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CONTEXT AND VALUE:  
ANTI-CONTEXTUALIST  
RATIONALITY AND  
RESISTANCE.  
THE CASE OF BURIAL  
CUSTOMS IN LATE  
SOCIALIST VIETNAM

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# **Context and Value: anti-contextualist rationality and resistance. The case of burial customs in late socialist Vietnam<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The paper draws attention to Georg Simmel's early scepticism toward socialism and his criticism of Marx's labour theory of value. It demonstrates the interpretive utility of Simmel's own model of valuation for a study of state-driven rationality projects that aim at decontextualising knowledge and popular resistance to such projects. The Vietnamese case serves here as an extreme example of a more widespread rationality hubris. The argument is illustrated by way of a few case-studies on burial practices from rural Vietnam. The aim of this paper is to approach the problem of context, specifically people's frames of reference for action, to study the way context has become an object of reflection and literally a problem through state-driven rationality projects.

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## Taking Out of Context

Anthropologists have become accustomed to thinking of context in relation to their own knowledge practice. Ethnography long seemed to be the contextualising strategy *par excellence* (Burke 2002). Contextualisation's heyday came with Geertz's dominant influence, the study of culture as a unified system of meaning (e.g. Sewell 1999). Subsequently, this faith in contextualisation came under close scrutiny (see esp. Strathern 1987; Fabian 1999 [1995]; Dilley 1999; Huen 2009)<sup>3</sup>, building on the discipline's previous and ongoing stock-taking – what came to be known as the *Writing Culture* debate and the problem of reflexivity. The very idea of culture or 'the local' as an ultimate self-referential context was critiqued (Strathern 1995).

When we deal with context, we are necessarily engaging with assumptions about knowledge and the conditions for understanding through interpretation. Roy Dilley (1999), in his introductory chapter, reminds us that both context and interpretation share the basic strategy of connecting, which necessarily involves making disconnections at the same time; to differentiate what is included, what is excluded through a particular context. He suggests the term *articulation* to highlight that context is fundamentally a way of making things present, that is, of bringing them into focus by way of connections. This in turn raises questions concerning the politics of context, the power to make certain contexts relevant and thus shape understanding (Dilley 1999: 35). Contextualisation may operate on or be triggered by very different knowledge orders, where knowledge itself may mean very different things. What becomes the actual target of a study of context or contextualisation then are the knowledge modalities, which condition the making, uses, and challenges to context. This is also why studies of contextualisation should be extended beyond the human sciences to informants' own strategies of context (ibid: xii, 34f.). In doing so, several authors in Dilley's collection arrive at a distinction between models of knowledge as either representation or practice (see esp. Fabian 1995 reprinted in Dilley 1999).

“The task of anthropology is to investigate the conditions of possibility of context within not only our own bodies of knowledge but also the bodies of knowledge of native interpreters and commentators. The best that anthropological accounts can hope to do is to bring these two sets of conditions together into a relationship that is dialogic.” (Dilley 1999: 38)

The following discussion is an attempt in this vein, seeking to contrast two approaches to context through a consideration of theories of value as they are exemplified through government policies and local burial practices respectively. A study of what might be termed 'local' contextualisation practices *still* inquires about the ways in which understanding or meaning is constituted, its validity claimed and contested through context, and in what way contextualisation reflects specific modalities of knowledge. Actors may appeal to certain contexts to legitimise an action. We are all familiar with politicians' objections that a previous statement, now considered controversial or a blatant lie, was 'taken out of context'. Actors may dispute the relevance of a context. Humour often involves the challenging or shifting of context.

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<sup>3</sup> I myself investigated this problem outside of anthropology – the uses of ethnography in neighbouring disciplines (Schlecker and Hirsch 2001).

## Context in Vietnam

Anecdotal, but allegedly true, stories have circulated among Northern Vietnamese for some time about an elderly man who purchased his coffin in advance. The rationale, provoking chuckles and laughter, goes as follows: the old man worried that rather than buying a decent coffin for him, his family might spend his savings on other things. In some versions of this anecdote, the old man sleeps inside the coffin so as to make it impossible for his children to sell it. Another version of this story goes further. The old man, while still in good health, plants trees that will later provide the wood for the coffin, again safeguarding against his children's potential impropriety. What underlies all these versions is a humorous blurring of two kinds of contexts: mundane considerations of material worth, on the one hand, and ritual concerns that one's spirit is well cared for after death, on the other.

The invitation to a wedding will sometimes be lamented with the expression 'having to eat dusty rice for a high price'. Thus the speaker effectively undermines the ritual context of the wedding. By custom, a wedding guest is expected to bring a gift envelope with a sizeable amount of money inside. The envelope is received by a receptionist and the amount recorded together with the name. The guest is then seated outside the house, crammed together on a bench with other guests, and receives a share of the wedding feast. In Vietnam, the term 'dusty rice'<sup>4</sup> refers to simple and cheap street food served in one of the countless small kitchen stalls with customers typically sitting on small benches or plastic chairs on the pavement. With his comment, the speaker situates his obligation to bring a monetary wedding gift within the mundane context of a kitchen stall visit, thus creating a sarcastic metaphor.

