1. Culture, morality, modernity, and the transformation of social imaginaries

There is no single notion of a good life, or of a good society; or, indeed, of how they are connected. This proposition holds at the philosophical, moral and political levels of theorising, discussion and debate. It is also true of the people in this book, all of whom have striven, in widely differing circumstances, to forge for themselves what they interpret as a good life. In each case, the interpretation was generated by specific experiences of both tradition and modernisation, and by the particular circumstances in which they found themselves. To that extent, this book offers no single interpretation either. By exploring a variety of ways in which different groups of people have sought to achieve a good life, however, the book identifies some central commonalities clustered around emerging notions of rights.

The two vignettes sketched in this chapter provide an introduction to the three more detailed case studies and indicate the fraught and contested character of these key concepts. In the first, a group of Hazara refugees fled the absolutist and oppressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan to seek a better life in Australia, only to be confronted by the limits imposed on their personal desires by an exercise of territory/nation/state sovereignty that defined a good society in terms that sought to exclude them. The second vignette foreshadows the longer analysis in Chapter 8 of the 2001 Durban UN Conference against Racism. It relates the very minor incident of a press conference and information session organised during the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Forum in the wake of the Australian Government's refusal to accept asylum-seekers who had been rescued by the Norwegian ship Tampa. The session's degeneration into an unseemly competition between the different civil-society representatives mirrored the central issues that bedevilled the Forum and the Conference itself: that is, incommensurate understandings of the practical meaning of human rights, and of what constitutes a good society. On these issues, and their very specific expression in strident anti-Semitism, the Forum and Conference foundered. In the view of many, both were entirely wrecked. My conclusions, based on the ethnographic studies presented in this book, are at odds with this view. They suggest rather that, despite such dramatic dissensions, human rights, and the principles that underlie them, remain a generative source for ordinary people's understanding of both a good life and a good society.

Vignette 1

On 7 November 2002, two unrelated Hazara farmers from Afghanistan, Musa Husseini and Sayed Husseini, sat in the dock in the Magistrates’ Court in Fremantle in Western Australia. They were in the dock, not accused of any crime, but because they were asylum-seekers who had the misfortune to collide with the Australian Government’s year-old refusal to accept refugees attempting to arrive in the country outside the UN refugee system. They were there to attend the coronial inquest into the deaths of Musa’s mother, Nurjan Husseini, and Sayed’s wife, Fatimeh Husseini, who had drowned when the boat in which both families were trying to reach Australia sank. The Muslim fast of Ramadan began on the second day of the inquest, so that Musa and Sayed were fasting on four of the intense five days. I was in the body of the court, observing the process for the Human Rights Council of Australia, an NGO that had lobbied persistently over the intervening year to have an inquest held.

The men had fled civil war and the Taliban regime. Musa left because of fighting between Pashtuns and Hazaras in his village. His son was less than fifteen years old and was likely to be taken to fight. In fear of this possibility, Musa decided to try to come to Australia with his mother, his wife, his five children and his brother-in-law. They went first to Iran, where they lived for three to four months. They left when they heard that the son of fellow Hazara refugees had been sent back to Afghanistan and was killed on his return. Their journey took them first to Malaysia and then to Indonesia. Sayed, who had been married to Fatimeh for about a year and a half, was persuaded by her to leave their village. As Hazara, they were persecuted by the Taliban, and the regional political party wanted Sayed to go to fight the Taliban. This was something that neither Sayed nor Fatimeh wanted. Their route was through Pakistan to Malaysia and then Indonesia over some two months. The families met for the first time when the people smugglers whom they had paid to find them a passage got them a place on the *Sumber Lestari*, a small coastal trader-type vessel. By then, Sayed and Fatimeh thought that she was pregnant with their first child. The boat left Surabaya, Indonesia, on Friday, 2 November 2001. Crowded on board were a crew of four Indonesians and 160 mostly Afghan asylum-seekers.

Their journey into the unknown was made in order to find a better life for themselves and their families than the one they were experiencing under the Taliban. They believed that they would find greater freedom and security in Australia and were prepared to pay the price and undertake the risks necessary to achieve that. They were among a number of people who, increasingly since late 1999, had been making their way from oppressive regimes in Afghanistan,
Iraq and Iran to Indonesia, and from there to Australian territory or territorial waters in small, overcrowded and usually unsafe boats. They were not to know that, two and a half months earlier, another group of 433 asylum-seekers, whose wooden boat had been badly damaged in a storm after six days at sea, had been rescued close to the Australian territory of Christmas Island by a Norwegian cargo ship, *Tampa*. When its Captain, Arne Rinnan, had changed course in order to reach the nearest port on Christmas Island, the Australian Government breached the most basic conventions of international maritime custom and the law of the sea and refused him entry. For five days, the *Tampa* waited. Its crew of 27 was swelled to 460 people, on a ship licensed to carry only 40 people, with only 40 life jackets on board, and with a number of people needing medical assistance, some urgently. It was only after the Government had finalised a comprehensive policy of rejection of boat people, and announced what it called the ‘Pacific solution’ to prevent them reaching Australian territory or waters, that the *Tampa* asylum-seekers were transferred to an Australian Navy ship. From there, they were taken to a hastily organised detention camp in the small neighbouring Pacific island country of Nauru.

A few days later, the Government launched ‘Operation Relex’. This was a military operation involving both Navy and Customs ships. It was designed to block entry to Australia of asylum-seekers arriving on boats officially categorised as illegal. A few weeks later, in an exercise of superlative casuistry, the Government passed a package of laws and amendments to the *Migration Act (1958)* that designated a number of offshore Australian islands as ‘excised offshore places’. The effect of this ‘excision’ was to remove those islands from the Australian migration zone and therefore to prevent asylum-seekers who managed to arrive successfully at those places from having any right to make a visa application to enter Australia. Both Christmas and Ashmore Island were included in the excised offshore places.

The impact of Operation Relex became clear throughout October. Two main incidents received extensive media coverage. The first was when the Navy ship HMAS *Adelaide* became embroiled in a highly politicised process of, first, attempting to turn back a boat with 233 Iraqi asylum-seekers aboard, and then, when the damaged vessel sank, managing to rescue them and bring them aboard the *Adelaide*. The invidious position of the Navy personnel involved was lost in the accusation—later proved false³—that the asylum-seekers had threatened to throw children overboard if they were prevented from reaching Christmas Island. This group of asylum-seekers was finally taken to a detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. For most of those on another boat a fortnight later, the tragic SIEV X, rescue came too late. The overloaded

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³ Commonwealth of Australia (2002).
boat capsized in heavy seas and 353 men, women and children drowned. An Indonesian fishing vessel rescued the 46 survivors—33 men, nine women and four children—more than 12 hours later. They were taken back to Indonesia.  

