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Introduction
Concerning Things that are Given, Things that are Sold and Things that must not be Given or Sold, but Kept

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Why this book? Why yet another analysis of gift-exchange, of its role in the production and reproduction of social ties, of its changing place and importance in the diverse forms of society that coexist on the face of this earth or which have come and gone over the course of time? Because gift-giving exists everywhere, even if it is not the same everywhere. But kinship also exists everywhere, and religion and politics. So why gift-giving? Why this book?

The present work grew out of the encounter between and the converging pressures from two contexts: one sociological, the present state of the Western society to which I belong; and the other, which is personal in another way and which is the occupation I chose to exercise, a professional context, a state of the theoretical problems today debated by the anthropological community, of which I am a member.

The sociological context is not peculiar to me. It is there for everyone to see, it surrounds us all, and, like many, while I am part of it, I did not choose it. I am talking about our Western society, which is in the process of excluding more and more people, an economic system which, in order to remain dynamic and competitive, has to “downsize” its firms, reduce costs, increase productivity, and therefore must decrease the work-force through massive lay-offs and
unemployment. It is hoped that this is a temporary solution, but for many it is turning out to be permanent. And lined up at the door of a saturated job market, there are young job-seekers: many are in for a long wait, and a small number will wait forever. For them, this is the start of a strange social existence, a lifetime of welfare of one kind or other, unless of course they find some way to earn money without working. Then there are those who do not wait to be dismissed, and who simply disappear into the shadow-zones of society, the underground zones where there is work, and money to be had without declaring it, or money to be had without having either to work or to declare it. For this is the way our society functions.

While in other parts of the world you must belong to a group in order to live – to a clan, a village or a tribal community – and it is this group which helps you live, in our society, the family does not provide each member with lifelong conditions of existence, however strong the solidarity may be. Everyone must have money to live, and most people have to work for it, but one earns a living as a separate individual. Furthermore, for the majority in our society, working also means working for someone else, for the owners of the companies which have hired them.

Without money, without income, there is no social existence, no existence at all in fact, material or physical. Hence the problems. People's social existence depends on the economy, and they lose much more than employment when they lose their job or when they cannot find one. The paradox of capitalist societies is that the economy is the main source of exclusion, but that this exclusion not only excludes people from the economy, it excludes or threatens ultimately to exclude them from society itself. And for those excluded from the economy, the chances of being included once more are increasingly slim.

The economy of a capitalist country does not stand alone. It is part of what has become a worldwide system which exerts constant pressure and constraints on all of its sectors and firms, every one of which is obliged to maximize profits by fighting its way to the top of competitive national and international markets.

The paradox is that this economy which excludes massive numbers of people also charges society with reintegrating them, not into the economy – except for a small percentage – but into society. This is our present situation. We live in societies whose “social fabric,” as they say, has been “rent,” societies that are breaking down into increasingly watertight compartments.

And given the role of the state in many Western capitalist societies, it is the state that is called upon to recompose society, to bridge the gaps, to reduce the “social fractures.” And yet the state cannot do this alone. This is the bundle of contradictions and incapacities that constitutes the context in which, increasingly and from all directions, we are hearing the call to give. It is a “forced” gift when the state passes new so-called “solidarity taxes,” compelling the majority of taxpayers to share with the most needy in an attempt to stop up some of the breaches the economy is constantly opening in society. This is an economy from which the state has chosen to withdraw, as it has chosen to retire bit by bit from other areas of social life. But the state is not an abstraction, an institution from another planet. The state governs, and it is what those who govern make it.

This is the context in which first hundreds and then thousands of people have taken to begging in the streets, many of them homeless; this is the context in which the call has been formulated and then gone out to give, to share. The request for gifts was first an appeal to suppliers, and then it began to organize the resources. Countless “charitable” organizations sprang up, from soup kitchens to supermarket collection boxes where potential donors were asked to be generous and to share, not their money directly, but a part of what they had bought with this money for their own consumption.

Charity is back, that virtue which Marcel Mauss, in his major 1925 article, “Essai sur le don,” described as being, after centuries of Christianity and religious charitable institutions, “still wounding for him who has accepted it.” Today, for many of those in need, it is still humiliating to beg, to accost passers-by, passengers on the subway. These people prefer the pretense of earning a living by selling papers in the street, newspapers which are printed for the purpose and rarely read.

But our society has become secularized, and although charity may be back in fashion, it is no longer seen as a theological virtue, a religious act. For the majority of believers or non-believers, it is a gesture of solidarity between human beings. The need had diminished when the number of the socially excluded fell and social justice increased; it surfaces again and becomes necessary when the excluded populations increase and the state can no longer single-handedly reduce the injustices, the isolation and the neglect.

And yet it was only a few years ago, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden collapse of the “socialist” regimes spawned by the revolution early in the twentieth century, which had maintained that the people would manage its own destiny, that the economy would be harnessed to serve the needs of humankind, but which subsequently developed into an insufferable combination of planned
economy and dictatorship masquerading as “popular democracy,” that some prophesied that the “end of history” was nigh, that at last we were going to see extending, from one end of the earth to the other, the Western social system, the product of what is actually a recent marriage, even in Europe, between laissez-faire capitalism in the economic sphere and parliamentary democracy in the political domain.

To reasonable people and those with a realistic outlook, this system seemed, not the best of all possible worlds to be sure, but the least bad, and therefore the most likely to expand to the far reaches of Africa, Oceania and tomorrow to China, and the most likely to endure. This would be the “end of history”: if the market economy was left to its own devices and the state withdrew as much as possible from the greatest possible number of areas, leaving individuals, groups, and firms to come to some arrangement among themselves, everything would work better, not least of all the world’s societies. With the failure of those societies whose planning had been in the hands not only of the state but of a caste that had appropriated the state for its own ends, the old myth of laissez-faire capitalism with its belief in a hidden god, an invisible hand guiding the market in the best interests of society towards the best distribution of goods among all of its members, gained a new lease of life and a seeming victory. Since then it has been invoked to urge patience and the courage to wait, to let the economy work itself out. Some day all will get their reward. In the meantime, however, life must go on, and for life to go on, people must give.

This is a far cry from Marcel Mauss and the “Essai sur le don,” in which we see a man, a socialist who has just lost half his friends in the First World War, take a stand at the same time against Bolshevism, contending that the market must be maintained, and against laissez-faire capitalism, asking the state to intervene and expressing the hope that the rich might rediscover the generosity of the ancient Celtic or German noblemen, so that society might not fall prisoner to the “cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker, and the capitalist.” Mauss was outlining a “social-democratic” program before its time, which France would adopt at the time of the Popular Front and which, following the Second World War, would be taken up by Great Britain, Sweden, and others. Mauss based his conclusion not only on his own experience of French and European society, but on years of scouring the literature concerning the role of gift-exchange in present-day non-Western societies and in Western societies of the past, Germanic, Celtic, and so on.

Here is where our paths converged, producing the second, pro-

fessional context which incited me to re-examine the phenomenon of gift-exchange. But before going into what moved me to this decision, I would like to say a few more words about the pressure everyone feels to “give,” about the call “to give.”

