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The Enchantment Effect: A Semiotics of Boundary and Profit

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The philosopher Montaigne recalled a 1562 visit between three leaders of the Tupinamba tribe from coastal Brazil and the then 12-year-old French King, Charles IX, along with members of his court. The Tupinamba were asked what “things of note” they had observed about French society. According to Montaigne:

They had perceived there were men amongst us full gorged with all sorts of commodities, and others which, hunger-starved and bare with need and povertie, begged at their gates: and found it strange these moyties [i.e., this half of society] so needy could endure such an injustice, and that they tooke not the others by the throate, or set fire on their houses. (Montaigne (1908: 270))

What struck these observers from a foreign land was the apparent French acceptance of gross inequities in material wealth, something that these Tupinamba would have found intolerable in their own society. For the sons of the New World, it was as if a magical spell had been cast over the

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population of France. The “hunger-starved” people failed to perceive their true lot in life. Consequently, they languished, unable to take appropriate action. As the Tupinamba saw it, the people of France lived an enchanted existence.

The idea of property rights has been central in the European social theory tradition, with Locke, for example, arguing: “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions”; while Marx viewed private property as a phase in the evolution of human society that created simultaneously profit and the exploitation of labor, with its attendant poverty (Locke 1824 [1690]: 133). Indeed, Marx set for himself the task of disenchantment, unmasking the naturalness of property rights, so as to liberate a true Tupinamba-like spirit of equality trapped within.

In this chapter, I propose to look at the enchantment¹ effect, as I call it, through a semiotic lens. The effect is essential not just to the creation of a notion of private property, that is, a boundary between what is mine and what is not mine. As I attempt to show, it is also a factor in the case of temporal boundaries—that is, claims about the creation of new and better products, as well as those in which entrepreneurs recognize the early signs of a new temporal boundary in formation and capitalize on it before others are able to do so. Because enchantment makes these boundaries seem so real, the enchantment process is a condition—perhaps a key condition—for the generation of profits.

When I use the words “enchantment” and “magic,” I do not mean to suggest chicanery, since it may well be true that accepting the existence of profit-creating boundaries produces the greatest good for the greatest number.² Outright trickery can be a factor. The recent Volkswagen scandal, in which engineers installed in some vehicles software that activated emissions control only when a test was being performed, comes to mind (Gates et al. 2016). Under actual driving conditions, the controls would deactivate, with the cars producing up to 40 times government mandated limits for nitrogen oxide pollutants. Moreover, were the emission controls to actually function during normal operations, the claimed fuel efficiency of the vehicles would drop precipitously. Arguably, Volkswagen’s duplicity benefited their bottom line. False advertising was likely a factor in boosting corporate profits. But it is not this type of purposefully deceitful enchantment in which I am interested.

Rather than outright deception, I mean by enchantment the largely invisible semiotic processes that make culturally specific patterns seem natural, that make it possible for us to tell ourselves: “that’s just the way things are.” Enchantment gives credence to a state of affairs. In so doing, I propose, it makes profit, in the normal course of economic transactions, possible.

If we think of communicative signs as operating through a hierarchy of semiosis, from signs closest to sense perceptions at the bottom to discursive and other symbolic processes at the top, enchantment results from people coming to understand the world through the upper semiotic layers. Especially critical in these upper layers are “entextualizations,” that is, representations of semiotic interconnections in forms that appear to be detachable from the contexts in which they occur—seemingly replicable texts (Silverstein and Urban 1996). This is what gives the enchanting discourse its seemingly timeless effect. The present world is just the way things are.³ While any given text can become a focus of contestation, the discernible patterns woven into countless widely circulating texts are not questioned but rather presupposed as reality, as a natural order.⁴

The specific contribution of this chapter is to explore the processes by which the enchanting semiotic layers are not only maintained and renewed but also transformed. I present here a view of signs in motion, reproducing themselves through the agency of identifiable actors but also undergoing change, again through the efforts of identifiable actors. Actors who realize profits do so not only by (1) staking ownership claims and asserting mine/not-yours boundaries; but also (2) innovating, and thereby asserting a future/past boundary; and even (3) recognizing the emergence of a future/past boundary in a cultural trend (or wave) before others notice it. The three processes of enchantment are interconnected, each contributing to the making of profit. In this chapter, I separate them for analytical purposes by focusing attention on each process through a different empirical case.