The focus of this paper lies on context where humour is not the primary issue. A common situation, especially in Southeast Asia, is a modern bureaucratic state pursuing a far-reaching rationalisation of its peoples' ways of life. This pertains often enough to the problem of context; precisely, to an officially sanctioned knowledge project that could be called 'anti-contextualist'. The gist of this project is that the validity of an action and the facticity of a statement are to be established independent of any particular context in which it occurs. The history of this anti-contextualist project is not the subject of this paper. It obviously has its roots in the norm of universalism pursued by European Enlightenment thinkers, which became institutionalised and spread especially through modern science and technology<sup>5</sup>.

It seems that a great deal of what has and continues to upset people about their leadership's eagerness to transform them into 'hyper-rational' citizens (Feher et al. 1983) pertains to such a rationalist disregard for context. In Vietnam, people commented on their leadership's rigorous anti-contextualism with the phrase 'without feelings' (*vo tinh cam*). Repeated exhortations to economise were really truisms for them. Given the pre-reform hardship, what else was one to do than to save up. Yet to be asked to economise to the same extent during an important ritual occasion appeared simply out of order. A well-known modern Vietnamese novel that takes a cynical view of the pre-reform years also addresses the leadership's hyper-rational disregard for context.

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'dust' (*bui*) refers to actions, clothing styles, and persons with qualities considered inappropriate. A homeless person is said to lead a 'life of dust'. Dust, I found, is locally conceptualised in opposition to the house as the quintessential stable, safe, and reliable anchorage point.

<sup>5</sup> See esp. Merton 1979 [1942]. The claim to universalism in the natural sciences itself was later questioned by sociologists and philosophers of science, a subject that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Before the economic reforms (since mid-1980s), popularly known as *Đổi Mới*, a proper coffin was still hard to come by, and as with most other desired items, it required much networking and economising. This Vietnamese practice is commonly referred to as secondary burial. After the decomposition of the corpse, between three to five years, the coffin is dug up again, and the bones are cleaned and reburied in a different location in a smaller terra-cotta sarcophagus. The coffin, the most expensive item of the first, provisional, funeral is no longer needed after this and simply disposed off. In Nguyen Huy Thiep's famous novel, *The General Retires* (1993), set in pre-reform socialist Vietnam, we encounter the following scene: Mr Bong, an uncle of the protagonist (who is the son of a retired general) comments on the coffin, which the latter had made for his deceased mother:

“Mr Bong asked: ‘How thick are these boards?’ ‘Four centimetres,’ I replied. ‘What!’ exclaimed Mr Bong. ‘You could furnish a whole lounge with this. When has anyone made a coffin with such good wood? When you move the grave [for the second, permanent burial], make sure you give me these boards.’ My father sat silently and looked deeply pained” (ibid: 32).

In the story, Mr Bong's character exemplifies the socialist anti-contextualist brute. It is illustrated by his violation of a contextual contrast: he allows mundane considerations of material gain to enter the solemn ritual context of funeral practices. It should be stressed that coffins are by far the most expensive item of a funeral. Past times of starvation and war are often recounted with reference to the improper burial of dead kin without a coffin. At best, some were wrapped in palm leaves. Clearly, for the novel author, this disregard for context epitomised socialism.

As part of its rationalising project<sup>6</sup>, a project by no means wholly continuous and consistent, the Vietnamese one-party state did and continues to encourage, at times enforce, thrift as a modern rational outlook on life. In the above-cited novel, thrift pertains to the ‘recycling’ of the coffin's wooden planks. The admonition to live frugally goes back to Ho Chi Minh's oft-cited characterisation of the ideal new socialist citizen who was to be emulated by everyone: industrious, thrifty, upright, and public-spirited.

### **Burial and Cremation in Late Socialist Vietnam**

In Vietnam, state exhortations to uphold a frugal lifestyle throughout are certainly not a dated matter. More recent debates on population growth and environmental degradation, sparked by dramatic waves of rural migration to the few urban areas in the late 1990s, and on the dangers of the new consumerism all mirror similar debates in the People's Republic of China (Liu 2009, Greenhalgh 2010, Tilt 2010). These debates curiously have become intertwined with the older socialist rationing narrative and contributed to a more recent version of frugality. It is clear that with the economic reforms and the state's gradual, ongoing evolving from a subsidising to a post-ideological welfare state, frugality has become shaped by non-socialist, global concerns of

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<sup>6</sup> By “rationalising project” I refer to the leadership's explicit aim to ‘educate the masses’, ‘raise awareness’ and liberate them from oppressive customs and harmful superstition beliefs. Behind the project is the strong faith in the efficacy of Western-derived rational knowledge as affording human action the most desirable and effective outcome. The leadership's educational aims were systematically formulated during the revolutionary phase (1940s and 1950s) and regularly restated in state media in subsequent years. While this project shares much common ground with similar projects in other socialist and non-socialist nations in Asia and beyond, for Vietnamese it is closely tied to the question of national independence.

sustainability and other humanitarian aims. The role of foreign non-governmental and governmental organisations has certainly been important here. The focus of this paper lies on the ideological link between an anti-contextualist rationalism and statements on value that permeate debates on population, environment, and so forth.

