one might argue that the continued marginality of Dalit scholarship in Indian sociology constitutes an ongoing manifestation of a problem that still demands a response.

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sense (Uberoi 1974: 136). His project for an Indian sociology claimed for itself an independence of mind and spirit that was not dominated by dominant foreign theories. Such an independence could certainly lead to theories and concepts that originated in different geographies: the crucial thing was not the ethnic origins of a theory, but the freedom of will for Indian sociologists to draw upon those that suited the purposes of a sociology of and for India. He did not seek to claim an independent or unique method for Indian sociology but sought instead a ‘swarajist attitude’ to theories and methods. Such an independence of intellectual attitude would famously draw him both to Goethe and to structuralist theory as two lifelong interlocutors. It was the same independence of will that deepened the grounds of structuralist thought, as he joined Veena Das in domesticating it through Sanskrit grammar. In fact, this approach of taking up structuralism as simultaneously ‘indigenous’ and ‘international’ helped Das and Uberoi formulate a critique of Dumont’s famous *Homo Hierarchicus* in 1971.

**Towards conceptual independence**

By no means is this a comprehensive account of the debates around *CIS* in the 1960s. Rather, I have extracted one transitional moment that reveals deep divergences about what a sociology of India was and could become. I revive these debates and questions here to point to a longer history of the critique of seamless ‘knowledge exchanges’ that Strathern persuasively presents. *CIS* proves a generative site to think about knowledge exchange particularly because of its contentious history, as it transitioned from Anglo-French to Indian editorship. Staked in this exchange of ideas and ownership was the fundamental nature of sociological inquiry, as well as the question of who its legitimate producers could be. With some hubris, Dumont and Pocock had sought to set the agenda for ‘A Sociology of India’, not only by providing a new forum, but explicitly hoping to prescriptively define its basic ‘concepts’ and ‘facts’ (in their words). Under the unmarked guise of a collective, unsigned project, they attacked the very possibility of an anthropologist ‘native’ to the region they studied. Their disappointment that Indian sociologists did not flock to this project

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3 See for examples of discussions of this period of the journal, Madan and Mayer (2018) and Thapan (1988).
led them to abandon the journal. But even before it transitioned into Indian hands, critiques had flourished. One might think of these deep divergences in the sense Strathern proposes: as revealing forms of disagreement in academic debate that should model to policymakers an understanding of the fissiparous nature of knowledge, thereby warning against fictions of seamless ‘knowledge exchange’.

At the same time, I hope to have developed Strathern’s critique further. Uberoi’s early and prescient polemic against such exchanges describes them as a ruse for a continued scholarly colonialism. Uberoi’s critique is a historical precursor to Strathern’s present critique. It reminds us of the long history of the problems implicit in institutional, policy and academic visions of an international exchange of ideas. In doing so, it makes explicit what is implicit in Strathern’s talk: that scholarly debates within disciplinary communities are also structured by geopolitical constraints. Even as they productively reveal the contingency of knowledge, they also reproduce its globally asymmetric structures. Uberoi’s deep disagreement with the founding editors of CIS opens the possibilities of many sociologies, differentiated not by their ethnic origins, but by the freedom of spirit to domesticate theories and agendas not already predetermined by the concerns of Euro-American academia. Such a borrowing, exemplified in Uberoi’s career, quickly unravels the stability of the categories of ‘Euro-American’ and ‘Indian’ sociology, while at the same time resisting the asymmetric power of certain academic communities to monopolise disciplinary vocabularies. Uberoi’s prescient critique reminds us then that to care for our discipline demands an investigation of who falls within the bounds of the category of ‘our’. And anticipating the charge of theoretical ethnocentrism, his demand for an independence of concepts and thoughts is not a call for an Indian sociology that draws only upon Indian concepts. Rather, it productively problematises the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspective, insisting on an independence of concepts from regional ownership.

4 Madan’s own recounting comes close to this position. In a later essay, he defends Dumont and his work in founding CIS against charges of ‘methodological exclusivism’ (Madan 2011: 224). In a brief analysis of this debate, Peirano understands Madan’s role as a necessary, pragmatic orientation that helped make more radical challenges and more equal international dialogue possible (Peirano 1991: 324–25).

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To return to Strathern then, academic controversies can indeed be privileged sites for a multidimensional knowledge of the world, where conceptual differences are irreducible to differences in points of view, where knowledge is not utilitarian, and where there can often be disagreement on basic terms. At the same time, an analysis of academic debate as a model of knowledge exchange also reveals attempts to monopolise its conceptual frames. Strathern recognises this danger and urges us to practise academic controversy in a way that does not allow a single apparatus to govern the grounds of comparison. Early debates in the CIS teach us that such a vigilance requires a view of the geopolitics of sociological scholarship, such that geopolitical divides do not determine distributions of ethnographers and informants, scholars and practitioners, theory and practice. To learn from Strathern then, if knowledge exchanges are gift-like processes that form and reflect upon social relations, in the same gesture, they are also potent sites of critique, revealing deep fissures that cannot be unified under a shared disciplinary framework. Here, Uberoi’s injunction—to cultivate a freedom of will to develop concepts decoupled from ethnic origins but not from geopolitics—continues to remind us of what gives knowledge its vital life and force.

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Mekhala Krishnamurthy

‘But what is your position?’

RS, a middle-aged commodities trader and broker in Harda, a small agricultural market town in central India, was fast running out of patience. ‘I don’t understand. You cannot enter a market without taking a position.’ Like most traders who met me during my early days of fieldwork in the local mandi (agricultural produce market) in Harda, RS was trying to decipher why I had suddenly materialised, apparently for no other purpose than to waste his time, and quite possibly, his money. ‘Look, even if you are here to study the market, you tell me what’s the point? What’s in it?’