This call has been “modernized.” Whether sent out by a secular or a religious source, it is now “mediatized” and “bureaucratized.” It uses the media to heighten “awareness,” to move, to touch, to appeal to people’s generosity, to the idealized solidarity reigning in an abstract humankind located somewhere beyond all differences of culture, class, or caste, language or identity. Appeals are made to be ever more generous in the fight against AIDS or cancer, appeals for the victims of Sarajevo. In short, appeals on behalf of all victims of disease or human conflicts. The West is in a sense constantly present in the front lines of every war on evil. Through the media, everyone is exposed to the spectacle of exclusion, of individuals and nations crushed by catastrophes, poverty, civil war, genocide. In a word, it is not only the suffering of friends and relatives, it is the suffering of the world at large that cries out for our gifts, our generosity.

Of course in this new context, it is no longer possible to give to someone you know, and even less so to expect anything other than impersonal gratitude. The giving of gifts has become an act that creates a bond between abstract subjects: a donor who loves humankind and a recipient who, for a few months, the duration of a charity drive, embodies the world in distress. This is a far cry from the situation in our industrial and urban societies only recently.

At that time gift-giving was caught between two powerful agents: the market and the state. The market – job market, goods and services market – is the site of self-interested relations, of accountancy and calculation. The state is the space of impersonal relations of obedience and respect for the law. Presents used to be made between close friends and relatives, both as a consequence of and a testimony to the links binding them together; these imposed reciprocal relations on the participants, expressed by the exchange of gifts, given without “counting,” and above all without expecting anything in return. For the mark of the gift between close friends and relatives, then as now, is not the absence of obligations, it is the absence of “calculation.”

I read the “Essai sur le don” for the first time in 1957, together with Lévi-Strauss’ “Introduction à l’œuvre de Mauss,” which preceded the essay. I was not yet a convert to anthropology but still a philosopher, having spent more time reading Aristotle, Marx, Kant, and Husserl than Durkheim and Mauss, even though the latter were regarded as the fathers of French sociology. But already Paris was
talking about a new, more rigorous approach to social phenomena, called “structuralism,” which claimed to go beyond Marxism and the British functionalist school. This “structuralism” was the approach used by Lévi-Strauss in his first major work, published in 1949, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*; the following year he wrote his preface to Mauss as a case for the superiority of structural analysis as a method of dealing with social phenomena. The notes I made in 1957 reflect the enthusiasm that gripped me as I read these two pieces.

With the “Essai sur le don,” I felt as though I had suddenly emerged onto the bank of an immense tranquil river bearing along a mass of facts and customs plucked from a multitude of societies stretching from the Pacific islands to India, from British Columbia to China, and springing from the most varied epochs, from archaic Roman antiquity to the present that Mauss knew, that of Boas’ Kwakiutl fieldwork before the First World War or Malinowski’s stay with the Trobrianders during it. Even more references to more facts were piled at the foot of each page, as though the author had placed them there as a reminder and planned to come back for them at a later time. All this material dealt with the various forms and complexities of gift-giving, and were carried by a strong current that had torn them from their numerous shores and swept them along. This current was the impetus of a two-pronged question that Mauss had formulated in an attempt to decipher the enigma of gift-giving: “What rule of law and of interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated. What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to give it back?”

An odd question, given that Mauss would go on to show that the act of giving is actually a concatenation of three obligations: giving, receiving (i.e. accepting), and making a return gift once one has accepted. This was a simple, powerful hypothesis which, by postulating the interlinking nature of these three acts, seemed to forbid considering them separately. However both of Mauss’ questions focused on only one of the three obligations, that of reciprocating the gift, as though the other two were self-evident. Furthermore, the formulation of the second question seems already to contain the answer to the first: Mauss was obviously evoking the existence of a spirit in the thing which compelled the recipient to return it. In short, it is as if he did not regard the existence of a rule of law or of interest as a sufficient reason and felt the need to add a “religious” dimension.

Lévi-Strauss saw the hole in the reasoning and headed for it, castigating Mauss for having strayed from his analysis and having failed to apply the same method to all three steps, which form a whole: this was a methodological error a structuralist would never have committed, and which stemmed from the fact that Mauss had let down his guard, had momentarily forgotten to think as a scientist, and let himself be “mystified” by an “indigenous” theory. At this point, Lévi-Strauss proposed a global explanation of social phenomena which made the entire social domain a combination of forms of exchange, the origins of which were to be sought in the deep-seated unconscious structures of the mind, in its capacity for symbolization. Instead of being presented with a sociological study on the origin of symbols, the reader was offered the sweeping vision of a “symbolic origin of society.” It is not hard to understand my enthusiasm at such critical vigilance, such brilliant thinking, such visionary perspectives on gift-giving, exchanges, the unconscious, the origin of society.

Since this first reading of the “Essai sur le don,” I have become an anthropologist and have spent many years doing fieldwork in Melanesia, an area of the world that provided Mauss with some of his richest and most eloquent material through the works of Seligman, Thurnwald, and many others, foremost among them Malinowski, who worked in New Guinea, in the Trobriand Islands. I myself later spent many years in a highland valley in the interior of New Guinea working among the Baruya.

It was there that I encountered non-Western forms of gift-exchange, a new context which was to make me reopen the case of gift-exchange and reassess the legacies of both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss on this as well as other matters. For I had set out for New Guinea with two ideas. The first was that, while gifts are exchanged the world over, this is not simply a means of sharing what one has but also of fighting with what one has; this was the idea – which I attributed to Mauss – that the logic of gift and counter-gift culminated in the potlatch. The second idea, inspired by Lévi-Strauss, was that society is founded on exchange and exists only through the combination of all sorts of exchange – women (kinship), goods (economy), representations and words (culture). And I was laboring under the influence of yet a third conviction, also from Lévi-Strauss, which was that the symbolic dominated the imaginary as well as something else tentatively called the “real.” For Lévi-Strauss, the symbol was in some cases more real than the “reality” it signified.

These self-evident truths soon began to unravel, but the entire process was a slow one. In the field, among the Baruya, I observed the giving of gifts and counter-gifts on the occasion of the exchange
of women, but no sign of potlatch. On the contrary, everything in
the logic of this society precluded the possibility of acquiring power
through gifts and counter-gifts of wealth. Power did not go to Big
Men, who amassed women and wealth, but to Great Men, who held
the inherited powers present in the sacred objects and secret know-
ledge given to their ancestors by non-human divinities – the Sun, the
forest spirits, and others. In sum, these objects are things the Baruya
could neither sell nor give but which they must keep. But the Baruya
knew about selling since they produced a kind of “money.” I ana-
alyzed all this in La Production des Grands Hommes and then went
on to a more theoretical area, the analysis of kinship systems and
relations. Once again, it gradually appeared to me that explaining
these systems by the various ways in which men exchanged women
was too reductive; it left many facts unexplained and it mutilated
reality.