In the rural commune Thanh Ha<sup>7</sup>, which belongs to the impoverished coastal district Tien Lang (Hai Phong province), villagers' efforts to provide proper burial and local policies to curb ritual wastefulness resulted in obvious and continuous tensions. In an especially noteworthy case, a double secondary burial of a deceased old woman and her grandson, the latter had died in a traffic accident, involved a degree of lavishness that had to provoke even the most lenient of government officials. Altogether, the family had invited seven Buddhist monks from Hanoi and Hai Phong City and a professional music group from Hai Phong city. The performances extended over three days, beginning with Buddhist prayers for the salvation of the souls (*cau sieu*). The next day, a large altar was erected in the family house's backyard, measuring around seven metres in height. It was covered with devotional items, especially paper effigies and offerings. Costly paper effigies were burnt on the village road and a procession of all participants moved out to the graveyard to consecrate the burial ground to be unearthed the following day. The secondary burial took place the next day, again involving an unmatched degree of ritual elaboration. It was later estimated that the total expenses for this funeral had amounted to 40 million Vietnamese Dong (approximately 1,500 Euros). The Fatherland-Front representative responsible for this family's hamlet soon informed the commune's authorities and the family was publicly chided the same evening over the commune's loudspeakers by the head of Dong Uc's committee for Cultural Affairs for having been very 'noisy' and having caused disruptions in the commune.

In a fairly recent booklet titled *The Vietnamese Funeral – Tradition and Heritage*, published in Hanoi (Truong Thin 2002), the author takes issue with Vietnam's customary two-stage burials, still the dominant form, that consume a tremendous amount of wood for building the first coffin. The author offers details: on average a coffin requires 0.25 cubic metres of wood and, taking into account the natural mortality rate, 112,250 cubic metres of wood are needed every year.

Wood, however, is not the only problem. Research conducted in two communes in Northern Vietnam had shown that, on average, 2,000 households required over one hectare of burial land. The author points out that according to a very recent survey, there are currently 14 million households in the whole of the country and 6,500 cemeteries of varying size. The author concludes that the share of land occupied by cemeteries is very large in relation to cultivated land and that occupied by the population. He takes the case of *Van Dien*, Hanoi's and Northern Vietnam's largest cemetery. *Van Dien* has a total area of 19,000 square metres, and the population size of Hanoi's inner city is 1.4 million. Given an average per annum death rate of seven per 1,000 inhabitants, there will be 8,400 deaths in Hanoi. The area needed for a grave is 2.5 square metres, and thus, the author infers, *Van Dien* can only accommodate another 4,600 burial corpses. The author also predicts the increasing amount of wood and land consumed in five, ten, and fifteen years' time.

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<sup>7</sup> For the duration of the research project in Thanh Ha – twelve months – which investigated social support practices with a special focus on death rituals, I lived in Thanh Ha commune. I conducted all conversations in Vietnamese, made brief notes on location and later expanded them the same day at home. I did not tape-record any conversation, given the intimidating effects. I also compiled basic biographical and socio-economic data on all families in Hamlet 7, the most populous hamlet with about 1,000 inhabitants and 350 households. I conducted two-hour interviews with over 150 households in Hamlet 7 and compiled additional data on remaining households.

The custom of secondary burial thus turns out to be an environmental and demographic time bomb. What is to be done? In contrast to this problematic custom, the author depicts cremation as a ‘modern’ and ‘economical’ funeral. It renders the wooden coffin obsolete and drastically reduces the amount of burial land. The reader is told that forms of burial differ across the world, for they reflect each country’s ‘scientific and technological level’. In ‘our country’, the author writes, the customary secondary burial features several ‘weak points’.

Among Vietnamese, there is still considerable hesitation to adopt cremation. In Thanh Ha, villagers gave accounts that were familiar to me from previous fieldwork projects in urban and some rural contexts. They started out presenting their own views as if wholly in tune with the official narrative of good and obsolete, bad customs. However, they frequently shifted to another version, usually introduced with the words, ‘according to custom’ (*theo phong tục*) or ‘the old ones say’ (*cac gia noi*), whereby the speaker distanced himself from officially disapproved concepts and practices. This also came up when I spoke with Thanh Ha’s grave-diggers (*to nghia*) about cremation. One man explained:

“My father was cremated. A good number of people here cremate their dead. They cremate them, but still bury them, inside a sarcophagus [*quach*]. The grave is built smallish in view of the small sarcophagus. By custom, if one cremates a dead person then his spirit [*hon*] cannot return [to the other world]. But that’s not true. They say that people in this world live like people in the other world, it’s just reversed [*nguoc lai*]. The corpse lies here [i.e. in this world]. Therefore [i.e. through the corpse] the spirit can come back at any time (...) Like our father, when we brought him to the crematorium, when the coffin [*van*] went through that small door, my family could observe all that until this point. We could not see the phase when the fire was ignited. It is very clean, not like the grave-moving ritual.”<sup>8</sup>

Another villager offered the following account:

“Of my grandfather, who he was cremated, only a small amount of ash remained, and three small pieces of the skull. The bone ash has a whitish colour, not like the colour of normal ash. (...) On the death anniversary of my grandfather, we can all still go out there [to the buried urn at the commune’s graveyard] and perform worship. It’s all very clean. One does not have to worry about performing the grave-moving ritual [i.e. secondary burial] for the dead person. My father is really afraid of being cremated, he instructed us that after he dies, we should bury him [in the customary way] in his home place. We should under no circumstances cremate him, but my [own] family will still go for cremation.”