The *Sumber Lestari*, too, was confronted under Operation Relex. On 8 November 2001, the Australian Customs vessel *Arnhem Bay* intercepted the boat, possibly just outside the Australian contiguous zone off the coast of Ashmore Reef. The Indonesian vessel was ordered to stop. This did not happen. Instead, there was an attempt to speed up. Nearby was an Australian Navy ship, HMAS *Wollongong*. Crew from the *Wollongong* boarded the Indonesian boat shortly afterwards. While the Navy personnel were on board, there was an explosion and a fire began in the engine room. In panic, those on the boat jumped overboard. Because there was an accusation that the asylum-seekers had sabotaged the *Sumber Lestari*, much of the questioning in the inquest focused on the state of the boat before it left Indonesia. Sayed was asked, ‘Was the boat safe?’ He replied, ‘I am not sure what a boat is supposed to look like, so I don’t know.’ Nevertheless, in the chaos that followed the explosion, Sayed tried to persuade Fatimeh to jump with him into the water but she was frightened. Sayed described to the Coroner what happened: ‘But when the Australians told us to jump, we held hands and jumped. That was the last time when we were together. Then we were separated. I couldn’t see my wife’. Musa had his whole family—his wife and five children as well as his mother—to protect.

First my wife jumped, then one of my daughters. I held my other daughter and jumped, then my sons. My brother-in-law jumped with my mother. I saw my wife with too much water in her trousers, she couldn’t get her balance and would have drowned. I had to help her. I couldn’t see my mother because of the waves. The last time I saw my mother was on the boat.

Most, if not all, of the asylum-seekers were wearing life jackets but of substandard quality. The crews of the two Australian ships managed to rescue alive all but two of the asylum-seekers and the Indonesian crew. The two who did not survive were Musa’s mother, Nurjan Husseini, approximately fifty-five years old, and Sayed’s wife, Fatimeh Husseini, twenty-one years old. Much of the incident was videoed by one of the Customs crew, up to the point of the

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4 Under Operation Relex, the boats coming from Indonesia were labelled and numbered. The label was ‘Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel’ or SIEV. The *Olong*, the boat confronted by the *Adelaide*, became SIEV 4. The name of SIEV X, the boat that capsized, is not known. The *Sumber Lestari* became SIEV 10.

5 Under international law, the contiguous zone refers to an area of 12 nautical miles beyond Australia’s territorial waters. Article 24 of the UN *Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, 1958* sets out that a state may exercise some control related to necessary protection of its territory. Less than two months before the *Sumber Lestari* incident, Ashmore Reef had been excised from Australia’s migration zone as part of a suite of eight bills ‘rushed into law’ as part of the so-called ‘Pacific solution’ (Mares 2002: 167 ff.).
explosion and when people started leaping overboard. At that point, the video ceased, with a startled exclamation from one of the Australian crew of, ‘The motherfuckers are jumping!’

A year later, the rest of the story was told from its different perspectives to the Coroner in the Fremantle court. The video footage was shown on the first day. It was the first time that Musa and Sayed had seen it. After the Navy and Customs personnel had given their evidence, Sayed told his story through an interpreter.

We started our journey on a Thursday evening, and then the next Thursday all these things happened. I was sitting with my wife and I heard from others that a ship was coming. Then we saw the other boat coming, but we didn’t know it was the Navy. We weren’t concentrating on the boats. I was paying attention to my wife, and my wife was paying attention to me. We were caring for each other.

After they jumped into the water and were separated, ‘one of the rubber boats saved me’. He was taken to the Arnhem Bay.

After I was saved, I was asking about my wife. They didn’t know. Then they told me she was on the other boat. I asked to be taken to her. That took quite some time. They told me there was one deceased lady on the ship. I went to her and saw that it was Musa’s mother. So I asked again. But I wasn’t informed about my wife.

In fact, Fatimeh was already dead. According to the Navy evidence, there may have been a very faint indication of life after she was taken out of the water, but she failed to respond to attempts to resuscitate her both then and later on board the Wollongong. Sayed did not find out until the following morning.

In the morning, they took me to the other ship. They were having their breakfast. Another man knew some English and asked for me. They told us to sit down and have breakfast, they told me my wife is sick and a doctor is attending her, and I should sit here and eat my breakfast.

At this point in his story, Sayed wept. When he could go on, he told how one of the officers came out: ‘I could tell from his face that it was very severe. They whispered to me that my wife had died’. Sayed then apologised to the Coroner and to the court for his emotion: ‘I am very sorry if I have upset anyone today.’

The account of Nurjan Husseini’s death was given mainly by the sixteen-year-old boy who had tried to save her. Ali Reza Sadiqi had left Afghanistan because of trouble with the Taliban. One older brother had been killed by the Taliban. Another had escaped three years previously and for most of that time the family did not know where he was. In the end, he had arrived in Australia and was living in Perth on a temporary protection visa. Their father was a blacksmith
and, as Reza told his story: ‘The Taliban used to come and take things without paying. Once I refused to serve them, and they stabbed me’. He still did not have the full use of his right hand and it continued to trouble him. He had tried to get to a UN doctor, but was introduced to a people smuggler and travelled to Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia. Overall, his journey took nearly a year. His attempt to reach Australia on the Sumber Lestari was the third time he had tried to do so. The first boat proved unseaworthy, the second one sank. As a result, Reza had bought his own life jacket before he left Indonesia. He was wearing it at the time of the explosion.

I threw my bag with my birth certificate and clothes, and a piece of [loose] wood into the water. Then I jumped… I had my bag for a few minutes but then I saw a person without a life jacket and gave it to him. I was having a problem with my right hand, but I tried my best. I can swim a little. I gave the piece of wood to another man who had been in the villa in Indonesia. I saw a tube in the water, I put a child in the tube and told the man to help. Then I saw Musa’s mother. What I saw first was another person with her face down in the water. She had a life jacket on. She was not moving and her arms were down in the water. I did not recognise her. I pulled her face out of the water. She wasn’t breathing. I pushed her chest and tummy and foam came out and she started breathing. I took her and tried to swim towards the Australian ship but the waves kept pushing me away… I was struggling to hold Musa’s mother’s head above water.

Reza and Mrs Husseini were finally taken on board the Arnhem Bay. Attempts to resuscitate Mrs Husseini failed.

The next morning, the bodies of both Nurjan and Fatimeh were transferred to another Navy ship for burial on Christmas Island. Instead of asylum, those who had survived were split into two groups and confined in detention centres for the next two and a half years. Sayed was with the group who were detained on Christmas Island. There he was able to make regular visits to his wife’s grave until he was removed to Nauru, at three o’clock in the morning and with almost no warning, in March 2004. Musa and his family and Reza were taken to the detention centre on Nauru. After a year there, Reza spent the year that followed the inquest under guard in a solitary motel room in Perth. He was still a minor and the Perth detention centre was not authorised to house minors. Nor would the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) allow him to be released into the care of his older brother.

Sitting every day in the court in Fremantle, I watched the impact on these men as the interpreter—a gentle Iranian Bah’ai woman—translated what was being
asked and said about the events that had changed their lives. Although I had
gone to the Perth detention centre to meet them, although I was representing
the NGO that had been actively instrumental in getting the inquest held at all,
and which was providing the interpreter after the refusal by the Commonwealth
to do so, I was not permitted to approach or speak to the men in the court. They
were treated as prisoners and kept separate and under guard. We felt the full
force of this on the final day, which was also the first anniversary of the deaths
of Nurjan and Fatimeh. A number of local refugee support groups had organised
a small memorial vigil to be held outside the courthouse half an hour before
the inquest was due to begin. I sought and gained permission from the Perth
detention centre manager and from the Coroner for Musa and Sayed to attend.
Minutes before the vigil was to begin, this permission was personally overridden
from Canberra by the Federal Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock. As we
joined in commemoration and prayer on a grassy area adjoining the courthouse,
Musa and Sayed waited inside under the usual guard, forbidden to share this
moment that touched them so deeply.