It was then that my sociological and theoretical contexts fit
together; what made it all click and spurred me to write a book on
gift-exchange was my reading, in 1994, of Annette Weiner’s Inalien-
able Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-Giving. I had read
this author’s earlier publications, but here she took her ideas much
further. As a Trobriand specialist returning to the same pheno-
menon, the kula, fifty years after Malinowski’s initial study, Annette
Weiner had uncovered new facts which shed light on some problems
that had been left unresolved by Malinowski and Mauss. In partic-
ular she showed how it was possible to keep an object while at the
same time giving it. One part of the enigma of the gift was thus
solved. In addition, I shared Annette Weiner’s interest in objects that
cannot be given, things that are sacred. At this point a light dawned,
and I decided to re-examine gift-exchange with respect to this basic
fact: there are some things which must not be given and which must
not be sold either.

It was from this angle that I reread Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, and many
others. When I had finished, the following hypothesis seemed self-
evident: no society, no identity can survive over time and provide a
foundation for the individuals or groups that make up a society if
there are no fixed points, realities that are exempted (provisionally
but lastingly) from the exchange of gifts or from trade. What are
these realities? Are they merely the sacred objects found in every reli-
gion? Is there not some general relationship between political power
and something called “the sacred,” even in secular societies in which
power is not conferred by the gods but comes from humans who
have founded it on a constitution they have given themselves? But
what is contained in a sacred object? By whom was it “given”? In a
word, the entire burden of analysis had shifted from things that are
given to things that are kept, and this shift illuminated the nature of
that universally familiar thing which seems to endanger the practice
of gift-exchange and to penetrate the sacred only to profane and
destroy it: money. Such is the strange itinerary which enabled me to
work back to those things that are repressed and whose repression is
perhaps the condition of life in society. It has been a long, hard
journey. Let us therefore begin with Mauss and attempt to assess his
legacy.
The Legacy of Mauss

A masterwork in chiaroscuro

The simple reason behind a reputation: a powerful global vision of gift-exchange as a concatenation of three obligations

In what terms or from what angle did Mauss broach the question of gift-exchange? The following formulation sums up his approach: Why is it that, in so many societies, at so many periods and in such different contexts, individuals and/or groups feel obliged not only to give, or when someone gives to them to receive, but also feel obliged, when they have received, to reciprocate what has been given and to reciprocate either the same thing (or its equivalent), or something more or better?

It was in seeking to answer this question that he amassed the material contained in his book and that, under the impact of his question, these details quickened with new meaning. Like most readers of the “Essai sur le don,” what made the greatest impression on me was seeing Mauss demonstrate the existence, within the most varied forms of exchanges and services, of a single power embodied in three separate but interlinking obligations which drew persons and things into a movement that sooner or later brought the things back around to the persons, and reconnected the point of arrival of all these gifts and counter-gifts with their original point of departure.

Mauss described this power as laying hold of both persons and things; he was speaking of course of societies where there seemed to be no absolute boundary between the two, and therefore no radical separation. Things were an extension of persons, and people identi-

fied with the things they possessed and exchanged. Mauss described worlds where everything passes and repasses “as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations.”! We learned that “things create bonds between souls, for the thing itself has a soul, is part of the soul.” And we felt as though we understood why, when a thing was given, it carried away something of the person and “wanted” to return sooner or later to the person who had initially ceded it. All seemed clear, providing, of course, the reader shared this type of belief and went so far as to regard it as a “scientific” explanation. That was the rub, and that was to be the focus of Lévi-Strauss’ criticism.

We are now going to re-examine the problem step by step, beginning with the fact that, before a gift can be received, it must first be given. Now even if the existence of an in-dwelling spirit in things may seem to explain the obligation to return gifts, it does not, it seems to me, account for the obligation to give them. What then is involved in “giving”?

Gift-giving, a double-edged relationship

In explanation of why people give, Mauss advanced a slightly less “spiritual” hypothesis, which appears explicitly in his explanation of the potlatch. He postulates that what creates the obligation to give is that giving creates obligations. To give is voluntarily to transfer something that belongs to you to someone who you think cannot refuse to accept it. The donor can be a group or an individual acting on his own behalf or on that of a group. Likewise, the recipient can be an individual or a group or someone who receives the gift as a representative of a group.

A gift is therefore an individual or collective voluntary act which may or may not have been solicited by the person or persons who receive it. In the West, we place more value on unsolicited gifts. But this is not a universal attitude. In many societies, and in the past in certain of our own social milieux, a suitor was supposed officially to ask the girl’s family, and in some cases her clan, for her “hand” in marriage.

I suggest that, at this stage, we set aside the question of specific social contexts which might compel certain individuals or groups to give or receive, and that we assume that both givers and receivers are of equivalent social rank before the gift. Now what happens as soon as the gift passes from one to the other?
The act of giving seems to create simultaneously a twofold relationship between giver and receiver. A relationship of solidarity because the giver shares what he has, or what he is, with the receiver; and a relationship of superiority because the one who receives the gift and accepts it places himself in the debt of the one who has given it, thereby becoming indebted to the giver and to a certain extent becoming his "dependant," at least for as long as he has not "given back" what he was given.

Giving thus seems to establish a difference and an inequality of status between donor and recipient, which can in certain instances become a hierarchy: if this hierarchy already exists, then the gift expresses and legitimizes it. Two opposite movements are thus contained in a single act. The gift decreases the distance between the protagonists because it is a form of sharing, and it increases the social distance between them because one is now indebted to the other. It is easy to see the formidable array of maneuvers and strategies virtually contained in the practice of gift-giving, and the gamut of contradictory interests that can be served. By its very nature, gift-giving is an ambivalent practice which brings together or is capable of bringing together opposing emotions and forces. It can be, simultaneously or successively, an act of generosity or of violence; in the latter case, however, the violence is disguised as a disinterested gesture, since it is committed by means of and in the form of sharing.

The giving of gifts may ward off direct violence or physical, material, and social subordination, but it may also stand in their stead. And there are countless examples of societies where individuals unable to repay their debts are forced to sell themselves or their children into slavery, ending up as the property, the "possession" of those who had bestowed gifts on them. From this it is clear that, of the two components (sharing and debt), of the two movements contained and combined in gift-giving, it is the second (the distancing) which probably has the greater impact on social life when it is organized around various forms of competition for access to wealth, power, knowledge, or ritual.

It is also clear that the very duality and ambivalence involved in gift-giving create the ideal conditions for it to flourish in societies which operate primarily on the principle of the production and maintenance of personal relationships between the individuals and groups that comprise the society: relations of kinship, production, power, and so forth. From the standpoint of comparative sociology, these conditions can be expected to prevail in societies without castes, ranked classes, or a state to govern them. In such societies, gifts are exchanged between protagonists who enjoyed a potentially or genuinely equivalent social rank before the gift. And that is precisely what we assumed in the "textbook case" we have just analyzed.