The following villager also took issue with the downside of the customary secondary burial, which he expressed rather vividly:

“When a grave is opened at night, a putrid stench emanates [from it], it’s horrifying. This work is very unclean. One has to make sure that one stands at the downwind end of the grave, one should never stand upwind. In Vietnam, the old ones still want to bury the dead [i.e. perform the customary two-stage burial]. (...) There was a guy, when they dug him up, he looked like he had not decomposed at all. He looked like white stone, like a statue. Finally, [they decided to] bury him again [and wait longer]. Another guy had been buried for seven years already, but when they dug him up, [it turned out that] they still had to scrape [his bones clean]. His arms and legs were still all connected [to the torso]. One has to use lime to scrape [the bones], to separate them, and then wash them. His family had not consulted a diviner. If people consult one beforehand, it is possible that they will know this

<sup>8</sup> These and subsequent statements made by Vietnamese informants were translated into English by the author.

and not dig up the grave, [actually] seven years is already a long time to let a body decompose.

The old ones always say that when you cremate a dead person, the spirit will be lost [lit. will 'not remain'], but one should cremate, it's the cleanest way. The custom, the old ones still insist, is that one should bury [the corpse] for three to four years and then dig it up again. Nowadays, the majority of people leave the corpse buried for four or five years and then dig it up. At [Hai Phong's municipal] Ninh Hai cemetery, one has to have the corpse dug up exactly after three years. Because the earth there has been dug up so many times, it is very loose. (...) The soil is [thus] very hot [and the corpse] disintegrates fast. (...). [It's] an outdated custom, gradually it will have to be given up."

These accounts are exemplary of a wide-spread stance towards the custom of secondary burial. It is acknowledged that this custom is laborious, time-consuming, and unclean. In fact, not few first-born sons dreaded the idea that they were obliged by custom to perform the cleaning and arranging of their parents' bones themselves. Nowadays, families will often hire grave-diggers or other specialists, but it is still considered an essential expression of filial piety if the eldest son himself takes care of his parents' bones. As with many other customary practices, however, the ancient norms, as laid down by the ancestors and called for by the 'old ones' in the local community, weighed heavily on one's shoulders. More importantly, people made it clear that no one could simply exclude the possibility that to cremate the deceased might destroy their spirit. It certainly destroyed the bones, which villagers conceptualised as the house for the spirit and its passage point between both worlds. The existential bond between the dead person and the living was at stake.

### ***Society***

State exhortations to take up cremation are another instance of the anti-contextualist rationality project. The validity and consequences of someone chopping down a tree are here no different whether it is done for the purpose of a funeral or for firewood. What the funeral booklet's author is doing is to invite his reader to assume a particular perspective on himself, his own actions and those of the people around him. I phrase this perspective *society*<sup>9</sup> or what the Vietnamese call *xa hoi* (see also Schlecker 2005).

Numbers are central to this kind of viewpoint, which endeavours to understand observations as parts of a whole, that is, *society*. Secondly, the *society* perspective situates this whole in relation to its transformations. A single burial thus comes into view as a part of a vast process of environmental degradation and the large-scale consumption of natural resources. The same viewpoint is assumed in many other contexts of course. From the vantage of *society*, one's own family or the neighbour's five children become a demographic trend, a population problem.

In late socialist Vietnam, one encounters state officials who cling to a pre-reform socialist habit of rationing resources, excessively in the eyes of many villagers, while other cadres have moved on and pay more attention to questions of investment, and yet others seem to embrace the new consumerism. What connects all of these political actors is that they legitimise their actions with reference to the same official project of spreading rational knowledge practices as the basis for effective action and of opposing other knowledge systems. At its core, the project postulates that in order to understand anything one needs to see the *whole* picture, the whole of *society*.

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<sup>9</sup> I keep the word *society* in italics to signify local uses and ideas and to distinguish it from usages in sociological and philosophical accounts.

Paradoxically as it may seem, while this project tries to do away with contextual circumstances for reflecting on and judging action, it does so by promoting a single overriding context all the more strongly – *society*.

State socialism, whether in the Eastern European Soviet States, Cuba, or Asia, institutionalised Marx's science of society into projects of 'hyper-rationality' (Feher et al 1983: 237ff) or what James Scott with hindsight called 'hyper-modernity' (Scott 1998). The rationality hubris in all these settings has proven counter-productive. Keith Hart, in a critical exchange with Steven Sampson in the early 1990s, rightly stressed the need to distinguish between 'the historical project of socialism from its authoritarian perversion in the twentieth century' (Hart 1991: 19). As a historical project, Hart pointed out, socialism was:

“(...) the continuation of the liberal project by social means. It is the attempt to extend democracy into areas of modern society which economic individualism cannot touch – especially the organization of government, work and domestic life, where coercive hierarchies prevail.” (ibid)

I want to re-phrase this as the extension of a particular kind of perspective on people, by which individual liberties were to be distributed. And although the distinction drawn by Hart is important, we should also consider the role the 'liberal project', however perverted, played in the ways it informed the imagination, design, and accounting of actual state policies under socialist regimes.

Society is a perspective. It is one of modernity's outgrowths: the study and statistical representation of people as a population (see esp. Rabinow 1989; Porter 1988). Socialism both derived from and embraced the consequences of 18th century Enlightenment: a notion of humankind that no longer was the vantage-point from which to study the world, but which had itself become an object of study therein, to be measured, classified, and represented. Humankind, in short, had become a statistical socialism's maxim of redistribution strongly dependant on this new kind of perspective.