These circumstances of fear, insecurity, loss, imprisonment did not constitute the
better life in Australia that these families, and several thousand other asylum-
seekers over the same period, were seeking. Musa’s teenage daughter Amina
wrote from Nauru to Bishop Brian Kyme of the Anglican Church in Perth:

    The situation of the camp is not good. Here is very hot. There isn’t
    enough water. I hate it. We are fed up with this situation. I always pray
    for everybody. I pray for my parents because they don’t feel happy in
    here, my mother always has headache and she’s ill. My father too. My
    father can’t eat anything due to he hasn’t got any teeth. I worry for
    them…I don’t like to lose my mother due to she really is ill and here
    hasn’t got good doctor. Please you help us…I request you from the
    bottom of my heart that you help us to get free from this camp as soon
    as possible…Please help, help, help. Perhaps you can’t believe if I tell
    you now that in writing the letter I’m crying…

* hope

Hope here dies, as long as hope lives
life thrives on hope, hope keeps me alive.
Amina
your friend

Whatever expectations these families had in leaving the familiarity of their
traditional village lives as farmers, they did not include a hazardous journey by
sea and long-term detention at the end of it. Sayed commented, ‘As soon as I saw
the sea, I was frightened. The smugglers told us that the boat would be quite
safe. If I knew it was this kind of boat, I wouldn’t have come.’ Musa talked of the
drought and the lack of wood in his village and very much about the fighting
and his fear for his fifteen-year-old son. Life was very difficult. After they left
Iran, they intended to come to Australia, because ‘we had heard that human
rights people were very active and that there would be a place for us there’. The
first part of Musa’s statement was borne out. The second was frustrated by their
encounter with a government whose idea of the good was dictated by narrow
political rather than humanitarian concerns. The families’ experiences, in both
Afghanistan and Australia, make clear that the idea of the good, and of a good
society, is not a matter of consensus but of intense conflict. This is a theme that
will be central to this book.

The men’s accounts also give brief glimpses of the lives of Hazara villagers
in central Afghanistan at a time of intense and immediate internal conflict.
Traditional ways continued, but already disrupted by decades of war. Things
had got worse under the Taliban, especially for women, as Musa reluctantly
responded when questioned: ‘I cannot really tell because it is dishonouring
for me, but they were raping women and girls. It was very bad for them.’ The
context for both families had become the immediate threat and the reality of
violence and death. Their choice to escape, despite its own dangers, reflects
the families’ recognition that, under these conditions, they could not succeed
in ‘the struggle to be ordinary’.6 For them, the local of their village and region
was subsumed by the larger regional and national conflicts. In embarking on the
journey to Australia, they entered the alien worlds of, first, people smugglers,
temporary sojourns in strange countries, and the fear and discomfort—with
insufficient food, no bedding and extreme overcrowding—of the long days and
nights on the Sumber Lestari. They also entered a world in which the familiarity
of traditional ways was fractured by the new, where the ways they had taken for
granted were reduced, and each day required new decisions and new choices.
In the process, and without actively seeking it, they also came to confront
the ambiguities of modernity, as well as entering a globalised world in which
borders are open to trade but not to people.

Vignette 2

A year before the inquest, I was in Durban, South Africa, again representing the
Human Rights Council, this time as part of an Australian delegation to the NGO
Forum that preceded the United Nations’ overly ambitious World Conference
against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances. On
Wednesday, 29 August 2001, the day after the opening of the Forum, news from

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Australia reached us of the *Tampa* stand-off. We learnt by short-wave radio, fax, phone, and email from other delegates that the Australian Government was refusing to accept asylum-seekers arriving by boat from Indonesia; even refusing, to the Norwegian ship that had rescued them, entry to Australian waters and to Christmas Island, and rejecting requests for assistance from the *Tampa*’s Captain Arne Rinnan. The details were incomplete and frustrating. The thousands of delegates were spread across multiple locations at the Kingsmead Cricket Stadium and beyond. Different people had sporadic access to different communication media. The queues were long for terminals in the internet room that the Forum organisers, the South African Non-Government Organisations Coalition (SANGOCO), had set up. By the next day, the situation had become clear enough for Australian delegates from a range of organisations to have set up an NGO Working Group and to have circulated, as did Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, a media release, outlining the situation and condemning the Australian Government.

Subsequent events could be seen as a microcosm of the dissension with which the whole Forum and then the Conference was riven. Our response began as a cooperative effort to organise a joint NGO position with a view to mobilising international pressure on the Australian Government. Despite our shock that Australia could so rapidly jettison its commitment to the principles fundamental to good international citizenship—the Refugee Convention and international law more generally, especially the law of the sea, and humanitarian obligations—we felt that we could use our presence at a world conference against racism to shame the Government. Instead, we shamed ourselves. The press conference and information session that the working group organised a few days later mirrored the tensions that had plagued the Forum and were to overshadow the Conference itself.

A little before 8 am, we gathered in the Forum media tent. Despite some activity around other tents, there was an early morning calm instead of the usual dust and noise. The ugly confrontation between Palestinians and Jews, which every day throughout the Forum defined the entrance strip close to the media tent, had not yet got under way. It was another beautiful early spring day and the final day of the Forum. The official Conference had begun the previous day in the splendid Durban International Convention Centre some blocks away from the Kingsmead Stadium. Our information session was small but well organised. We had chosen a panel, including a representative of the Norwegian Red Cross, who could speak with knowledge and authority about refugee issues. The names had been suggested and agreed to at earlier, well-attended meetings of the Australian NGOs. We thought the focus was *Tampa* and collective action. We found that, like much of the Forum itself, this degenerated into a competition of victims. In this case, some Indigenous Australians, aggressively supported by a small
group from an NGO representing one of the Australian Ethnic Communities Councils, asserted prior unresolved injustices as against those of the *Tampa* asylum-seekers. The point of the Australian Government’s decisions about *Tampa* was lost as the shouting from the floor escalated in accusations about us as organisers not representing Indigenous people or issues and having set up an ‘all-white Australian’ panel. The Norwegian representative looked bemused at being lumped in as a ‘white Australian’. The failure of the press conference and information session was a very minor preliminary to the defeat of the hope for a more humane government response to the terrible predicament of persecuted people seeking safety and shelter in Australia.

In the heat and disappointment of the incident, I could not see that what I was witnessing was, as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor was later to put it in a different discussion, a clash of divergent modern social imaginaries.\(^7\) Importantly, that clash was not just at the level that we had anticipated of a national government and its own civil society but also of groups within civil society who are defined differently by colonisation and modernisation within that nation. At issue were different understandings of what constitutes a good society. At stake was a common understanding of the good. At risk was a vision of a modern international order, represented by the United Nations, based on a recognition of the bond of common humanity, and a willingness by all member nations to work together towards common understandings and actions. UN processes like the Durban NGO Forum and the World Conference are predicated on the possibility of negotiating agreement about principles and issues that touch all people and all nations—in this case, about finding ways to eliminate racism throughout the world. No-one expected that to be easy. No-one expected it to come so close to collapsing in a morass of vituperation and overt mutual hostility. The shock for many NGO delegates was that this was not confined to a confrontation between the sectional interests of governments in the official Conference, but that it also contaminated the NGO Forum. As Myrna Cunningham, one of the members of the NGO International Steering Committee, commented in a striking understatement, ‘It was not a conference of happiness, but a conference of pain’. She was referring to the key issues—the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the question of reparations for slavery, the multiplicity of victims’ voices—that dominated the proceedings. Had she been at our modest *Tampa* press conference, she might have used a similar description.