Alternatively, in societies based on rank, caste, or class, gift-giving, while widespread, necessarily takes on different forms and meanings, depending on whether it is practiced between persons of equivalent rank or condition (which brings us back to the preceding example) or between persons of radically different status. In the latter case, gifts have a different meaning according to whether the giver is of inferior rank to the receiver or vice versa. Here I would like to note a point to which I will return later: giving to a superior does not necessarily imply that the recipient is a human being. In all societies - whether or not they are divided into ranks, castes, or classes - humans make gifts to beings they regard as their superiors: divinities, nature spirits, spirits of the dead. People pray to them, make offerings, and sometimes even "sacrifice" possessions, or a life. This is the famous "fourth obligation" that constitutes gift-exchange, which Mauss mentioned without going into further detail and which was generally forgotten in subsequent discussions. And yet it is the articulation between his "Essai sur le don" (1925) and his "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice" (1899), written and published in collaboration with Henri Hubert. Having made these remarks, I will now argue that, in analyzing a gift, whatever it may be, one needs to consider the relationship that existed between the giver and the receiver before the former made a gift to the latter.

Here I would like to dwell on a moment on the fact that the giving of a gift is a "personal" act. This is why, whatever the society, whether ranked or not, gift-giving occurs in all areas of social life in which personal relationships continue to play a dominant role. Furthermore, the "personal" character of the gift does not necessarily disappear when the giver and receiver no longer entertain direct personal relations, do not know each other, and are linked by intermediaries. For example, at the end of the twentieth century, the flame of charity once kept alive by various religious institutions of all denominations has now been passed to non-governmental organizations and sometimes to the state itself. National drives are launched to collect funds for cancer or AIDS research, or to send convoys of food and medicine to Bosnia.

Charity has become a secular affair, and once it turned to the media, it became part game-show as well; the telethon has several features in common with the potlatch. As in potlatch, for instance
there is the appeal to outgive others, one city more than another, one company more than another, and there is the hope that the total will surpass that of preceding years. As in potlatch, too, it is the practice to announce the names of individuals, towns, and companies who have shown the greatest generosity.

So even in societies where relations between individuals are becoming less and less personal, gift-giving often retains its "personal" character, even if the persons have become fairly abstract; this personal character is associated not only with the donors but also with those who receive the gifts. Virtual representatives of all of the beneficiaries are always shown on the program: children suffering from genetically transmitted diseases or AIDS victims are interviewed, and they arouse compassion and the desire to help, to give. Next to the victims sit the representatives of the agencies appealing to public generosity, who undertake to act on behalf of the many donors, as stand-ins.

Today, then, even in the huge industrial or state-run societies that form the core of the capitalist world, where the individual's personal value is constantly proclaimed, but where just as constantly individuals can be heard voicing regret at being overwhelmed by impersonal relations in all areas, gift-giving has lost nothing of its personal or voluntary nature. We will return to these points, but we may already work from the postulate that, in order for a gift to be genuine, the act of giving must be voluntary and personal; if not it immediately becomes something else, a tax, for example, or extortion.

But our modern capitalist societies stand at the opposite extreme to those Mauss analyzed in the "Essai sur le don." It is no exaggeration to say that our societies are deeply marked by "an economy and a moral code dominated by the market and profit"; and that the societies featured in the "Essai sur le don" appear to Mauss, by contrast, as deeply marked by "an economy and a moral code dominated by gift-giving." This does not mean that gift-giving societies did not know about commercial exchanges or that today's commercial societies have ceased giving gifts. The problem is to see in each case which principle prevails in the society and why.

Mauss obviously asked himself why certain societies were characterized by "an economy and a moral code dominated by gift-giving," and his answer was that such societies emerge when several conditions are present: the first is that personal relations must play an important or even dominant role in producing the social relations which constitute the framework of a society. However, Mauss saw this as a necessary but not a sufficient condition. These social relations also had to be such that the individuals and groups involved had every interest, while reproducing themselves and their relationships, in appearing disinterested. And the interest of giving-while-appearing-disinterested resided ultimately in one fundamental characteristic of gift-giving, which is that, in these societies, what creates the obligation to give is that giving creates obligations. Here we have the first three components of Mauss' theoretical reconstruction of the sociological basis of gift-giving.

But paradoxically, while these three conditions were perhaps enough to explain why one gives gifts, they were not sufficient to explain why one reciprocates. There was still something enigmatic about gift-giving, or at least the fact of giving remained an enigma. It was at this point that Mauss set out in search of one more condition, one that was necessary even if it was not sufficient. He thought he had found this condition in the belief that things given have a soul that compels them to return to their original owner who gave them away.

The enigma of the gift and Mauss' solution

The enigma was, then, that while it was relatively easy for Mauss to understand why one must give, it was hard for him to see why one must give in return, and more particularly give back the very same thing one was given. Why reciprocate the same? We see that, by his very manner of looking at things, Mauss had altered the status of the three obligations. Instead of each being the equivalent of the others in that each is equally necessary, one, the third, which "obliges one to reciprocate the present received," now appears more important in practice and harder to grasp in theory than the other two. But he seems to have resolved the enigma thus created by positing the existence of a power in things which makes them wish to circulate and to return to their original owner. His solution therefore lies in "spiritual mechanisms," in moral and religious reasons, in beliefs that would endow objects with a soul, a spirit that makes them want to return to their place of birth:

The most important feature among these spiritual mechanisms is clearly one that obliges a person to reciprocate the present that has been received. Now, the moral and religious reason for this constraint is nowhere more apparent than in Polynesia. Let us study it in greater detail, and we will plainly see what force impels one to reciprocate the thing received.²
This explains Mauss’ analysis of the Polynesian concepts of *hau* and *mana*, and his gratitude to the Maori sage, Tamati Ranaipiri:

Concerning the *hau*, the spirit of things ... Tamati Ranaipiri ... gives us, completely by chance, and entirely without prejudice, the key to the problem ... What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary ... In reality, it is the *hau* that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan, and to the owner ... in Maori law, the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul ... Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to its “place of origin”, or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it.¹

We will not now go into the question of whether or not this is what Tamati Ranaipiri really meant. Raymond Firth (in 1929) and later Marshall Sahlins (in 1976) have long since shown that Mauss quoted Ranaipiri out of context, which was the description of a ritual addressed to the spirit of the forest before the start of bird hunting. In so doing, Mauss may well have changed Ranaipiri’s original meaning.

But such is the thread of his interpretation, and in another context, analyzing the potlatch, Mauss returns to the same argument: “One can push the analysis further and demonstrate that in the things exchanged during the potlatch, a power is present that forces gifts to be passed around, to be given and returned.”²

And writing about the precious copper objects which circulated in Haida and Kwakiutl potlatches, Mauss stresses that these coppers “have a power of attraction that is felt by other copper objects, just as wealth attracts wealth ... They are alive and move autonomously, and inspire other coppers to do so.”³ To be sure, Mauss reminds us that this is true only in the framework of a mythological vision of the cosmos and society:

Often the myth identifies them all, the spirits that have given the copper objects, their owners, and the copper objects themselves. It is impossible to distinguish what makes the strength of spirit in the one and wealth in the other: the copper object speaks, and grumbles. It demands to be given away, to be destroyed; it is covered with blankets to keep it warm, just as the chief is buried under the blankets that he is to share out.⁴

Mauss indeed thought that, with the account of Tamati Ranaipiri, Elsdon Best’s Maori informant, he had found the answer to the famous questions that open the “Essai sur le don” and which I recalled in the Introduction. But as I have said, his analysis contained a flaw and it was this flaw that Claude Lévi-Strauss was to seize upon.