Case 1: Enchanting Property

To the 1562 visitors from the New World, the French appeared to be entranced, under a spell of private property and possession that enabled taken-for-granted disparities in wealth. The spell assumed the form of a

widely accepted idea of property and ownership among the French that their Tupinamba visitors did not share. That idea forms one key semiotic layer making market-based exchange and, hence, profit possible. However, a semiotic approach reminds us that the circulation of the idea of property cannot be taken for granted. While the idea may be part of inertial culture, passed down from prior generations, it is also an achievement. It must be reproduced time and time again in magical acts small and large.

Earlier I alluded to the circulation of discourse in the form of property theory, and to the contributions to the spread of property discourse made by specific individuals, such as the philosopher John Locke. If we were to look back historically at the achievement of an entextualized idea of property as taken for granted, we might perhaps start with the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament: “Thou shall not steal.” That fragment of discourse has gained currency in the Judeo-Christian world, with its assertion of a clear-cut mine/not-yours boundary.

However, the entextualization of property, while depending on such widely circulating discourse, also takes place in individual acts through which property is declared. The declaration occurs thanks to the magic of words, but it also depends on other signs and symbols, of which I examine in this section—the gate as a demarcator of geographically bounded property. The creation of ownership through such signs contributes to the renewal and reproduction of property as enchantment in each instance. Putting up a gate is thus itself an enchanting act—an instance of sprinkling fairy dust onto the world causing people to “see” that world in a peculiar way, and to shape their own conduct accordingly.

The first story I have to tell is about the creation of property through a specific act of enchantment. The story’s original narrator was Lawrence Coben, a PhD in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania with a specialization in Bolivian archaeology. Coben came to archaeology later in life, having had a different career for many years. After receiving a BA in Economics from Yale, he studied law at Harvard, earning a JD. For a year he worked as a lawyer representing business people engaged in deal-making. Deciding that deal-making was “more fun” than lawyering, he switched career paths, moving into the energy sector, where he co-founded Catalyst Energy Corporation. The company was among the first in the US to specialize in alternative energy. Today, Coben is the CEO of

Tremis Energy Corporation and also Chairman of the board of NRG Energy, Inc., a major energy-producing company whose stock forms part of the S&P 500 index.

After Catalyst Energy, Coben went on to own and run power companies in Bolivia. It is there that he fell in love with archaeology. In the middle of a successful business career, he went off to graduate school, completing his PhD in 2012 with a dissertation entitled *Theaters of Power: Inca Imperial Performance*. As part of his research, he investigated the archaeological remains at Incallajta in Central Bolivia. This is a monumental site some 80 miles to the east of Cochabamba, not far from the town of Pocona. In 2003, it was added to the candidate list for UNESCO World Heritage sites.

While working on the site, Coben noticed that tourist cars would occasionally drive up. Their occupants would get out, walk around, take pictures, and then leave. On the site, the local residents played soccer or engaged in other activities. This was not a wealthy area. Residents here earned typically at most a few hundred dollars per year. Coben wanted to preserve the archaeological site, but he also wanted to help the local population.

Coben observed that there was touristic interest in the site. In effect, the ancient Inca culture, at least insofar as it could be gleaned from the archaeological remains, was freely available to all visitors. In more technical language, one might say that interest was the driving force behind this movement of culture from the archaeological remains to the tourists. Coben was also aware that the tourists came from wealthier areas. So, he reasoned, wouldn't it make sense to charge the tourists to come in to see the site? This way the local population could earn some money, and, if all went well, they would see that the site was worth protecting. Coben thus hoped to do two things at once: help the local population economically and create a sustainable way in which the archaeological remains could be preserved.

How could he do it? Here is where enchantment comes into play. His thought was to put up a gate on the road leading to the site, to, in effect, fence off the area. Coben proposed the project to the local residents, suggesting that they charge roughly \$10 per visitor. The fee applied only to foreigners; Bolivians entered for free. Coben would pay for the gate, and

he would pay initially for someone to sit at the gate and collect the fees. The local residents were skeptical that anyone would give them money to see the remains, but they went along with Coben's plan. To the surprise of the local population, the tourists paid the entrance fee. The community began to make money. So how did this happen? How was it possible to extract profit for the local community from the archaeological remains. The answer is that those remains were turned into community property. And this happened through the seemingly enchanting power of a symbol—the fence or gate as boundary marker, sign of property, force capable of controlling human conduct.

Let's take a closer look at the semiotics of this act of enchantment. From the perspective of sign theory, the gate acts firstly as an icon. It resembles other boundary markers with which people are already familiar. It is a token of the type, one that participates in culturally understood ways of acting. Of course, the gate can serve as a physical barrier to prevent movement, but it is important in this instance, as Coben tells it, that people could have easily walked around. Its efficacy lies in the realm of signs. It draws upon the known in creating something new, an impediment to the free flow of culture in this specific case.