The divisions among Australian NGOs receded as the Forum gave way to the Conference. However, the broader NGO dissensions and issues were not resolved in Durban, as they were overtaken by the more public and dramatic dissensions of the Conference itself; as, indeed, the significant actual achievements of the Conference were largely overtaken and overwhelmed three days after its close.

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\(^7\) Taylor (2004).
by the events of 11 September and the attack on the twin towers in New York. And the three incidents—Tampa, the confrontations in Durban, and the attack on the twin towers and its aftermath—are not unrelated in their demonstration of the fragility of the achievements of modernity and the malaise, disaffection, and violence that are their dark side. The modern forms of racism, so closely linked to colonialism, which Durban was established to defeat are themselves part of that malaise.

Durban, like its other World Conferences, also embodied the United Nations’ struggle to maintain the ideal of its Charter ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’, ‘to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours’. But Tampa, the confrontations in Durban, the attack on the Twin towers—all in their own way threatened the ‘friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples’ that was the basis of the United Nations’ establishment and of the international order the United Nations was designed to represent. The three different events underline that the greatest challenge to the effectiveness of the United Nations and the international cooperation that it was set up to foster comes from the sectional interests and power struggles of its own member states and from groups that those interests exclude. The global village has given way to globalisation; modernity carries the seeds of its own potential destruction.

Culture and modernity

These two different sketches illuminate the dilemmas and contradictions that lie at the heart of globalisation and of modernity. They throw into relief the main propositions that I address through more detailed ethnographies in this book. In the following chapters, I offer a multi-sited, comparative analysis of three different societies struggling to come to grips with the assault of modernisation on traditionally held beliefs and practices. My interest has always been social change, since the moment as an undergraduate student in anthropology at the University of Queensland when we moved from structural-functionalist presentations of what appeared to be static traditional societies to Edmund Leach’s study of the Kachin in his *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Suddenly, in that hot lecture theatre, anthropology came alive for me. I understood that all societies, even the most traditional, are dynamic, that they are about change, not equilibrium, that culture is a frame of reference, not a

8 I will look at the Conference in more detail in Chapter 8.
10 ibid., cl. 2.
11 Leach (1954).
straitjacket, that people respond to the historical and political conditions—of continuity or of rapid change—in which they find themselves. The common thread in all my subsequent research has been the impact of social change, in the form of modernisation, on traditional groups. The questions have focused on the meaning of people’s everyday lives, how ordinary people experience the often extraordinary events of their time, what human groups have in common, but also, and crucially, how culture shapes but does not determine the ways in which people respond to change.

My assumption is that, by examining the various ways in which different groups respond to and invest meaning in their new situations, we can learn something important, not just about each particular group, but about what humans have in common and about the human condition. More immediately, one of my aims in this book is, by looking at a range of different social groups in the process of encountering modernity, to throw some light on the urgent social issues of the early twenty-first century. Many of the issues arising from globalisation that we now confront can be better understood through the lens of the modernising processes that have taken place in the second half of the twentieth century.

In order to canvass these issues, the book draws on anthropological research that I have undertaken at different times and in diverse regions of the world: Thailand (1975–77), Spain (1981–84), and Aboriginal Australia (1987 to the present). It also follows the personal journey that took me, and often my family, to spend some years in each of these places, providing a context of daily familiarity with not just the subjects of the study but also with the broader conditions in which they lived. They also gave me the ethnographic orientation that has informed my briefer encounters in other situations—the inquest in Fremantle and the Durban World Conference—and confirmed my view that, despite enormous diversity, postmodern or cultural relativism collapses in the face of demonstrated human universals.

In drawing on this material, my aim is to explore what it is that humans see as having a good life. On the basis of this deceptively simple premise, the book examines a range of traditional societies and the variety of ways in which modernisation, through its fracturing of the past, has demarcated particular notions of the good and of a good life as key to the continuity of a culture. At the same time, the case studies make clear that culture, with its ‘unyielding ambiguity’,¹² is a protean frame of reference, offering differing facets to its constituent groups in forms that depend on the social and economic circumstances through which they are experienced. The book also examines, therefore, what alternative notions, distinct or oppositional, are held within as well as between groups who identify themselves as part of the same cultural tradition.

¹² Bauman (1973: 1).
I examine the extent to which differing notions of the good may be essentially incompatible and what means—formal or informal, institutional or violent—are used to impose or resist certain notions of the good. And I analyse how these contradictions and struggles are played out in particular circumstances. The ethnographies identify at which points traditional notions may be open to expansion and transformation and where these notions are unable to withstand the assault of modernisation and result in conflict. Finally, I examine some of the consequences of these divergent understandings and experiences in order to understand the extent to which violence emerges from the clash between modernity and tradition, or is spawned by modernity itself.

My interest in exploring commonalities as well as difference has led me to a number of propositions that the book examines. These propositions are, firstly, and drawing again on Charles Taylor, that the concepts of the good and of a good life are human universals and that moral evaluation—morality—and the concept of the good are at the centre of human agency.\(^\text{13}\)

Secondly, one of the characteristics of modernity is the struggle to identify agreed fundamental aspects of these human universals. Modernity places secular humanity rather than religious beliefs at the centre of moral evaluation and action, giving rise to a new moral source. This new moral source is the key moral principle of respect for the bond of common humanity. In our modern—globalising—world, the principle of respect for the bond of common humanity links all humans across cultures, underpinning notions of personhood, equality, freedom, justice, and rights. Its primary source of articulation is the United Nations. And, like all moral principles, it is honoured as much, perhaps more, in the breach than in the observance as self-interest, national interest, the thirst for power, even the rejection of universality, combine to resist its application.

Thirdly, despite this commonality, different human groups understand and experience these concepts differently, and the variety of ways in which they understand them are culturally and historically constructed and contingent. Even where the moral source may be shared, particular understandings of the good and the moral frameworks arising from those meanings are culturally negotiated. As morality is about choice and reason is about order, culture is about framing those choices and giving meaning to them and to the particular order that prevails. Culture mediates and makes meaningful the relationship between reason and morality. And culture may also be seen as

\[\text{a } \textit{permanent revolution} \text{ of sorts. To say ‘culture’ is to make another attempt to account for the fact that the human world (the world}\]
moulded by the humans and the world which moulds the humans) is perpetually, unavoidably and unremediably noch nicht geworden (not-yet-accomplished), as Ernst Bloch beautifully put it.\textsuperscript{14}

This view of culture challenges, as Bauman means it to do, a totalising notion of culture as an instrument of ‘continuity, reproduction of sameness and resistance to change…culture as a “preservative”’,\textsuperscript{15} or even as resistance. Instead, culture is about creating, modifying and reproducing meaning, those ‘webs of significance that [man] himself has spun’.\textsuperscript{16} Such ‘webs of significance’ may be more or less generalised in any particular society. Inherent in the notion of a ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-modern’ society is a comprehensive and stable set of meanings that infers the world as complete rather than as ‘not-yet-accomplished’. These meanings include a customary order and moral framework that, in turn, reinforce those meanings that underpin particular notions of the good and of the good life. Nevertheless, as these studies will show, there is not a single notion of the good even within as well as between societies. Conflict, often violent, is generated by opposing and sometimes incompatible differences in meaning and in practices designed to implement particular notions of a good life and a good society. This is so in the confrontation between different social groups and cultures, and can be so even within the same social group where there are differing interpretations arising from the same moral source.