**Mauss mystified by indigenous theories: Lévi-Strauss’ critique**

Lévi-Strauss writes:

Does this property [that forces gifts to circulate] exist objectively, like a physical property of the exchanged goods? Obviously not. ... So this property must be conceived in subjective terms. But then we find ourselves faced with an alternative: either the property is nothing other than the act of exchange itself as represented in indigenous thinking, in which case we are going round in a circle, or else it is a power of a different nature, in which case the act of exchange becomes, in relation to this power, a secondary phenomenon. The only way to avoid the dilemma would have been to perceive that the primary, fundamental phenomenon is exchange itself ... the mistake was to take the discrete operations for the basic phenomenon.⁵

And he goes on, indicating the direction the search might take:

*Hau* is not the ultimate explanation for exchange; it is the conscious form whereby men of a given society, in which the problem had particular importance, apprehended an unconscious necessity whose explanation lies elsewhere. ... Once the indigenous conception has been isolated, it must be reduced by an objective critique so as to reach the underlying reality. We have very little chance of finding that reality in conscious formulations; a better chance in unconscious mental structures to which institutions give us access, but a better chance yet, in language.⁶

Basically Mauss had failed because he was too empirical and because he, the theoretician of religious beliefs, of magic, had fallen victim to the very beliefs he claimed to be analyzing; somehow in his mind these had suddenly taken on the value of a scientific explanation:

In the “Essai sur le don”, Mauss strives to construct a whole out of parts; and as that is manifestly not possible, he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of
Mauss mystified! Mauss caught with his methodological guard down! An overly empirical Mauss and facing him a Claude Lévi-Strauss who had spotted the flaw and claimed to explain not only what the indigenous concepts of hau and mana are not, but what they truly are: signifiers “in [themselves] devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all,” or in the terms that have since become famous, “floating signifiers” or “a symbol in its pure state.” And all this closely reasoned to reach a conclusion which reveals a sweeping vision of the “symbolic origin of society,” explaining why social life is built on “exchange” and is composed of symbolic systems (marriage rules, economic relations, art, science, religion) articulated by unconscious mental structures.

The reader will understand the enthusiasm that seized me as a young philosopher in the presence of such critical vigilance, seeing the research perspectives thus opened on the origin of society, exchange, the unconscious. One had the impression that Mauss had missed the “decisive turn” that would have made him the “Novum Organum of the twentieth-century social sciences,” and that Lévi-Strauss on the other hand had successfully negotiated it. And yet with utmost modesty, the latter did not ascribe any of the merit to himself, but put it down to the “objective evolution which has occurred in the psychological and social sciences in the course of the last thirty years,” and even maintained that his conception was “rigorously faithful to Mauss’ thinking. In fact it is nothing other than Mauss’ conception translated from its original expression in terms of [Aristotelian] class logic into the terms of a symbolic logic which summarises the most general laws of language.”

We will not linger over the question of whether, in claiming to be Mauss’ faithful successor, Lévi-Strauss was acting in all good faith or whether he was seeking to mask the fact that his theories broke with those of Durkheim and Mauss. What is important is that Lévi-Strauss’ text, which it must be said is superb, was at the time rightly regarded as the manifesto of the new “structuralism,” whose strengths and limitations, whose successes and failures can be better measured today. With Lévi-Strauss, social life became a movement of constant exchanges in which words, wealth, and women circulated between individuals and groups: and we were invited to seek the origin of this movement beyond conscious thinking and explicitly avowed reasons, within the unconscious part of the human mind.

Let us recall that, at the time of his critique, Lévi-Strauss had just published his first major work, Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté (1949), in which, putting to work the postulate that all social life is exchange and that society is better understood in terms of language than from the standpoint of any other paradigm, he developed two theses which began to unsettle a few received ideas. One was that kinship is based on exchange (the exchange of women by men). The other was that, between the two components of kinship—marriage and descent—the former outweighs the latter and provides the keys for understanding the diversity of kinship systems, the most elementary like the most complex. It was during this period that Lévi-Strauss had his sweeping vision of a social anthropology: “by associating more and more closely with linguistics, eventually to make a vast science of communications, social anthropology can hope to benefit from the immense prospects opened up to linguistics itself, through the application of mathematical reasoning to the study of phenomena of communication.”

Today it would not occur to anyone to deny the fecundity of the marriage of anthropology with linguistics, mathematics, and communication theory, but the outcome of these encounters does not retroactively validate the general philosophical postulates which, in Lévi-Strauss’ eyes, made them necessary. It was with these in mind that in 1949 Lévi-Strauss reread Mauss in preparation for introducing his work to the public. Here he performed a two-step maneuver. On the one hand, he privileged and adopted all the formulas Mauss had used to describe in such lyrical terms the importance of gifts and exchanges in social life. Yet he completely disregarded the clear distinction Mauss made between two domains which divided the social sphere between them: the domain of alienable, exchangeable things and the domain of those inalienable things kept out of exchange, each of which corresponds to different types of social relations at different moments of the production and reproduction of society. On the other hand, Lévi-Strauss celebrates Mauss as seeming “rightly to be controlled by a logical certainty, namely, that exchange is the common denominator of a large number of apparently heterogeneous social activities,” but criticizes him for having failed to perceive that “the primary fundamental phenomenon [of social life] is exchange itself.”

The same movement which causes Lévi-Strauss to adopt and to amplify certain of Mauss’ claims about exchange also leads him to stress the importance of the symbolic in explaining social
phenomena and to substitute it for the imaginary, with the result that he all but evacuates the theory of the sacred elaborated by Durkheim and Mauss at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{17} He does this in several stages, which we will follow. At the outset, there was his criticism of Mauss, which we can only share: "Hau is not the ultimate explanation for exchange; it is the conscious form whereby men of a given society, in which the problem had particular importance, apprehended an unconscious necessity whose explanation lies elsewhere."\textsuperscript{18} Lévi-Strauss goes on to warn of what might happen were we to follow Mauss' approach:

We would risk committing sociology to a dangerous path: even a path of destruction, if we then went one step further and reduced social reality to the conception that man – savage man, even – has of it. ... Then ethnography would dissolve into a verbose phenomenology, a falsely naïve mixture in which the apparent obscurities of indigenous thinking would only be brought to the forefront to cover the confusions of the ethnographer, which would otherwise be too obvious.\textsuperscript{19}

Sage remarks, accompanied by a definition of scientific knowledge to which we can only adhere and which formulates the tasks of scientific investigation in terms very like those used by Marx a century earlier when he encountered the mystery of “commodity value” and showed that if, in its substance, the value of a commodity is the quantity of labor necessarily expended in its production and concealed in it, it is quite the opposite that appears to be the case. Commodities seem to possess a value in themselves, independent of the labor expended in their production.\textsuperscript{20}

Lévi-Strauss writes in fact: “a full explanation of the object should account simultaneously for its own structure and for the representations through which our grasp of its properties is mediated.”\textsuperscript{21}