The gate or fence is also interpretable as an index. It is spatially and temporally contiguous with a line in space through which an imaginary boundary of property is created. It points to that line, orienting individuals who are capable of interpreting it. To appreciate this, one need only contemplate how the gate affects non-human animals. They simply go around it or they go under it or they go over it. Because the gate fits into a culturally intelligible scheme of signs, however, those familiar with the gate as sign know how to interpret it and they know what behavior is expected of them.

The enchantment effect is not just the set of behavioral routines that get activated by interpreting the gate as an iconic and indexical sign. It is the connection between the gate as iconic-indexical sign, on one level, and the circulating discourse about property on another level: "thou shalt not steal," in biblical words, or "no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions," in the words of Locke.

The link to this discursive layer of semiosis occurs via a conversion of the iconic and indexical interpretations of the gate into a potentially

articulable text. The entextualization connects the here and now of the tourist's encounter with the gate to a seemingly more eternal realm of property and ownership: "beyond this gate lies the property of someone other than me." It is the meaningful contextualization of the discursively circulating ideas about property that makes the remainder of the ritual—the paying of an entry fee to pass through the gate—seem reasonable and justifiable.

To put this enchantment process into perspective, however, I note that the gate as an iconic-indexical sign not only evokes a set of robotic behavioral routines, such as paying an entry fee; the gate may also bring to mind the sanctions associated with property, such as punishment for having taken what is not one's own. That official-looking guards reminiscent of police often staff gates reminds us that power in the form of threat of force is still a component of the property equation. In the case of Coben's Incallajta gate, if tourists did not want to pay, minimally they would have to confront the gatekeeper.

Still, the enchantment of property is a fact of everyday life in the US and many other places around the world. A palpable threat of force is unnecessary. Although a fraction of the population may be restrained in their trespass only or primarily by threat, others take property rights for granted, especially if they see themselves as benefitting from a collectively shared orientation to property rights. In the US, where the ideal of owning one's own home has been touted, a homeowner may be more inclined to respect the property rights of other homeowners because adherence to the ideals of property helps to secure his or her own rights. Whether for that reason or simply because the ideal of property is part of inertial culture, received from the past, the construal of property through its entextualization becomes a lens that brings the world of iconic and indexical signs into focus.

Coben's Incallajta story is not just about the demarcation of property. It is also about profit. And it is about Coben as entrepreneur on behalf of the local community, recognizing the prospects for profit through the process of demarcation. His is a story of actively creating an orientation to the world by turning property into profit. How did he do this? To return to his story, the first step was to recognize the interest that others—the tourists—had in the community's archaeological remains. Until

the gate was set up, tourists had unrestricted access. They had no need to pay to see these ruins. By asserting that the archaeological remains belonged to the community, Coben was able to convert that interest into the tourists' willingness to pay. What had been freely flowing culture was, so to speak, captured by the assertion of a property boundary. To perform that capture, Coben relied on the tourists' prior enchantment with the idea of property and their ability to cognize the gate as signaling ownership. A property assertion by itself produces no profit unless others are interested in that property, unless they have a desire for it. Profit is a product of property plus interest/desire.

The Incallajta story dates back to the middle of the last decade. As Coben explained to me, the situation has since changed. A politician raised enough money to build a visitor center at the site. According to Coben, the center now sits empty. The community failed to preserve the capture. The original symbol was dismantled. Still, the general idea that motivated this act of enchantment has been repeated elsewhere. Indeed, it is the main focus of the organization Coben founded: Sustainable Preservation Initiative. According to their website, the goal of the organization is to empower entrepreneurs, alleviate poverty by creating jobs, and preserve archaeological remains of the past.

Important about this story in the present context is not just that the Incallajta gate depended for its success upon an pre-existing enchantment on the part of the tourists with property, including their familiarity with entrance gates at parks, movie theaters, museums, and the like. It is that the community's act signaling ownership reproduced the enchantment layer of semiosis in a new context. It renewed the enchantment and expanded its scope, contributed to its movement through both space and time. The enchantment layer may be in large measure inertially transmitted in much of the US as well as in other places. However, without renewal, it runs the risk of entropic dissipation. Further, without specific acts of reproduction, as in the Incallajta case, it cannot expand or move into new areas. In fact, every time we engage in an explicitly economic transaction, whether we purchase a cup of coffee at Starbucks or sign a mortgage contract, we participate in a ritual through which property is re-enchanted.