Almost two decades before the Russian Revolution, Georg Simmel recognised that proponents of socialism implicitly assumed a distancing viewpoint on people. Socialists, he noted, tended to speak on behalf of people, their personal and thus *varying* wishes and aspirations, to represent them collectively as the needs of a society or population.

### **Scarcity Value: Simmel on socialism**

In several articles, written for the Viennese newspaper *Die Zeit*, Simmel noted that socialism owed its appeal in late 19th century Europe more to the pessimistic mood of the times than to its own, essentially optimistic, ideological system (Simmel 1900b, 1900c). As he saw it, socialist collectivism provided a well-suited social form for the pessimistic *Zeitgeist*. Late 19th century Europeans had yet to come to terms with the loss of a world where salvation would eventually outweigh all suffering. Socialism substituted the eudemonistic quest for greater happiness for a demographic approach. Simmel wrote:

“It is curious to observe in what way the question of redistributing instants of happiness is beginning to eclipse the question of its [overall] amount. There are enough supporters of socialism, who are convinced that it [socialism] will not alter our average mass of pleasure and pain, as little as that of propriety and impropriety, and who see its value, which goes

beyond the ideal of happiness, in equality and equity, by which it will distribute that overall eudemonistic mass.” (Simmel 1900b: 70–71; translation and insertion by author)

Socialism, as Simmel saw it, approached humankind’s happiness from a reifying perspective. Implicit in its eudemonistic picture was an assumption that units of happiness could be pitted against commensurable units of suffering. Correlating happiness with suffering itself was not unique to modern times, but the division into measurable and commensurable units was. Socialism added to this its emphasis on redistribution, which ultimately depended on the kind of quantifying perspective of *society*.

Simmel essentially took issue with the socialist approach to the question of human well-being or, phrased differently, to the *value* of human existence. What followed in history only proved his point, the unquestioning embrace of modernist ambitions to reify human existence, undermined the very humanism that Marx had sought to foster. The socialist science of society involved a distancing viewpoint on people, from where value, including the value of life, was absolute and where society’s standardised needs displaced questions of people’s varying desires and aspirations.

While not explicit in his essays on pessimism in modern times (Simmel 1900b, 1900c), I argue that what underpins Simmel’s critical comments on socialism is his own theory of value, as developed in his *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel 1900a, 1978). The philosophical categories of happiness and suffering correspond to the basic tension between desire and sacrifice,<sup>10</sup> which, for Simmel, generates the experience of value.

In the opening part of his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel (1978) is at pains to convey to his reader an understanding of value in terms of significance or meaning and material worth only as its extension. To value something means to attach significance selectively and thus parse the world of experiences. Such a value process is triggered by the experience of a sacrifice, strain, or obstacle to the fulfilment of a desire, one which requires the relinquishing of something in return. Value is thus an inwardly felt tension, a desire strained by the obligation to give away something in return.

In anthropology, Simmel’s theory of value has been given short shrift. Authors tend to rely on secondary sources (esp. Appadurai’s account) and tend to focus on exchange (e.g. Graeber 2001; Strathern 1992). All seem to have missed Simmel’s point, which was to demonstrate that neither exchange nor desire mattered to value in the first instance. What mattered was what *strained* desire, i.e. sacrifice. S.P. Altmann (1903: 50) once rightly called Simmel’s theory of value a ‘theory of sacrifice’. In Simmel’s model of value, exchange and the nature of what is exchanged have little relevance for value in the first place. Even a solitary smallholder working in his fields perceives value in that his desire to extract food from nature is strained by his experience of nature’s resistance, the labour that he is forced to ‘sacrifice’.

For Simmel, the sense of value as objective, that is, as external to an evaluating actor is entailed by forms of sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) or what he called reciprocal efficacy (*gegenseitige Wechselwirkung*), when several such value perspectives become coupled and one man’s desire

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term *sacrifice* here in the way it has been translated from Simmel’s common-sensical use of the German word *Opfer* (noun) and *opfern* (verb). Simmel chose this term to stress the subjective, mundane experience of loss that is implied in the necessity to give away something in return for something else. This use of the term *sacrifice* was not intended to address the anthropological subject of ritual offerings (inclusive the slaughter of animals). The relevance of this body of literature to Simmel’s model of valuation may be an interesting project, but it is not the objective of this paper. Thus, the term *sacrifice* in this paper is kept in its original Simmelian sense, as an act of renouncing something that is felt or considered precious.

becomes another man's sacrifice. The tension between desire and sacrifice thus becomes externalised.

Marx and his followers, Simmel argued, reduced value to the sacrifice dimension – labour, measured in labour time units – as *independent* of people's varying personal aspirations. Simmel explicitly attacked Marx's labour theory of value, especially the concept of scarcity and scarcity value, so central to Marx's model. An inevitable outgrowth of the distancing – 'representing' – perspective on people as a *whole* society with collective needs was that it presumed scarcity to be generative of value. Something was valuable because it was scarce or rare, irrespective of people's varying desires and aspirations. Simmel noted:

“The enjoyment of things, therefore, so soon as possession of them is achieved, the positive practical significance of their actuality for us, is quite independent of the scarcity question, since this affects only *a numerical relation to things, which we do not have* (...) The only question in point with reference to things, apart from enjoyment of them, is the way to them. So soon as this way is a long and difficult one, leading over sacrifice in the shape of strain of the patience, disappointment, labor, self-denial, etc., we call the object scarce. Paradoxical as it is, things are not difficult to obtain because they are scarce, but they are scarce because they are difficult to obtain. The inflexible external fact that there is a deficient stock of certain goods to satisfy all our desires for them would be in itself insignificant.” (Simmel 1990a: 601; emphasis added by author.)