In the next section of his text he therefore attempts to define the “unconscious mental structure” at work behind the indigenous representations and the practice of gift-giving. As far as the unconscious goes, it should be noted that Lévi-Strauss singles out the underlying unconscious processes of the mind, refusing to

go along with [Mauss] when he proceeds to seek the origin of the notion of mana in an order of realities different from the relationships that it helps to construct: in the order of feelings, of volitions and of beliefs, which, from the viewpoint of sociological explanation, are epiphenomena, or else mysteries; in any case, they are objects extrinsic to the field of investigation.\textsuperscript{22}

Lévi-Strauss is clearly concerned to explain how people think and why they think as they do. He refuses, and rightly so to my mind, to follow Lévy-Bruhl when he claims that people think as they feel, and that primitive people are like little children or like madmen, incapable of distinguishing between the self and the outside world, between subject and object, and so on. What, then, in the unconscious of mental structures (and not in the unconscious of desire) is the source of the notions of mana, hau, and the like, and explains both their nature and their illusory character?

[Conceptions of the mana type are so frequent and so widespread that it is appropriate to wonder whether we are not dealing with a universal and permanent form of thought which, far from characterising certain civilisations, or archaic or semi-archaic so-called “stages” in the evolution of the human mind, might be a function of a certain way that the mind situates itself in the presence of things, which must therefore make an appearance whenever that mental situation is given.\textsuperscript{23}

Confronted with this situation, the human mind, according to Lévi-Strauss, unconsciously sets about producing categories, following “itineraries traced once and for all in the innate structure of the human mind and in the particular and irreversible history of individuals or groups.”\textsuperscript{24} His task would therefore be, after Mauss, “to reach a sort of ‘fourth dimension’ of the mind, a level where the notions of ‘unconscious category’ and ‘category of collective thinking’ would be synonymous.”\textsuperscript{25}

If he were to succeed he would have discovered a part of the human being which not only could be said to be untouched by time but which would void of its content the idea that humankind has evolved and continues to do so in the irreversible history of the individual societies that comprise it. All that would remain would be the unconscious mind standing opposite the individual histories of societies and persons. But just what is this situation that confronts the mind and each time compels it to produce unconscious categories, of which the concepts hau, mana, orenda, and so on are merely one expression found in a given collective thought? It is the way a mind situates itself when, faced with an unknown quantity, it sets about producing signifiers that have no corresponding signified and are left "devoid of meaning": “those types of notions [mana, hau] ... occur to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all; their sole function is to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified.”\textsuperscript{26}
Lévi-Strauss’ solution to the enigma: “floating signifiers”

The Polynesian religious concepts are now voided of their meaning and reduced to what the French call a “true” or a “machin,” a “thingamajig.” Mana is “a simple form, or to be more accurate, a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever ... it would just be a zero symbolic value.”

Let us take a closer look at the level of analysis Lévi-Strauss has chosen in order that a notion such as mana should be transformed into a “floating signifier which is the disability of all finite thought.” He has chosen the level of philosophical thought and a materialistic, critical variety of philosophy at that. For this school of thought, religious concepts, religious explanations of the world are not erroneous explanations of the world but false explanations. They are not more or less right or more or less wrong, as is the case of those explanations established in the field of experimental science or deduced in the field of mathematics, but lie outside this field. They are not cases of erroneous knowledge; they are false knowledge. Of course, from the standpoint of human practice and the history of humankind, these representations which say nothing right or wrong about the world do say a lot about the people who think them. They are always full of significations, and these cannot be reduced to the projection onto nature and society of classifications drawn from one and applied to the other. But let us stay with philosophical thought and see how these collective representations of the Polynesians, the ancient Germans, the Celts, the Hindus, and so forth appear to the universal gaze of the philosopher, and in the intellectual light inherent in all philosophy because it claims to have come closer to the origin, to the foundations, to the real. All illustrate to various degrees

a fundamental situation ... which arises out of the human condition: namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifi-
totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or “inadequation” between the two. ... So in man’s effort to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification (which he shares out among things in accordance with the laws of the symbolic thinking which it is the tasks of ethnologists and linguists to study).

It is altogether possible to think, on the philosophical level, that religious concepts are not erroneous knowledge but false knowledge

which is my opinion as well – without having to espouse the idea that “man disposes from the start of a signifier-totality.” This is a fine formula and it makes one proud to be human, but it remains obscure. The key, the underlying thesis is the idea of “a symbolic origin of society.” The term “symbolic” is to be taken in both senses, as a means of communication, language, and in its etymological sense (symbolon in Greek), a tangible sign of an agreement and, by extension, of a contract concluded between parties. In short, society is, in its essence, exchange, language, because it originates in a contract. And Lévi-Strauss goes on to expose his philosophical “vision” of the big bang from which human society sprang:

Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually. In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had a meaning to another stage when everything had meaning ... In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once became significant, it was none the better known for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. ... It is as if humankind had suddenly acquired an immense domain and the detailed plan of that domain, along with a notion of the reciprocal relationship of domain and plan; but had spent millennia learning which specific symbols of the plan represented the different aspects of the domain.

And lastly: “Like language, the social is an autonomous reality (the same one, moreover); symbols are more real than what they symbolise, the signifier precedes and determines the signified.”

Language’s big bang and the symbolic origin of society

I do not know if Lévi-Strauss still agrees with this analysis, but I know why I no longer would today. In the first place, coming back to Polynesia and to the concepts of hau and mana, because, even if these indigenous concepts are “false knowledge,” their content consists of the practices in which they are involved, those of gift-exchange and of creating lasting, sacred obligations, that of marking differences, hierarchies, and so on. In sum, even if it is obvious that the capacity for elaborating symbols and for communicating the content of an experience using the symbols that express it is not the
direct product of the development of society but that of the development of the brain, the material support of the mind, it is always necessary, whatever Lévi-Strauss may say, to “develop a sociological theory of [the] symbolism” used by a given society at a given moment to invent and to give expression to itself.

Although it is legitimate to consider that human-ness cannot be reduced to consciousness and that, beyond consciousness there exist powers and principles that are continuously at work, it would perhaps be wise to take care when invoking unconscious mental structures to explain facts and behaviors that are not found in all societies or at all epochs, or which are found but do not have the same meaning or importance. Something more than the action of the unconscious structures of the mind is therefore needed to explain the transformations and developments which occur in the conscious productions of humans. Lévi-Strauss himself encountered this difficulty some twenty years later when he invoked the “dormant seed” to explain the emergence in ancient Greece of “scientific and philosophical” forms of thinking that were distinct from religious discourse and ran counter to the mythology of the old cosmogonies. Here (but elsewhere as well, in ancient China and India) was the beginning of a process of accumulation of “knowledge” which did not disappear when the gods and beliefs of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman civilizations were engulfed by the tide of history.