Case 2: Enchanting Innovation

The mine/not-yours enchantment can assume different guises. We can well imagine that ancient forms of property enchantment underlie the original rise of complex social formations, in which certain individuals or groups accumulated more material wealth than others; the high-level interpretive semiotic layers make sense of such disparity in ways that have appeal, and that therefore achieve wide circulation. For example, the spell of property might derive from a claim that an individual or group was descended from the gods, as in the case of Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, where royal descent was traced to the god Woden.⁵ More generally, the right to property based upon descent has played and continues to play an important role. The claim can even be an argument that organizing the world in terms of property is the best way of satisfying the needs of the greatest number.

At the same time, property, however the enchantment takes place, is insufficient to account for the phenomenon of profit. There must be as well an interest, on the part of those lacking the specific item of property, in acquiring that item, a desire to possess it. Moreover, it must be possible for individuals with interest in acquiring the property to actually do so. If property is based on the enchantment of the mine/not-yours boundary, such that the boundary is taken for granted as simply in the world, or a “natural right,” as Locke might have it, a second boundary presents itself as a necessary condition for profit, namely the boundary of not-yours/potentially-yours. This boundary inserts temporality and hypothetical futures into the equation: “this property can be yours if you are willing to give me something I want in return.”

The enchantment consists in convincing people that something they do not already possess is desirable, that they should want to possess it, that a boundary exists between what they have and what they could have, and that there is a way to traverse that boundary. I should make clear again that the enchantment is not a matter of deception or falseness. It is a matter of coming to see the world in a particular way, to view it through a lens. In accepting a view of the world in terms of property, one is not necessarily accepting an erroneous understanding. Rather, one

is accepting a specific understanding for which alternatives are imaginable. Arguably, enchanting the world in terms of property may be a better way than others when evaluated in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number. Similarly, enchanting innovation may produce something better, measured in terms of some standard, than the status quo the innovation supplants. Enchantment in this case consists in making the innovation appear good and desirable.

Steve Jobs, the immortalized founder and former CEO of Apple Computer, Inc., now Apple, Inc., is reported to have said, when asked whether the company should do research to find out what their customers wanted, “no, because customers don’t know what they want until we’ve shown them” (Isaacson 2011: 143). Jobs, of course, was famous for creating fanfare around each new Apple release. Perhaps more than any company, Apple succeeded in enchanting technology, making it appear desirable. We can argue about the relative significance of Apple’s innovations but in labeling the promotional work as enchantment I am not suggesting that Apple’s claims were false. In fact, as an Apple user since 1984, I have largely bought into Apple’s enchantment of technology, and I do see many of its innovations as advances. It is precisely the enchantment of this boundary of innovation or advancement that I want to explore here.

Here I propose to explore the boundary through the case of Boston Scientific Corporation and its co-founder and former Director, John Abele. When Abele tells his story, he begins with college—Amherst College in Massachusetts, where he studied physics and philosophy. He is a man with wide-ranging intellectual interests and the desire (like Larry Coben) to make the world a better place. His interest in betterment these days far transcends any specific business goals. He is concerned about the world at large and the problems it faces.

After graduating from Amherst, Abele found a job selling a specialized type of lighting, and he discovered, in the course of that work, that he liked interacting with people. He answered an ad for someone producing a medical device out of the basement of a Catholic church in Watertown, Massachusetts. Abele’s role was to develop the device—a steerable catheter. A catheter, of course, is: a small long tube that can be inserted into the body for various purposes. For example, it can be slipped into arteries

and veins and used to inject medicines or to remove blockages. The innovation that came out of the basement of the Catholic church was a catheter of this sort but one that could be guided or steered to its destination within the body.

The company was called Medi-Tech, and Abele's role was to help develop the devices and sell them to doctors. In the course of his work, he met and talked to numerous people, especially doctors. He recalls that they "gave an enormous amount of their time to teach me. But I reciprocated and provided them with information they might never had otherwise."⁶ In this regard, Abele's attitude was the opposite of Steve Jobs's. Abele wanted to find out how doctors used existing catheters, as well as what they would like to be able to do with catheters. He was doing a form of what we now call design ethnography, although he did not call it that. In the years I have known him, I have found him to have an anthropologist's sensitivity to culture, and he made good use of that sensibility in developing the steerable catheter.

While Abele learnt from doctors and others, however, he also enchanted the Medi-Tech innovations for them. He gave them an idea of what they might be able to do with the new devices. The crucial step was to listen to the doctors and to convert their desires into better devices, and then to convince yet others of the benefits of adopting the new technology. The enchantment consisted in getting medical professionals to imagine alternative futures and to bring those alternative futures into reach. Thanks to Abele, the professionals came to see the world in terms of a not-yours/potentially-yours boundary that was traversable, and, moreover, one that is was desirable to traverse.