Both the agreed articulation and the culturally specific understandings of these concepts, and the principles that underlie them, are subject to the ‘compromised pragmatics’ of people’s daily lives,\textsuperscript{17} as well as to the possibility of transgression. They are also subject to the struggle between opposing interests, whether of individuals or of nations, to impose one totalising view and suppress others.

Finally, the possibilities of a good life and a good society are essentially related; one is not possible without the other.

\section*{Reason and morality}

This book’s theoretical framework emerges particularly from the work of Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas. Taylor and Habermas have engaged with and critiqued each other. At the same time, the early thinking of both was shaped by Marx as well as Hegel and, despite their divergent paths, both continue in the tradition of Marx’s moral, as well as practical and political, core. Just as importantly, they offer cogent, constructive alternatives to contemporary social

\textsuperscript{14} Bauman in Bauman and Tester (2001: 32).
\textsuperscript{15} Bauman in ibid., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{16} Geertz (1975: 5).
\textsuperscript{17} Miller (1995: 322).
1. Culture, morality, modernity, and the transformation of social imaginaries

Theories focused principally on deconstruction and on the exclusive predominance of relations of power. Both seek—and offer—a theory of the self and of society and social action that addresses and takes issue with the contemporary position, theoretical and practical, of desolation. Neither dismisses the insights gained in the examination of relations of power, but both look to go beyond a defining notion of power to the effectiveness of human agency and, indeed, freedom. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor asserts the fundamental importance of morality: that ‘selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes’. Morality, in turn, implies choices made freely by human agents, even within the limits imposed by external conditions, and not necessarily in pursuit of the good.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and throughout his work, Habermas places reason, and rationality—‘a disposition of speaking or acting subjects that is expressed in modes of behaviour for which there are good reasons or grounds’—at the centre. His analysis challenges the notion of the amorality of reason argued by writers such as John Ralston Saul because, in Habermas’s view, reason is not divorced from, and therefore is not in imbalance with, ‘the other more or less recognised human characteristics: spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will, and, most important, experience’. On the contrary, ‘reason is, by its very nature, incarnated in contexts of communicative action and in structures of the lifeworld’. Habermas rejects the nihilism of Nietzsche and the position taken by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: that ‘reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible’. He sees this analysis as ‘mutilating’ reason, ‘because it lays claim to it only in the form of a purposive-rational master of nature and instinct—precisely as instrumental reason’. Habermas’s work is an ongoing investigation of the proposition that only in a society in which a richer, more complex, notion of reason can be invoked can we hope to sustain a good society or, indeed, a good life. In Habermas, reason is redeemed, as morality is re-centred in Taylor, and the essential relationship between reason and morality is affirmed.

In this book, I build on Taylor’s argument that moral evaluation—morality—and the concept of the good are at the centre of human agency. Through the examination of different groups subject to rapid social change, I also develop the links between Taylor’s propositions and Habermas’s analysis of communicative

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18 Taylor (2003: 3).
23 ibid., p. 111.
24 Seidman (1989: 1).
action. In communicative action, human action is oriented towards reaching understanding\(^{25}\) and is essentially interactive and intersubjective—that is, relational—invoking a moral as well as a normative dimension. A communicatively achieved agreement, he suggests, ‘must be based in the end on reasons’,\(^{26}\) and the structures of rationality are embedded in everyday life.\(^{27}\) Communicative action represents for Habermas the utopian potential of modernity.

The particular theoretical contribution of this book begins at the juncture of the works of Taylor and Habermas. From that point of critical convergence, my analysis moves to a series of further propositions emerging from the book’s ethnographies. The first is that people’s experience of modernity is inevitably partial because the processes of modernisation are regulated and to varying extents limited by historical and institutional structures. People respond to modernisation from within their cultural frameworks. They respond as individuals and as members of social groups. Their responses involve rational and moral choices. Where reason and morality combine to generate action that is oriented towards reaching a common understanding of the good, different groups also develop ideas about what constitutes a good society. Modernity assesses and universalises key aspects of these ideas through the discourse of human rights. The practical application of these ideas requires the active support of institutional structures, at local, national and international levels. Conflict arises within and between societies when there is no common understanding of the good or of what constitutes a good society; when communicative action collapses.

Habermas recognises that communicative action is only one among the possibilities for human action. Not all are based on reaching understanding. Strategic action, for example, arises from interests and distorts rationality. The result is one of the central paradoxes of modernity: that the search for freedom, meaning and a good life can lead equally to the loss of meaning and of the moral framework that sustains particular understandings of the good: of what it is good to be—of wellbeing—and of what it is good to do; and of what constitutes a good life.\(^{28}\)

This paradox becomes most acute in the processes of modernisation:

‘Being modern’ means to be in a state of perpetual modernization: modernity is, so to speak, the time of ‘new beginnings’ and of forever new ‘new beginnings’, of dismantling old structures and building new ones from scratch.\(^{29}\)

\(^{26}\) Habermas (1984: 17).
\(^{27}\) Seidman (1989: 2).
\(^{28}\) Taylor (2003).
\(^{29}\) Bauman in Bauman and Tester (2001: 72).
The notion of modernity is one generated by and rooted in European history and in the Western imagination. Among the many available descriptions, Taylor offers one that has the merit of being succinct:30

By modernity I mean that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).

Modernisation, whether through colonialism, industrialisation, or globalisation, has drawn, often forced, the rest of the world into grappling with this originally European paradigm. Modernisation fractures the continuity between the present and the past, and looks instead to the future:

Because the new, the modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new...A present that understands itself from the horizon of the modern age as the actuality of the most recent period has to recapitulate the break brought about with the past as a continuous renewal.31

For asylum-seekers like Musa and Sayed and their families, however, for Durban delegates focused on reasserting the validity of claims based in the past, for the different groups in the case studies, the break with the past is not, cannot, be absolute. The past may no longer be the primary source of either meaning or legitimacy, but it remains a potent one, and one that is essential to making sense not only of the present but also of the future. Culture, like history, is grounded in the past, and continues to inform and shape the ways in which these different groups develop new meanings out of their changed situations, giving rise to ‘multiple modernities’.32 Inevitable in modernisation, too, as the case studies in this book make clear, are encounters or clashes between different ways of defining the good and the good life. With modernisation have gone its ancillary experiences of rapid and drastic, indeed often violent, social change; and the many equally violent reactions, like that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Ordinary people, like Musa and Sayed and their families, are caught up in the ensuing conflicts.