Furthermore, one cannot at the same time maintain that thought goes beyond language and proceed as though it were indistinguishable from language and its unconscious structures. And who can affirm that articulate speech (since that is the kind we are talking about) came about at all once, that before it “nothing” had meaning and after it “everything” did? Articulate speech is composed of abstract sounds that are produced and combined in order to communicate “abstract things,” namely the products of a type of thinking which not only thinks relationships but discovers or constructs relationships between relationships. This capacity to imagine relationships between relationships is an active part of the production of all relationships that humans entertain with each other and which they establish with nature. The mind produces social reality by combining two parts of itself, two separate powers which complete each other while remaining distinct: the capacity to represent or imagine and the capacity to symbolize, to communicate both real and imaginary things.

And even had articulate speech appeared all at once in one of our distant ancestors, Neanderthal man or whoever, what our ancestor suddenly possessed was merely the ability to produce phonemes. To string them together into morphemes, into words, was to produce a given “natural” language which, like all natural languages, had a limited, finite number of words (between 60,000 and 100,000 on average) with which the individuals of this society strove to communicate what they had to say, words which did not necessarily exhaust the totality of their thinking. Alternatively, no human being, not this ancestor or any one of us, will ever personally possess the signifier-totality, and even less a totality containing a “detailed plan” of itself. Furthermore, a signifier never exists in “a pure state,” devoid of any reference to one or more signifieds. The notion of a “symbol” or a “signifier” in a pure state is a contradiction in terms. Lastly, everyone knows that, while a child is capable of learning all languages, he will only ever speak a few at best, and his mind will contain not the “signifier-totality,” but a greater or smaller portion of the thoughts and the “things signified” and relayed by these languages.

In short, it is not clear who is the more mystified: Mauss, who believes in the explanatory value of Polynesian beliefs, or Lévi-Strauss, who believes in the big-bang theory of the emergence of language and in the symbolic origin of human society. It would of course be interesting to reconstruct the subjective historical context of these visions and beliefs, but what matters at this point is that, with Lévi-Strauss as with Lacan and other thinkers of this period, a general change of perspective occurred in the analysis of social facts, a shift from the real and the imaginary to the symbolic and to the affirmation of the principle that, between the imaginary and the symbolic (which cannot exist separately), it is the symbolic which dominates and must therefore be the starting point of any analysis.

**Lévi-Strauss’ postulate: the primacy of the symbolic over the imaginary**

Let us remember that, a few years after the publication of Lévi-Strauss’ text, Jacques Lacan, building on the same premises, wrote: “what we call the symbolic dominates the imaginary.” From what he knew of structural anthropology and linguistics, he soon constructed a theory in which the paternal function was divided into three orders – the real father, the imaginary father, and the symbolic father, the latter being synonymous with the order of language and the law. In the approach of both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss we see the same tendency to overrate the symbolic with respect to the imaginary, and to reduce thought and society to language and contract.
Of course, such a theoretical shift, emphasizing as it did the systematic analysis of the forms and structures of symbolic thought and language, produced an impressive number of innovative results which, on a certain level, enriched the earlier findings of Mauss and Freud. Among other things, Mauss had not attempted the analysis of myths and Freud had not broached the analysis of the relationship with language. Therefore we can by no means today simply “go back” to Mauss or Freud. The crucial point, however, is not that, but whether the positive findings of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan legitimize (continue to sustain) a posteriori the theoretical assumption underlying their research, namely that “it is the symbolic that dominates the imaginary.”

I do not think so, and I see proof of this in the two conclusions founded on this premise, both of which lead to veritable theoretical impasses. One is Lévi-Strauss’s: having come to the end of his analysis of American Indian myths, he concludes from the fact that all of the mythic themes echo and complete each other, from the fact that the world of myths is round, that everything happens as if, as he says literally, “the myths were thinking among themselves or thinking each other.” The other is Lacan’s claim, which still exerts its hold on the disciples of the master as well as on those who have tried to break away, namely that it is as if the Phallus were not only the object of desire, but the signifier of desire, for men as well as for women. Here are two famous formulas which affirm the idea that “symbols are more real than what they symbolize,” and thus more real than the imaginary and “the real” that they re-present (to the mind).

In spite (or rather because) of the fascination they exercise, such formulas are a veritable coup de force that speed the thinking process up a blind alley and block the exit. Lévi-Strauss does away with the active role of the content of specific historical relations in the production of mythological thought, relations which shed light on the importance of this form of thought with respect to other forms coexisting in the same society at the same time. Does mythology dominate all forms of thought or is it restricted to certain areas of social practice, playing a secondary role elsewhere? It is difficult to deal with this type of problem using the idea that everything happens as if the myths were thinking among themselves. History, in other words the coexistence, the interlinkage, and the succession of the multiple histories of the individual societies within which a given form of thought or way of organizing social life is reproduced or not, is not simply the unconscious and wholly contingent unfolding of a few of the possibilities “lying dormant” in the deep-seated structures of the human mind, that is to say ultimately our brain. As for Lacan’s formula, it does away, albeit less abruptly and more ambiguously than Freud, with the active role of the feminine in the production of figures of desire and in the constitution of a person’s intimacy, with a feminine which is inescapable because, in the last analysis, it is cannot be reduced to the Phallus and because we cannot, like Lacan, content ourselves with the assertion that there is something that takes more pleasure (de l’avoir-plus-de-plaisir) in women because they are not “all” subject. Desire cannot be reduced to the simple opposition, prisoner of a single symbol, the Phallus, between those who have one and will become one, and those who do not and will never be.

There is no question of denying the existence of the functions (the imaginary, the symbolic and the “real”) of these three orders which combine to make up human social existence, human social reality. The problem is whether more adequate representations of this reality are constructed by positing that the symbolic dominates the imaginary or by assuming the converse. To my mind, we must opt for the converse. It is first and foremost the different ways humans imagine their relationships with each other and with what we call nature that distinguish societies and the periods during which some of them exist. But the imaginary cannot transform itself into the social, it cannot manufacture “society” by existing on a purely “mental” level. It must be “materialized” in concrete relations which take on their form and content in institutions, and of course in the symbols which represent them and cause them to send messages back and forth, to communicate. When the imaginary is “materialized” in social relationships, it becomes a part of social reality.