The 'numerical relation to things' could be called a scarcity-value perspective. In Vietnam, state actors have devoted considerable zeal to promoting this numerical relation to things so as to guide people to recognise themselves as making up a *society*. It is a particular value perspective in the sense that it guides one to attach significance to things by seeing and studying them from a distance, as part of a social whole. Only then can scarcity come into view and, in this manner, generate the experience of value.

### **Sacrifice Value: contextual switching**

Simmel's stress on the experience of a strain, the need for a sacrifice as generative of the experience of value, allows us to re-examine what Vietnam's and similar anti-contextualist rationality projects are trying to do away with. When Vietnamese were taking issue with government policies that called for staunch frugality, to be upheld during festive occasions, they were in fact insisting on what I would call a 'contextual switching' between ritual and mundane occasions. This crossing of the threshold between mundane austerity and ritual lavishness is, following Simmel's model of value, precisely what is endeavoured.

If we follow the logic of Simmel's sacrifice model of value, the villagers' desire for ancestral blessings is strained by the general uncertainty of its fulfilment. These inwardly felt 'contents', in Simmelian terms, are externalised and resolved through a 'form' that enacts and anticipates the successful exchange between ancestral spirits and family members and kinsfolk through a contextual switch. Strain here applies to the specific experience of a threshold, the days, weeks, and months leading up to a particular ritual occasion, marked by an unjoyful self-restraint and worries that one might not be able to save up enough in time.

In Vietnam, rituals are often conceptualised as gatherings, family members and kinsfolk congregate in one place. Through ritual, they encounter the dead – ancestors, recently deceased

family members, and restless ghosts – as exchange partners in the wider and narrower sense of the term. Opening speeches by spiritual practitioners typically invite the dead to join the gathering. Orators inform them of the particular location and purpose of the gathering. The successful conduct of a ritual rests largely on the sudden and sizeable consumption of previously hard-earned resources. Indicators during a ritual are typically the number of guests – measured by way of food trays – and the kinds and quality of ritual items to be destroyed (e.g. paper effigies are burnt) and food offerings to be consumed.

The general approach is that one should not spare any expense, demonstrating that one suspends considerations of material constraints in ritual contexts. Two scenarios are possible where ritual performers fail, in the eyes of the local community, which is thought to be a good indicator of what the ancestor must have felt at the time. The first is one where the consumption of resources is considered to have been too little and where the ritual host is said to be tight-fisted and thus lacking propriety. The other scenario is one where villagers consider the ritual to be too ostentatious and aimed at impressing them rather than caring for the needs of an ancestor.

It is noteworthy that in both of these cases the ritual host is implicitly accused of not respecting the contextual boundary or threshold. Ostentatiousness and miserliness are both triggered by considerations that belong to the mundane contexts of either communal standing or household budget planning. We can therefore assume that criticism of the leadership's anti-contextualist rationality project builds on this undoubtedly much older stance toward ritual impropriety in local communities; a failure to respect context.

To say that through ritual lavishness, participants express the significance of the addressee – here ancestors – would not present much of a novel finding. Instead, I am suggesting that we focus on the very switch between mundane and ritual contexts. In doing so, we are in a position to fully appreciate Simmel's sacrifice model of value. With Arnold Van Gennep's (2001 [1909]) model of *rites de passage*, subsequently elaborated by Victor Turner (1995 [1966]) into his model of *communitas*, we already have influential models that share common ground with what I call contextual switching. The paper's aim, I should stress, is to deploy Simmel's sacrifice model of value as a critique of anti-contextualist rationality projects. At issue are the different value perspectives in play, something that neither Turner nor Van Gennep really touched on.

In Simmel's model, value progresses from subjective experiences and feelings of actors ('contents' in Simmelian terms) outwards to externalised 'forms' of social exchange, and where exchange denotes anything from a one-time face-to-face interaction to long-lasting and large-scale institutions. This is a fundamentally different perspective than that of *society*. The scarcity-value perspective of *society* registers value only by way of an absolute or static, all-encompassing view of the whole: e.g. the value of rice grains is determined by a ratio of the overall amount of rice measured against the total population size.