As Abele describes it, this was an "elaborator business." Abele, working in conjunction with the doctors, was the elaborator. The force of interest in, or desire for, the constantly improving devices led to increasing sales. The profit derived from the imagined world Abele fashioned for the doctors and transmitted to them, a world built around the satisfaction of their desires for new uses of the catheter.

Here it is worth pondering whether anyone could contemplate the possibility of not adopting these advances. Didn't the advances speak for themselves? Or, perhaps, when might the advances not speak for themselves? There is, of course, the problem of getting doctors to notice the

advances in the first place. That was Abele's original job. If even one doctor found out about the new technology and appreciated it, the doctors themselves could produce the enchantment, getting other doctors interested in acquiring the new equipment. This is still a form of enchantment, as one doctor becomes enthralled by another's account, although it leaves out the "elaborator" component.

Abele's experience, however, also reveals another possibility: the potential consumers, doctors in this case, might be content with the status quo. Rather than seeing an innovation as an improvement, they might regard it as a threat to the way they are currently doing things. In more technical language, habitual inertia might counteract the interest in the new technology.

In fact, this is what happened when Abele's company developed a new use for the steerable catheter. In addition to delivering medicine or draining fluids, where it serves as a conduit, the steerable catheter could also be used to perform surgical procedures. According to Abele, this potential purpose met stiff resistance from surgeons. Their world was enchanted by a view of themselves as cutting open the body in order to enter it to perform repairs. They did not insert tubes in them. Many of the surgeons told Abele that they would block the introduction of surgical uses for the steerable catheter. This meant that he would have to find those brave souls who were adventurous enough or iconoclastic enough to try out the new device. Looking back on that past world today, of course, we know that the innovation eventually did catch on as the adopting surgeons helped to convince others, especially doctors in training. Today such minimally invasive surgical procedures are commonplace and widely accepted throughout the profession.

An initial observation: the surgeons, when first contacted by Abele about the possibilities of using the steerable catheter for surgery, lived in an already enchanted world. They possessed a view of the world transmittable through discourses about themselves and who they were. They were under the spell of a prior enchantment. Their prior enchantment was incompatible with Abele's proposal. Abele suggested that surgeries could be done without major incisions to open up the body. It could be minimally invasive. This alternative view did not sit well with the surgeons' existing self-understand.

A second observation: Abele's role in enchanting the world was distinct from that of Coben. In proposing to build a gate, Coben imagined a world that looked like one already familiar to international tourists, his prospective customers.⁷ He renewed their enchantment with the idea of property. He confirmed the way they were already looking at the world. In proposing minimally invasive catheter surgery, in contrast, Abele challenged the world of his potential customers.⁸ He told them they were not who they thought they were. This was more than a matter of technological innovation. It was a matter of worldview innovation. Abele proposed a new enchantment; he directed the attention of the surgeons to a possible new reality.

Here I note that disruption is a matter of quantitative difference—the extent to which the possible new world, as formulated in words and images by Abele, differed from the existing self-understanding of the surgeons. Had Abele been proposing a less radical rupture, say a new type of scalpel or advanced cutting instrument, something more in line with what the surgeons were already used to, he likely would have met with less resistance. Change of an incremental sort—a new type of scalpel, for example—seems compatible with an evolving worldview. A talented salesman could enchant such a micro-innovation more readily. The innovation Abele proposed, however, was disruptive. Hence, it met with resistance.

A third observation: the resistance could be construed as a matter of bodily habits (Mauss 2006 [1935]; Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Inertia was at work in how surgeons did things, what repetitive activities they engaged in. Those activities involve certain neural-muscular habits. There is an analogy here to the inertia of habits associated with producing spoken sounds within a particular language. Our efforts to acquire new linguistic sounds while learning a new language meet with resistance, the neural-muscular habits associated with the old language. From the point of view of enchantment, however, what is most intriguing is that the resistance was to Abele's words and images of a possible future. It was not directly kindled by the pattern of bodily habits. In other words, the existing enchantment, the way surgeons were accustomed to thinking and talking about themselves and what they did, itself participated in inertia. It was the resistance of an existing enchantment that Abele confronted and had

to overcome. The resistance took place in the higher realms of semiosis, in particular, in the realm of discourse encoding of identity, of a way of making sense out of one's self and its activities and purposes.

The steerable catheter used for minimally invasive surgery is what Abele himself refers to as a disruptive technology. What this case shows us, however, is that the disruption takes place first in the higher semiotic planes, that is, in the realm of enchantment. Disruption occurs when a new enchantment of the world appears to be incompatible with an old one. The disruption brings into focus a boundary that exists between a present worldview and a possible future one. Insofar as the future proposed by the new enchantment is an appealing one, profit is possible. A company can extract profit from customers if the future they conjure up is sufficiently desirable that the consumers are willing to pay handsomely for it.