In struggling for new meanings, all the groups in this book offer a further challenge to one of the key characteristics of modernity: the replacement of religion with secular humanism as the fundamental moral source. For none

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32 Comaroff and Comaroff (1993: 1).
of these groups has religion been replaced; God is far from dead. At the same
time, religion is no longer the sole moral source or source of meaning. In fleeing
Afghanistan, Musa and his family, Sayed and Fatimeh, Ali Reza and his brother
did not make a choice in terms of modernity. Their choice was made to avoid
the consequences of the Taliban’s rejection of modernity. But in so doing, they
laid claim to sources of meaning and morality other than religious belief, or at
least the religious belief expounded by the Taliban. They did not reject religious
belief; on the contrary. But their action put them in opposition to the Taliban’s
orthodox expression of religious belief and to religious authority as the sole
imposed moral framework.

The case studies will make clear that this is the situation for other groups.
Religious belief is not in necessary opposition to an assertion of common
humanity based in the secular humanism of modernity; the two can coexist and
indeed complement each other. But religious belief does not, of itself, provide a
sufficient moral framework to encompass the multiplicity of belief systems and
cultures in the modern world. Modernity displaces the hegemony of religious
belief with a privileged role for reason and, by extension, for rationality in
engaging with the world; humans knowingly reliant on their own devices and
meanings. Only where religious orthodoxy asserts itself as the sole moral source
and framework does it become anti-modern and deny in practice that human
agency, not divine or preordained order, is at the centre of the human world in
the making both of history and of meaning.

In examining what it is that humans in different societies see as having a good
life, the case studies identify the connection between those notions of a good
life and particular ideas of the good; how different groups attempt to put
those ideas into practice; and what happens when those ideas and practices
are confronted by modernisation. A key and generally radical impact of
modernisation on traditional communities is, indeed, to challenge, override, or
shatter the accepted order and its moral framework; and hence different notions
of the good and practices tied to particular understandings of a good life.
Modernisation relativises or fractures also the traditional moral sources from
which people derive their legitimating frameworks, and gives rise to one of the
other key characteristics of modernity, that is, uncertainty. This may result in
a purposeful agency or, as Camus argued, in absurdity. The case studies make
clear that the result is turbulent, often violent, social upheaval and change as
different groups struggle to come to grips with, and react to, the assault of
modernisation and modernity on deeply held beliefs and practices.

In the societies under review, the responses are chaotic, coherent; pragmatic,
ideological; violent, confused; self-interested, altruistic; idealistic, mundane.

33 Camus (2000).
In each case, the ways in which these particular groups have responded to modernisation are culturally shaped, though not culturally bounded. The moments of acceptance or rejection of themselves indicate the permeability of cultural boundaries, suggesting some areas of existing or possible common understanding, while areas of conflict identify points of greater or lesser contradiction or incompatibility. Within this range of differences, I include an examination of attempts by these various groups to accommodate and, in some instances, appropriate the new. At the same time, they continue to retain, assert, or transform their own notions of the good and the practices associated with the good life. These dialectically related movements occur in the face of challenge, from within their communities as well as from without. Nevertheless, the different responses share a common striving to make sense of these experiences and to maintain or reconstruct a good life, for themselves and others, and for the next generations, under the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The case studies analysed in the book also provide the material for a comparative analysis that looks not only at cultural specificities. On the basis of this material, it becomes clear also that it is possible for different groups—within the same society and between societies—to reach, out of their particular experiences, consensus about what constitute universal moral principles and about some of the ways in which those universal principles are to be implemented. Implementation takes place in the modern world particularly through the articulation of rights, which have ‘become central to our legal systems’ but, in an analogous way, have also ‘become central to our moral thinking’. Such consensus may be achieved because of the pervasiveness of ‘the medium of action orientated to reaching understanding’ and of the centrality to human agency of morality; of the relatedness of morality and reason; and of the idea of the good itself. This is so, whatever the varying meanings attached to that idea of the good may be.

The ethnographies demonstrate that individual societies stand in different, and often contradictory, relationships to modernity’s placing of secular humanity at the centre of the vision of rational order. Nevertheless, despite these complexities and contradictions, the material shows that all are required to engage with the concept of rights—the practical expression of secular universal moral norms—and with the legal formulations of and safeguards for those rights. The Durban World Conference against Racism indicated the moral as well as political pressures on nations and on civil society to participate, however rancorously or unwillingly, in the discussion of rights, even where this discussion was hijacked by a power struggle between sectional interests asserting incompatible interests against one another.

34 Taylor (2003: 11).
Structure of the book

The book is divided into four sections. Parts I and II examine the impacts of modernisation in two non-colonised countries, Thailand in the period 1975–77 and Spain in the period 1981–84, keeping in mind Spain’s earlier role as itself a major colonising power. Nevertheless, both countries in the periods dealt with here were still in the process of formation as modern nation-states. The material demonstrates that the impact of modernisation has been radical for both societies, despite the absence of military or settler colonisation, or the heritage of Spanish colonialism. The analysis makes clear, that is to say, that colonisation is not a necessary vehicle of modernisation. Nor is the imposition of a colonising power or culture a prerequisite for the effects of modernisation to be felt as radical disruption within particular societies and social groups. Both case studies analyse the differing but deeply cultural—and gendered—understandings of the good within each particular society and the ways in which people with different notions experienced and responded to change, including conflict.

Part I. Tradition and transformation in a non-colonised state: Thailand

The Thai material in Chapters 2 and 3 deals with workers in a Bangkok factory over the latter period of the ‘democratic experiment’ (1973–76), the incipient development of labour unions, the violent end to that experiment in the coup of 1976, and the re-establishment of military rule. At this time of transition in Thailand, from a primarily peasant to an industrialising economy, most of the workers were drawn from rural Buddhist families, with a small minority from the Muslim south. The factory was a co-owned Japanese–Thai enterprise under a Japanese parent company. The analysis will demonstrate that the workers’ experience of urban factory work was, because of the implementation of Japanese rather than Thai industrial practices, a relatively benign one, with the factory management attempting to incorporate or accommodate as many aspects of traditional social relations and practices as possible. The context, however, was the ultimately violent clashes experienced in the broader Thai society, as traditional hegemonic notions of the good were rearticulated around the triadic invocation of Nation–Religion–King. This was in opposition not only to the modernising tendencies that escalated after 1973 but also, though in much milder form, to the changing notions about a good life developing among the workers themselves. This occurred as they embraced many aspects of what they saw as the better conditions offered them by urban factory rather than by rural agricultural employment.
Part II. Tradition and transformation in a non-colonised state: Spain

The Spanish study in Chapters 4 and 5 deals with an order of Catholic teaching nuns in the aftermath of the changes initiated by the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and by the political and social changes leading up to and following the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975. All the nuns articulated their choice of the religious life in terms of ‘vocation’, the calling by God, not just to a good life, but to a better life. Many of the older nuns had lived through the attacks on religion and religious orders during the period of the Republic (1931–36) and the Civil War (1936–39) and had retained the meaning of religious life as separate, sacred, and hierarchical.