The sacrifice-value perspective, in contrast, registers value by externalising the degree of resistance perceived, which prevents a desire from being fulfilled. The bestowal of ancestral blessings and their decisive role in worldly matters (e.g. the graduation of a child) are known to be highly uncertain. Ritual forms map the experience of this resistance on to objective, often self-imposed, constraints (e.g. material self-restraint) as the condition for a successful resolution of the value tension. The contextual switch thus enacts a handing over (a 'sacrifice') of the fruits of self-restraint and it thereby implies that what is handed over was asked for (e.g. by an ancestor) in

return for what is desired. Rituals thus depend crucially on their demarcation from mundane contexts in order to exteriorise the experience of value through their social forms.<sup>11</sup>

The sacrifice-value perspective does not depend on an all-encompassing view of the whole to register value, but rather progresses through gradually extending social forms. At the lowest level, we have someone praying privately at the ancestral altar at home, then various family-sized events, e.g. a family sweeping the grave of a single ancestor, and so on. A more extensive social form are local death-day anniversaries, easily amounting to a hundred participants who enter collectively into a ritual exchange with their common ancestors. This is further extended by kin gatherings that extend beyond the village context. In recent times, a trend has emerged to find out about more distant kinsfolk and to extend the scope of such gatherings. Finally, the highest level and largest scope is the idea of the ‘country’ (*nuoc*) or the ‘land of the ancestors’ (*to quoc*) as a kind of extended kin group with common apical ancestors, the Hung kings, at times Chairman Ho Chi Minh.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Case of the Catholics**

The value experiences of both human actors and their ancestors is to a great extent engendered by the uncertainty<sup>13</sup> of having one’s wishes fulfilled and needs cared for. Humans experience value because the bestowal of ancestral blessings and their actual effect are anything but certain. Ancestors are known to desire permanence; permanence of their graves, their bones, their family line through an unbroken line of male descendants, and thereby an unceasing cult of veneration. Again, that human actors ensure their wish for permanence is never certain but frequently called into question. The past of war, starvation, and pervasive shortage has continuously undermined the ancestors’ need for permanence.

The contextual switch is therefore necessary because only through this can the experience of value be exteriorised and its resolution ascertained. Modernist anti-contextualist rationality projects, such as the Vietnamese state party’s exhortations to conduct frugal rites, undermine this. People would be unable to enact their experience of value, the strain on their desires and wishes; and they would be unable to anticipate its resolution – the moment of contextual switching, the sacrifice of hard-earned resources, and the performance of a ritual exchange with the ancestors. Conversely, ancestors are imagined to depend on ritual lavishness. Not only are the prayers, the food, water, clothing, luxury items, and other offerings imagined to support the spirit in a direct manner. The whole event, the large number of guests, feast trays, costly items, and the ritual speech are said to re-assure the ancestors that they are cared for, that permanence prevails, in a manner of speaking. A frugal ritual signals indifference of self-absorbed descendants.

The case of the Catholic minority of Thanh Ha illustrates this problem and its dissonance with the anti-contextualist rational project. Non-Catholics (*luong*) observed that more and more of the local Catholics were adopting their custom of secondary burial. This seemed remarkable since the Christian one-stage burial was clearly much more in tune with government regulations that aimed

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<sup>11</sup> One could go further here and argue that rituals, by anticipating a successful resolution of the value tension, deliberately indebted the opposite party in the ritual exchange and thus coerce them to reciprocate.

<sup>12</sup> I have elsewhere (Schlecker 2005), without an explicit reference to value and sacrifice, referred to this kind of perspective as *home-place*.

<sup>13</sup> Here, stimulus derived partly from Webb Keane’s (1997) emphasis on the uncertainty of action in his account of ritual life in Sumba, Indonesia.

at streamlining funerals. Those among the Catholic believers who had a more active role in the Catholic community tended to deny this trend emphatically. They insisted openly on the supremacy of their style of burial with reference to the very arguments put forward by government officials: a single burial was much more hygienic than the unearthing of the coffin and removal of the rotten corpse for a second burial; it also consumed much less resources, land and building materials especially; and it demanded less time and financial resources of both hosts and guests. As these Catholic followers put it, only a few of their members had strayed from the path and performed secondary burials because they ‘lacked the [true] Catholic creed’ (*khong co duc tin*).

When asked what might have triggered this change in burial practices, non-Catholics tended to converge on the view that Catholics had finally realised that their custom infuriated the dead by disregarding the permanence of their bones and grave. Often through the help of a diviner (*thay boi*), they had found out that their dead also demanded the same, non-streamlined, two-stage burial. Common to their accounts was the concern that to bury one’s dead in a coffin permanently was analogous to cremation: it did not shield the dead person’s corpse from destruction. The following interview excerpt from a conversation with a female villager whose son is one of the Commune’s grave-diggers (*to nghia dia*) illustrates this line of reasoning very clearly:

“The majority of Catholics also do a lot of grave-moving [these days]. They also go to see a diviner [to determine the most auspicious time to move the grave] and [then] move the graves. Before, Catholics always ‘dug deeply and buried tightly’. They did not move a single lump [of clay].”

MS: “Why did this change?”

“They went to see a diviner, who told them that the grave [i.e. the coffin] would collapse. That’s why they were told to move the grave. After a long time, it will completely collapse. For instance, the coffin lid will be very ‘ugly’ [i.e. be in a bad condition] and cause bad fortune. It will collapse and fall into the [dead person’s] eyebrow, into the face. It [i.e. the dead person] will become restless. They went to a diviner and were told to move the graves. Before, the Catholics never believed in this at all. Now, in these times, they too believe it, they believe in it very much nowadays. In the Catholic neighbourhood, they all move their graves.”

MS: “When did the Catholics start to practice grave-moving?”