Why does a disruption like this one succeed despite the initial resistance to it by the surgeons? Here we enter a realm that, since the nineteenth century, most anthropologists have found it unfashionable to contemplate. Does culture evolve or grow or accumulate in some progressive fashion? Bourdieu indirectly raised the question by suggesting the need to bring high culture, what is sometimes called "Culture with a capital C," back into the anthropological idea of culture, that is, with a small "c" (cf. Bourdieu 1984 [1979]: 1). He was referring to the notion of high and low culture especially in the realm of fashions, however, which made the idea of high culture seem less cumulative than it had appeared to Kant, in his anthropology, who had in mind the progress of science (Kant 2006 [1798]). Kant's view became that as well of the nineteenth-century theorists of cultural evaluation.

Looked at from the point of view of enchantment, boundaries, and profit, the question of accumulation is at the heart of economic capital as well. Is the steerable catheter used for minimally invasive surgery an "advance" over older forms of surgery? It must have come to appear so, however, grudgingly, even to those enchanted by an older worldview. We might venture that the worldview surgeons held at the time Abele pitched the new idea must have permitted recognition, however dim, of a possible step forward. Despite their resistance, some surgeons could see the device as a potential advance, an innovation, even if a radical one.

Although an advance, the idea could, simultaneously, preserve enough of the older worldview to be recognizable as contributing to the accomplishment of goals held to be fundamental by those in the profession. The worldview in some sense contained within it a dynamic trajectory, rendering the advance possible. The not-yours/potentially-yours boundary appeared traversable, and traversing it seemed desirable.

As the idea of cultural accumulation solidified in nineteenth-century anthropology, cultural evolution rigidified as a stage model. Accumulation occurred in a kind of lockstep fashion such that a “society,” as it was imagined then, transitioned from one evolutionary stage to the next (e.g., Service 1970). Twentieth-century multilinear evolution models presented an alternative to the stage model, albeit one still concerned with the trajectories of societies over time (e.g., Steward 1955). The case of the steerable catheter suggests a further refinement, namely, that cultural advances appear as such within worldviews. Those worldviews themselves map trajectories into the future, such that a new enchantment, even if disruptive, is rendered compatible with the existing enchantment.

Case 3: The Wave of Enchantment

Since worldviews consist of discourse and other high-level semiotic representations, innovations in enchantment spread, like the rest of such semiotically high-level culture, through processes of social transmission and social learning. In this regard, nineteenth-century diffusionism provided a complement to evolutionism. The central idea of diffusion was that innovation was difficult and occurred at certain specifiable sites—centers of diffusion.⁹ The innovation spread out from those centers in waves.

To translate that idea to the concept of worldview as discourse, we might say that enchantment comes in waves. What appears as an innovation within an existing enchantment spreads out to new areas. But that wave is not necessarily geographical, as in the nineteenth-century view. Within the framework of modern capitalism, it can spread out within professions, such as surgery, and manifest itself in complex socio-geographical patterns. The key characteristic of the enchantment wave is

not geography per se, like the wave formed by a stone dropped into still water. Rather, it is a wave characterized by an increase in acceptance by people. It is, in other words, a popularity wave, like the rise in popularity of songs on the pop charts.

To bring together the idea of the enchantment wave with the notion of enchanting innovation as the basis of profit, my sample case is the restaurant business. In the restaurant business, innovation looks to an outsider more like Bourdieu's fashion and cultural capital model than the advances in surgical procedures (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Because we are dealing with enchantments in both cases, however, the principle is the same: profit can be had by providing people with something they want and are willing to pay for in return. However, in the restaurant case, we are dealing with profit accruing not to those who introduce the innovation in the first place but rather to those who recognize before others that a wave of innovation is taking shape and spreading.

The entrepreneur, in this instance, is someone who has "opened up about nine different restaurant concepts for different people."¹⁰ He has been successful in making profits in this highly competitive business because of his seemingly magical ability to foresee a rising wave of enchantment and get on board early. Although the time scales are different, the waves of enchantment in the restaurant business resemble the rise and fall of songs on the pop charts.

The entrepreneur relates: "I'm always trying to figure out what the next new concept will be." He endeavors to detect trends that are already out there in the world, but that the vast majority of people haven't noticed. This isn't, it would seem, so much invention as copying, itself a key form of cultural motion. But it is copying at the right time, being an early adopter of a trend. As he puts it: "if you're gonna do something you have to do it as the wave is going up. If you don't catch it then, you're dividing the market so many ways that you can't stand out any more."