These were the notions challenged most directly by the Second Vatican Council, with its emphasis on the sacredness of ordinary life and the fellowship of hierarchy and laity within a pilgrim, not triumphant, Church. Coinciding as it did with the opening of Spain to the influences of modernisation, also in the decade of the 1960s, Vatican II led to a radical re-evaluation by many of the nuns of the meaning of the good and of a good life and to the collapse of the distinction between a ‘good’ and a ‘better’ life. These new meanings mirrored in important ways the shift at the time of the Protestant Reformation from the imposition of orthodox dogma to the priority of individual conscience. They also reconstituted the relationship between the nuns and the laity and took many of the nuns out of their enclosed convents and into the community. Some left completely. Others remained committed to the religious life and the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but initiated much closer involvements with the lay community and changes to their own interpretation of Christian belief, leading to a dramatic shift in their practices as well as in their values.

Part III. Colonised people and the nation-state: Aboriginal Australia

Part III—Chapters 6 and 7—looks at some of the ways in which Aboriginal people in Australia have experienced and responded to modernisation through the experience of colonisation. Beginning in 1788, colonisation occurred in different stages and different forms in the various regions of the continent, setting the stage for modernisation but not always bringing it immediately in its wake. It would be difficult to claim, for example, that Aboriginal groups on the pastoral frontier were exposed to many facets of modernisation, although they were certainly subject to colonisation. In areas that were settled earlier or more closely, where colonisation resulted rapidly in the displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal landowners, and where major economic developments such
as mining occurred, colonisation became the instrument of modernisation, fragmenting the relationship between the present of Aboriginal Australians and their past. Colonisation resulted also in a dislocation of Aboriginal people from the source of their social and moral vision and practice, that is, the land. In so doing, it led to a consequent distortion of the coherent connection between moral evaluation of the good and the social practices designed to express and promote a good life. Colonisation robs people of their past.

The book focuses on the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia, examining changes since the 1960s, and specifically the complexities of modernisation over that time. I examine a number of the ways in which, despite and in response to their experience of modernisation, these groups have shared a discourse developed with other Aboriginal Australians that affirms certain core notions about the meaning of the good and of what constitutes a good life for them. While the practices of daily life may be more diffuse, ambivalent, or downright contradictory, foremost among the values that have come to be publicly articulated are those of the primacy of kinship or relationships, of the generative power of the sacred, and of the intimate relationship, founded in the land, between the two. The analysis will demonstrate that the articulation of these values has come to constitute a central element of identity within Aboriginal groups themselves, as well as in their interaction with non-Indigenous people and institutions. The chapters also show that these values are often precisely those that are invoked in the interaction, often conflictive, among different Aboriginal groups.

The symbolic and practical power of these values has been enhanced through the translation of indigenous rights into a land rights discourse: the Commonwealth’s Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, the High Court’s recognition of the continuing existence of native title in the Mabo case (1992), the Commonwealth’s Native Title Act 1993, the participation of Australian Indigenous groups in discussion and exchange with Indigenous groups from other countries and in the international arena, have all contributed to a central emphasis on land and land rights. Within these processes, Indigenous Australians have themselves appropriated the discourse and practice of land and rights as a way of reaffirming the legitimacy of their understandings of the good, and of repositioning these understandings and their related practices in an active dialogue with modernity.

This dialogue with modernity is an uneven and unequal one. Nevertheless, it takes place in the context of a modern, liberal-democratic nation-state and of an increasingly accessible international and globalising arena. Indigenous Australians now therefore can, and do, draw from this wider context in order...
to position their moral vision as a legitimate interpretation of the good. This interpretation interrogates and calls to account various notions of the good proffered as characteristic of modernity. The distinction is not absolute, nor the webs of significance associated principally with Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australians bounded and separate. At the same time, disjunctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of what constitutes a good life and its sources, and resources, remain, and the engagement with modernity generates often stark contradictions, both internal and external.

I will examine a number of key aspects of this engagement and these contradictions in repositioning Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal notions of the good in relation to each other within the parameters of modernity. I will cover some of the more broadly institutional or informal processes of encounter since the 1960s. A major part of this section will focus on the native title processes since 1993. It will draw especially on a particular case study from the Pilbara, permitting a narrative that traces the complex layers of meanings of the good for Pilbara Aboriginal people. The chapters will do this from the first major impact of mining developments in the mid 1960s, through one of the most widely publicised deaths in custody dealt with by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, to a successful native title claim under the *Native Title Act 1993* and an ongoing engagement and tough agreement negotiations between native title groups and resource companies through the resource boom of the early twenty-first century.

### Part IV. Modernity and human rights

The analysis of the impacts of modernisation in particular societies is the grounding from which Chapter 8 then moves to the broader international arena, to test the proposition about the universality of the human activity of moral evaluation and of agreed notions of the good. Elaborating the comments in this Chapter about the Durban World Conference against Racism, Chapter 8 examines the role of the United Nations in struggling to realise and maintain international agreement about the principle of respect for the bond of common humanity and the essential conditions for a good life. The chapter looks specifically at how these have been articulated through the paradoxical discourse of human rights that attempts to encompass the contradictory principles of the rights of individuals and the sovereignty of states. Drawing on Habermas’s theory of communicative action and Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space, I examine the new articulation of a universal secular moral order and framework, through the agreement of nation-states, in the UN Charter, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the international human rights conventions.
The analysis focuses on the UN World Conference against Racism (Durban, 2001), a key process in attempting to maintain international agreement about a universal notion of the good. The World Conference demonstrates the contradictions and clashes inherent in an international forum aimed at achieving international consensus, where the often opposing principles of human rights and the rights of nation-states vie with each other, and where separate nation-states are committed to protecting their own sovereignty and promoting their own national interests. In such a context, where strategic action vies with communicative action, the pressure for fragmentation and isolation is great, and I will look at the extent to which and the conditions under which delegations are prepared or not prepared to subordinate strategic to communicative action. Despite these pressures, the World Conference achieved final agreement. This was by consensus but in the absence of the United States and Israel, whose delegations walked out of the Conference on its third day, and with reservations being made by representatives of a number of countries, including Australia. The section will argue that this agreement, nevertheless, and the common meanings finally formally subscribed to were possible only because of the acceptance, through the fraught process of agreement itself, of respect for the bond of common humanity as a universal moral principle.

Finally, I draw on the themes elaborated throughout the book to suggest that modernisation effects a radical transformation of traditional social imaginaries. I reflect on the relevance of these transformations to the proposition that moral evaluation is at the centre of human agency and is an essential universal principle in the different ways in which human groups define their meaning of the good and of a good life. At the same time, I stress, on the basis of the material, that there is not one notion of the good across any society or between societies, and that conflict, often violent, is generated by opposing and sometimes incompatible differences in meaning and in practices designed to implement particular notions of a good life. Nevertheless, there can also be consent to the universal principle of respect for the bond of common humanity, and agreed interpretations, based on this principle, about the essential conditions that constitute a good life.

Based as the book is on ethnographic material, I also reflect on the relevance of anthropology to, and for anthropology of, a comparative analysis that interrogates the concept of a humanity that is equal while culturally diverse.