“They have been moving their graves for a long time already, several years by now. People said that [after] going down to the world of the dead, those [dead] who had married a non-Catholic were satisfied. They could eat and drink, [because their descendants] were making offerings. Well, and they had built them a proper dwelling place [i.e. grave]. [By custom, the Catholics] are ‘digging deeply and burying tightly’. The non-Catholics, like us, were right. One has to make offerings. That is how we venerate [our dead]. [And that is] precisely [why] they now follow our belief, our side. [In] the Christian neighbourhood, almost every family there has a bowl with incense sticks [to perform ancestral worship]. They buy bananas, incense, [etc.]. They bring it to their homes and venerate their dead. The only difference is that they pray on [*sic*] Saturdays.”

It is remarkable that this villager connected the custom of secondary burial with the practice of making offerings. Catholic one-stage burials do not exclude regular offerings and, in fact, Catholics did visit their graves regularly and looked after them. What this villager was hinting at was a more general change, an acceptance by Catholic followers that their dead continued to be direct

exchange partners, which called for repeated offerings and elaborate rituals, including the two-stage burial. The custom of secondary burial epitomised, in other words, the realisation among Catholics that their own custom ran the risk of signalling a disregard for context, a tendency to let mundaneness spill over into the ritual event. Without the appropriate social form, the desire for ancestral blessings could not be appropriately expressed and its fulfilment anticipated.

There was an additional theme, touched on in this conversation, that of inter-faith marriage. The change of burial custom was also said to have been triggered by inter-faith marriages. During the same conversation, the villager explained:

“In this area, the Catholics often marry non-Catholics [lit. the non-Catholic side, *ben luong*]. You see, [Catholic] girls marry non-Catholic men and non-Catholic girls marry Catholic men. Nowadays, non-Catholics and Catholics are united. The family of old Mr Manh over there [in the Catholic neighbourhood], for instance. He has ten children, seven daughters. He married them all off to non-Catholics.”

A certain unease prevailed among Thanh Ha villagers that Catholics were absorbing their non-Catholic majority through marriage. They explained that if a Catholic married a non-Catholic, the latter would have to convert to Catholicism. The child of this couple would also then have to follow the Catholic faith. Catholic villagers, instead, stressed that this was only an administrative formality and that the spouse could continue to practise a non-Catholic faith. They also pointed out that in many cases of inter-faith marriage, the importance attached to patrilineal descent had entailed that the Catholic bride renounce her faith.

The last point is especially noteworthy. The precept of patrilineal descent brings us back to the ancestors' value of permanence, the continuation of the line of worship heirs, who also ensure the permanence of their grave and bones. In sum, the change of burial custom among Catholics is therefore generally thought to have been triggered by considerations of the ancestors' value of permanence. This depends on a social, ritual form that exteriorises the desire for ancestral blessings and their resolution through exchange by way of a contextual switch between mundane austerity and ritual lavishness.

## **Conclusion**

I have contrasted two models of value, that of scarcity and sacrifice value. It was my intention to heighten our awareness of the role of a scarcity-value perspective in, often state-driven, anti-contextualist rationality projects. Such projects propagate the idea that the validity of actions and, generally, knowledge is to be established independent of circumstances. The frequent resistance to such projects, I have argued, derives from a different value perspective, where circumstances are all that matters. Naturally, the contrast is not meant to be exhaustive. Other kinds of value perspectives are conceivable.

It is obvious that anti-contextualist rationality projects are not limited to socialist state regimes, and it was precisely my intention to exemplify this kind of analysis by way of a socialist case study as an extreme case. I have made reference to three observers along the way, each occupying a different temporal position with regard to socialism's history. All three concur that such regimes tended toward an excessiveness of rationalist, modernist ambitions. James Scott (1998) wrote with hindsight on the 'hyper-modernist' ambitions of especially the Soviet Union, Feher et al. (1983)

wrote as participants and eye-witnesses of Soviet societies, still several years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. They too noted the tendency towards what they termed a 'hyper-rationality'. Finally, George Simmel commented on socialism long before the Russian Revolution and yet he anticipated the same kind of rationality hubris among proponents of socialism.

What I have not dealt with in depth is that these two value perspectives or models of value imply specific ontologies of knowledge. The anti-contextualist rationality project with its scarcity value, as exemplified by Vietnam's one-party state, builds on an idea of knowledge as representation<sup>14</sup>. The problem of understanding is thus coupled with an effort to arrive at accurate modes or means of making knowledge stand for what is scrutinised. Thus, to enhance understanding that a customary secondary burial is a threat to the environment and livelihood, knowledge must create a disjunction between what is to be understood and the position of the inquirer; the more of it, the better. The ideal position is one where *society* as a whole comes into view and where particular actions become accountable as instances of types.

Sacrifice value, as it was exemplified by a die-hard Vietnamese preference for contextual switching, involves an idea of knowledge as practice. Here, the aim is not to generate a representational distance, but to enact value, that is, the experience of a strain on people's wishes, desires, and hopes and enact the anticipation of its resolution through the crossing of a contextual boundary. Knowledge is here accomplished through performance and, as such, it is not meant or expected to be lasting and piling up. A second contextual switch, from the ritual moment back to the mundane setting, evaporates the performatively accomplished knowledge and uncertainty sets back in, that fundamental strain on one's desires.

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<sup>14</sup> Several anthropologists, who have investigated the epistemological problem of context, have similarly arrived at the distinction between knowledge as practice and as representation, which in a sense echoes much of the comparative work of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern with regard to Melanesian and Euro-American ontologies of knowledge (see esp. Harvey and Fabian in Dilley 1999).

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