In some of his accounts, he seems to be more of an innovator than an early adopter, but it could be that he noticed the trend elsewhere and brought it to the Philadelphia area. He mentions, for example, KatManDu restaurant, "an outdoor seasonal, open for three months of the year. It was a tropical theme, tropical style food, basically for the summer months ... Bring in half a million dollars worth of palm trees and decorate it so

that you can't tell if you were in Jamaica. It was based on a place I had been to in Jamaica, so that's what I was basing it on." An online source described it as follows: "Complete with palm trees and white sand beaches, Katmandu looks like the film set for Gilligan's Island" (ClubPlanet n.d.).¹¹

It is the entrepreneur's awareness of the interest "wave," as he calls it, and when to get on and when to get off that is important. In his words, "I've always tried to just be looking around, see what's going on. I happened to be out in Las Vegas, and if you want to see what's really going on in the hospitality industry, you go to places that are the leading areas where people who have major money are going to take a gamble and try to do something new and exciting." There he observed the rise of interest in Chipotle-like restaurants. Regarding this venture, he concluded: "I was trying to think how I could take what I saw there and start doing something here. But by the time I worked out my recipes and learned how to make the food, I really missed the wave."

The entrepreneurial magic, in this case, lies in seeing what others do not, that a wave of interest is taking shape and beginning to spread—a wave of enchantment, that is, a desirable future, just on the other side of a traversable property boundary. The clues are there in the world but not just anyone can assemble a picture out of them, make a diagnosis, calculate the risks, and undertake a successful venture. This entrepreneur was and is particularly good at it. KatManDu, for example, among his many ventures, was highly successful and rode the wave of interest from 1991 until 2002, when it closed—at least the one in Philadelphia closed; another in Trenton, New Jersey continued on for another decade.

A final point in connection with this story: insofar as profit is concerned, the enchantment wave is a discourse wave, consisting of talk and writing about the cultural property that is for sale, as well as other representations of it. It is an explicit metacultural wave. Advertising plays an important role in this wave, though it is complex semiotically, often employing lower-level icons and indices that may create a desire to acquire without a great deal of explicit discourse. However, the enchantment wave necessarily includes an explicit representation of not-yours/potentially-yours, since it involves a purchasing decision.

Not all cultures spread through such an enchantment wave. Bourdieu's acquired cultural capital, for example, was conceived as non-commodified albeit potentially interconvertible with economic capital. In fact, a vast amount of culture spreads not through the intermediary of high-level semiotic enchantment but rather through the direct copying of cultural forms. One need think only of so-called Valley Girl talk or the recent spread of "vocal fry"—an exemplar of creaky voice, which forms one component of ritual lamentation styles around the world but in the US is used primarily by young adults to communicate world-weariness as a marker of in-group social status. Because no property boundary has been drawn around such vocal styles, they are there for the taking, so to speak. They can be freely copied. The same is true of given names, which exhibit patterns of rise and fall over time similar to trends in the restaurant business but which can spread by simple copying without high-level semiotic enchantment. Profit, however, depends upon the enchantment of the temporal boundary, of the possible future surrounding acquisition.

Conclusion

What is the enchantment effect? It is the effect whereby words, especially their referential content, make sense out of the icons and indices through which the world is more directly apprehended, such as Coben's gate in our earlier example or Abele's steerable catheter or our restaurant entrepreneur's "palm trees and white sandy beaches." The words make the interpretation of the world they offer seem, to use Geertz's (2017 [1973]: 128) phrase, "uniquely realistic." As a first tentative conclusion, I propose that the widespread, albeit not always uniform, sharing of words pertaining to property rights and ownership, is a necessary condition for the possibility of profit. The tourists visiting the archaeological site readily handed over their ten dollars in exchange for the right to enter, just as the diners at Katmandu did, and just as surgeons ultimately did, despite their initially fierce resistance.

However, this specific view of property—namely that large disparities in property ownership are possible—is not a given in the world. Alternative formulations, such as those of the sixteenth-century Tupinamba chiefs, are imaginable. At the same time, the words cast a spell over us, influencing

our judgments, guiding our actions. We find it difficult to see through them or beyond them to other possible visions of reality.

A second conclusion is that the possibility of profit also depends upon a mine/not-yours divide. Insofar as desire exists on the part of some people for what is regarded as the property of others, the possibility of profit from property exists. The extra ingredient needed is an agreed upon not-yours/potentially your boundary, with mutually understood and accepted conditions for how to traverse it. The not-yours/potentially-yours boundary is, again, the result of an enchantment, an interpretation of social reality formulable in words.