39 The deep flaws demonstrated in the Durban conference were further exacerbated by the Durban Review Conference (Durban II), held in Geneva in 2009, again overshadowing any achievements. Australia was one of a number of countries which chose not to participate, on the basis that the Australian Government could not support a document reaffirming the 2001 Durban documents in their entirety, that is, the 2001 Declaration that singled out Israel and the Middle East (The Hon. Stephen Smith MP, Media release, 19 April 2009).
The book as anthropological reflection

In neither of the situations that I sketched at the beginning of this chapter—the inquest for Nurjan Husseini and Fatimeh Husseini in Fremantle and the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban—was I carrying out fieldwork as an anthropologist. But the anthropologist, like Nanki-Poo in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*, is in many ways ‘a thing of shreds and patches’. So too is the material that is available. A further element of this book is the exploration of the different and always partial ways in which the anthropologist builds an understanding of culture and social relations. This can be done not only through the longer-term ethnographic involvement demonstrated in the case studies. It can be done also by drawing on the practical and conceptual frameworks derived from this ethnographic experience, from more fleeting encounters, such as the earlier vignettes, that evoke rather than describe the workings and effects of power on particular social and institutional relations. It is the specific task of anthropology to gain an intimate knowledge and understanding of the local and, on that basis, to draw the connections between the subjective experiences of ordinary people and the objective conditions—social, cultural, increasingly global—that shape both them and their way of experiencing and engaging with the world. In undertaking this study, I examine the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions of modernisation through the diversity and concreteness of particular societies and particular groups; trusting to do so, to borrow Said’s comments about philology, in ‘a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality’. For all of the material I have used for this book, I have drawn, as anthropologists need to draw, on the fragmented range of sources—secondary as well as primary, global and institutional as well as local and familial—that increasingly constitutes the complexity of social life.

At the same time, if the anthropologist’s access to the world of others is never complete, neither is that of those whose world it is. As Bourdieu observed, ‘native experience of the social world never apprehends the system of objective relations other than in profiles’. Modernity has, however, transformed the profiles that he described as ‘relations which present themselves only one by one, and hence successively, in the emergency situations of everyday life’. Modernity replaces the sense of manageable predictability that he invokes for the Kabyle of Algeria with a superfluity of influences and an ever increasing rapidity of change. This is one of the key aspects of modernisation experienced by the people whose stories form the content of this book. It is my task as an

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41 Bourdieu (1979: 18).
42 ibid.
anthropologist to examine the commonalities and the differences in the ways in which they experience it. It is in attending to the changing situations in which we find people today that we can hope to understand both the pervasiveness and the contingency of culture, together with its inherent contradictions and conflicts. In this way, too, we can explore what it means to be human in the contemporary world and engage more fully with ‘the potency and grandeur as well as with the terror of the modern age’.  

In undertaking the anthropological task, I cannot ignore the question, most eloquently posed by Said in *Orientalism*, of the representation of the Other. Nor can I ignore the accusation, reinforced most strongly by writers in subaltern and postcolonial studies, of anthropology’s complicity in the colonial enterprise: what Said calls ‘the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies’. My study is not an apologia in reply to these accusations. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention also to Said’s further comments in his added 2003 Preface: ‘There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination.’

I would suggest that much anthropology belongs in that first category, and attempts its role—even if it does not always succeed—not as an orientalising or objectification of the Other, but as an openness to the ways in which the Other calls into question the Same. Part of this openness demands a capacity to imagine the Other and, in so doing, to ask the further question about what kind of act such imagining may be. The answer is to be found only in the experience of encounter—Buber’s dialogue between *Ich und Du*: I and Thou—and in acknowledging that ‘the self only exists in relation to other selves’; that is, in relation to the Other. There is no self except in relation to the Other, and the moral choices of the self are ineluctably framed in relation to others. When the imagining of the Other takes place from a position of power and a will to dominate, the Other is indeed objectified and diminished. But it is possible to imagine—and recognise—the Other on the basis of ‘knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes’. This kind of recognition is key to the recognition of a common humanity and to the anthropological enterprise that I undertake in this book.

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45 ibid.
46 ibid., p. xiv.
47 Levinas (1979).
In most instances, I did not undertake the studies dealt with here in185the role purely as researcher. All reflect a multi-layered experience that started with being in particular places at particular times largely because of family, not academic, reasons and with forging my own place, and a place for our family, within terms set out by others. I was in Bangkok and Madrid because of my husband’s work. Not wishing to play the role of an incorporated wife, I spent a year in Bangkok getting to know the country, learning Thai, meeting people, and looking after my daughter who was born two months after we arrived there. In the second year, I was able to spend much of my time at the factory compound where I undertook my ethnography.

My research in Madrid was made very easy because of friendships I had already made with a group of the Spanish nuns a decade earlier when, as a member of the same religious order, I had shared several intense months with them at the order’s central governing convent in Rome. Although we had not stayed in touch in the intervening years, they made me and my family very welcome and we enjoyed many informal times together. My knowledge of the order went back even further, to my eight years as a pupil in their boarding school in Brisbane. My eldest daughter’s early experience of school was attending one of the order’s schools in Madrid. These broader experiences provided a background of mundane familiarity to my research and enriched my understanding of the women with whom I was working and the context in which they were living and acting.

Western Australia’s Pilbara was different. My first time there constituted regular fieldwork over several months in Roebourne as an academic anthropologist carrying out ethnographic research for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and then a brief review for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. My children attended the Roebourne Primary School. But Roebourne people have changed in many ways over the nearly 20 years since I first went there, drawn increasingly beyond the local into regional and global arenas. Their daily lives involve meetings with lawyers and with mining companies, negotiating agreements, and participating in native title processes. I have needed different forms of ethnography in order to match these changes.

When I returned several years later, it was not as a researcher but as a member of the National Native Title Tribunal, with responsibility for co-mediating the Ngarluma/Yindjibarndi native title claim. Over the next eight years, I continued to mediate other claims in the central and west Pilbara. The meetings held as part of the mediations were confidential so I have not used any of that material. Nevertheless, they gave me deeper insight into the social and cultural relations

51 Callan (1977); Callan and Ardener (1984).
52 Now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).
of people in the area. The Ngarluma/Yindjibarndi claim finally went to trial in the Federal Court. The evidence given there, as well as the Court’s judgement, is on the public record and forms part of the different kind of ethnography needed in contemporary representations of Indigenous people. In 2006 I returned to Western Australia to take up the role of lead negotiator in developing agreements between Rio Tinto and central and west Pilbara native title groups. Over the next two and a half years, I was involved in regular meetings, formal and informal, with the groups and their representatives. As with Native Title Tribunal mediations, the formal meetings were confidential, but there were many exchanges outside those meetings that have enriched my analysis.

In many ways, therefore, the subjects of my research did not present as Other, but as other players with whom I was involved in particular moments. These case studies show also the fluidity and permeability of the cultural boundaries across which we were able to meet. I experienced my own foreignness more acutely in some contexts than in others, but perhaps nowhere more sharply than in Durban, and subsequently back in Australia, in the face of the actions of my own country’s government. Perhaps otherness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, or at least in the face of choices and actions derived from a moral source that seems alien. At the same time, the case studies demonstrate that one of the impacts of modernisation is to exacerbate the potential for very different, often violently conflicting, responses to arise from the same moral source. More radically, modernisation fractures the moral source itself, creating, as Miller suggests, ‘a new fragility in which people become much more conscious of the processes of self-creation and the creation of the principles by which they judge themselves’, and, I would add, to do so in relation to the Other. By bringing together very different groups at different moments in time, I hope that the material presented in this book, and the people whose lives are its content, offer insights into the act of imagining and recognising the Other; but, even more, into the commonality of our humanity and the multiplicity of relations that bind as well as differentiate us.