Because enchantment takes place through the magic of words, it moves through the world like culture more generally, obeying a kind of inertia susceptible to entropic change. That inertial view appears to map a trajectory in which incremental change is understandable and on the horizon of which desire for acquisition operates. However, disruptive change takes hold only grudgingly and with protest, as John Abele's experience with attempting to convince surgeons to adopt the steerable catheter for surgery attests. What had to change in this instance was the inertial enchantment to which surgeons were attached. The medical specialists had to come to appreciate that they could perform—and perform as well or better—some of their surgical operations without the need of radically invasive procedures, and that, simultaneously, this did not diminish their identity as surgeons. While the change was grudging, it did finally make sense to many surgeons in light of their professed goal of healing through operative procedures. The redefinition of what it meant to be a surgeon involved including among those procedures the use of steerable catheters. A third conclusion, therefore, is that the inertial frame enchanting the world of surgery was able to finally allow recognition of the development of surgical catheter procedures as a better way, in some cases at least, to do what surgeons were already trying to do. That is, their articulable worldview included the possibility of progress, with better operative procedures discernible as such.

A final conclusion draws ethnographic inspiration from our restaurateur. He viewed innovation in the restaurant business—the “next new concept”—as coming in waves, a view not unlike that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists studying diffusion. The conclusion I draw is that the waves are real. They are waves of enchantment. They

spread outward from centers as the popularity of the concept takes hold. But like songs on the pop charts, although exhibiting perhaps a different temporal trajectory, interest in the new concept eventually fades. The initially alluring grows old. While I do not at this point pretend to understand what the time frames for the fading of enchantment are in different instances, the tentative conclusion is that the enchantment of new commodities has a temporal life. Over time the spell dissipates.

The story I have told here is about enchantment as the basis of profit. It is about the ability of words to cast a spell over us, leading us to apprehend the world in peculiar ways. It is a story about the spell of property, of the acceptance of inequalities in material wealth, and about the origins of profit in the desires people have to acquire the wealth of others. Simultaneously, it is a story about innovation as creating desire for the new but also resistance to change if the innovation is too new. And it is a story about the waves of enchanting words that sweep across space and that rise and fall over time. It is ultimately a story that reaffirms the truth of Marcel Mauss's (1972: 178) claim many years ago: "Though we may feel ourselves to be very far removed from magic, we are still very much bound up with it."

Notes

1. I adopt the term "enchantment" from Brian Moeran (2017). Moeran references Alfred Gell's (1992) "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology." Gell's focus, however, is the relationship between technology and enchantment. My own usage focuses on the role of words.
2. Jeremy Bentham's (1998 [1776]: 3) "fundamental axiom" was formulated as: "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."
3. The enchantment effect as described here thus builds upon the concept of "essentialization" or "naturalization," that is, viewing the world in terms of "essences", qualities or characteristics predicable-as-true of individual things (including persons, events, signs of all sorts), and in particular predicable-as-true independent of the micro-contextual instance of presentation of the thing at issue. That is, to the ideological perception, essences perdure, and, when naturalized, they are grounded in cosmic

absolutes, or at least relatively more cosmic and absolute frameworks-of-being than the micro-contextual indexicality with respect to which they manifest themselves: ‘Boys will be boys!’—meaning, of course, that this/these boy(s) as (mis)-behaving are grounded in—their behavior indexes—the cosmic essence—maybe even a ‘natural’ essence—of ‘boy’hood” (Silverstein 2003). See pp. 202-3. However, enchantment refers to broader patterns of discourse as well as to timeless propositions made about specific things.

4. Except during revolutionary periods, such as happened in France beginning in 1787, when large portions of the population came to see their society the way the Tupinamba saw it. Property ceased to hold them in its spell.
5. See, for example, Bede (n.d.).
6. The quotations in this section are drawn from transcriptions of Abele’s presentations to my classes at the University of Pennsylvania.
7. Although it did not resemble the world as understood by the local population, for whom the archaeological remains simply could not command tourist dollars or Bolivianos.
8. In this regard, the surgeons were more like the local Bolivian population, resisting the innovation.
9. The wave theory goes back to the work of Johannes Schmidt (1872). For more recent work on waves in linguistic diffusion, see Labov (2007).
10. Except where noted, all quotes reported in this section are taken from an interview with a Philadelphia-area restaurant entrepreneur. My then research assistant, Abby Graham, conducted the interview on April 8, 2015.
11. The notice indicates that the restaurant closed in 2002. The restaurant was located at 417 N Delaware Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19123.

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