To return to gift-giving, mana, and the spirit of things, we must remember that the imaginary is the birthplace of all beliefs, and at the same time the origin of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, in short the world of religion and magic, a world based on the twin belief that there exist invisible beings and powers which govern the universe and that humans can sway them by prayer and sacrifices, and by adopting a behavior in accordance with what they imagine to be their desires, their will, or their law. But the distinction between these three orders did not wait for the second half of the twentieth century; in a short but incisive article on Lacan, Jean-Joseph Gouy reminds us that political economic discourse, from the time of its great founders, “had already produced this distinction with regard to a highly privileged object, the object of exchange par excellence in modern society, money,” and he quotes this astonishing statement by Marx, concerning gold: “As the standard of value,
gold is merely nominal money and nominal gold [elsewhere Marx uses the word “imaginary”]; purely as a medium of circulation it is symbolic money and symbolic gold; but in its simple metallic corporeality gold is money or money is real gold.39

This quotation is worth pausing over. Goux’s commentary is highly apposite. I will summarize his remarks while indicating one essential point that he did not stress. Goux reminds us that Marx was writing at a time when gold, as a precious metal, fulfilled all three functions of money, serving both as a general equivalent of the value of the commodities circulating in the markets and as the primary form of wealth: in this instance money functions as a measure of the value of the commodities, as the medium of their exchange, and lastly as a reserve of wealth, as a treasury. Marx was also writing at a time when nearly all economists, together with the public, shared the idea that all forms of money other than gold (paper, securities, or other tokens of monetary value, especially bank notes) had value only because they represented gold.40 Confidence in money rested on the fact that, in principle, a person could obtain immediately and without restriction, gold coins in exchange for the bank notes or other monetary signs in circulation. Of course in times of crisis, the application of this principle was suspended, since if everyone changed their bank notes for gold, the system would collapse. But under ordinary circumstances, gold did not need to circulate in order to function as a measure of value. It was enough that the bank kept it in reserve. In the extreme case, as Marx said, it could exist merely in the imagination, unlike money in the form of paper or other monetary signs, which circulate in the actual exchange of commodities and function as a substitute, a symbol.

In fact, Goux points us down a trail which leads back to Mauss and the distinction between alienable and inalienable goods. Here, in the very midst of a market economy, of universal currency, and generalized competition, we discover that something needs to be kept out of circulation, to be voluntarily withheld from the sphere and the movement of exchange in order for the mass of market and bank exchanges to be set in motion, for everything that can be bought or sold to begin circulating.

The paradox is that this thing which must be removed, uncoupled from the exchange sphere, “withdrawn as it were from circulation,” is the very instrument of these exchanges, the means of this circulation, money. It must therefore be concluded that it is not enough that some kind of currency exist for commercial exchanges to develop and to flood the sphere of exchange, this money (whatever it may be) must also fulfill two functions, occupy two places at the same time, one at the very heart of the exchange process where it functions as a medium of payment, the other prior to or beyond exchange, where it constitutes a stable reference point for measuring the value of whatever circulates in these exchanges. Money is thus both swept along by the movement of the commodities and immobilized as a point around which all this machinery begins to revolve and whose volume and speed it measures.

We seem to be a long way from Mauss here. And yet, with the discovery of the existence of realities which are in a way withheld from exchange while at the same time enabling exchange to take place, we find ourselves very close to certain passages of Mauss, which have never attracted any particular comment, however, and have consequently gone unnoticed. Who is this forgotten, this non-annotated Mauss?

Forgetting the fourth obligation (men’s gifts to the gods and to their representatives)

Having introduced the notion of the “spirit” of the thing given, hau, and outlined a preliminary description of the potlatch and the kula, Mauss mentions for the first time a “fourth obligation,” which plays “a part in this system and moral code relating to presents.”42 This is the obligation to make gifts to the gods and to the men who represent them. He evokes ceremonies in which men bear the names of spirits, gods, animals, and so on, and who exchange wealth in order to incite their homonyms to be generous with humans. He observes that this practice appears in certain potlatches but that it is not restricted to this institution. To illustrate, Mauss points to Eskimo ceremonies in which shamans invite the spirits whose masks they wear to take part in the dancing and gift-giving. Afterwards they announce that the spirits have enjoyed their visit with the humans and that they will send game. At the end of the hunting season, other ceremonies are performed to thank the spirits for having given humans gifts of game. The remains of the feast are thrown into the sea, and “[t]hey return to their land of origin, taking with them the wild animals killed during the year, who will return the next year.”43 Mauss thus includes in the category of gifts offerings presented to the spirits and the gods, sacrifices made to seek favors or to give thanks.44 Offerings and sacrifices are gifts to the dead, to the spirits, to the gods; but sacrifice, according to Mauss, is capable of compelling the gods, of making them give in return, as in potlatch, more than they were given. “The purpose of destruction by sacrifice is
precisely that it is an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated. Mauss also states that the spirits of the dead and the gods are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world. With them it was most necessary to exchange, and with them it was most dangerous not to exchange. And he adds: “yet, conversely, it was with them it was easiest and safest to exchange.”

Men make gifts to the gods in the form of offerings and destruction of the things offered. Victims are sacrificed, the aroma of the incense and the smoke of the sacrifices rise up to the gods, and in some cases the flesh of the sacrificed animals is consumed. To sacrifice is to give by destroying what is given, and it is in this sense that sacrifice is a kind of potlatch and that gifts made to the gods, to the spirits of nature and of the dead not only belong to the “same complexus,” but, as Mauss writes, “realize to the full” the economy and the spirit of the gift, for these “gods who give and repay are there to give something great in exchange for something small.” Mauss clearly indicates here the articulation between gift-giving and the practice of contractual sacrifice to the gods and spirits. Taking his reasoning a step further, we see more clearly why, in these social and mental worlds, men who give more than they have been given, or who give so much that they cannot be repaid, raise themselves above other men and are something like gods, or at least they strive to be.

It is strange that Mauss, who takes seriously the fact that, in all these societies, the gods and the spirits of the dead are the true owners of things, should reduce the giving of gifts to the gods to an act of sacrifice, in other words to the hold that humans claim to have over the gods. He should also have taken into account the fact that the gods are free to give or not, and that the men approaching the gods are already in their debt, since it is from them that they have already received the conditions for their existence. His analysis fails to take into consideration the fact that the gods and the spirits are already superior to humans, and that the human donors are from the outset inferior to the godly receivers.

This, I believe, is the reason why men’s indebtedness to the gods, the spirits of nature, and the spirits of the dead was probably the starting point, the imaginary structure which enabled caste and class relations to crystallize, to take shape and to acquire meaning. I will develop this idea later when I show that it is in the context of gift-giving and the debts created by gifts that the process of caste and class formation is illuminated and takes on meaning. After all, for the ancient Egyptians, Pharaoh was not a man, he was a god dwelling among men. Born of the incestuous relationship between

the twins, Isis and Osiris, he is the sole source of ká, the breath of life in all living beings, men, birds, beasts of the field, flies, fish and the like. The Egyptians believed they owed their life, fertility, and abundance to the gods, and to Pharaoh in particular. Nothing could repay this debt, not the gift of their labor, not the product of their hands, not their own person nor that of their children, “repayment gifts” for Pharaoh’s acts of kindness, which I see as so many forms or aspects of the domination-exploitation of the Egyptian peasants by the priestly and warrior elite surrounding Pharaoh and which bore the names of corvée, tribute, servitude. But this will be my only allusion. I could cite a hundred other examples to illustrate the same reality, the fact that all power contains “kernels of imaginary material” which were necessary to its formation and reproduction. But the imaginary has power only when it becomes a belief, a standard of behavior, a source of morality. We will soon see that it is precisely this power of belief inherent in the imaginary that Lévi-Strauss occults when he affirms that the symbolic dominates the imaginary.

Before finishing with the fourth obligation, we need to recall that, although Mauss had already published another famous essay, in 1899, written with Henri Hubert and entitled “Essai sur la nature et la fondation du sacrifice,” he felt unable, in 1925, to do more than suggest the existence of a close connection and a continuity between gift and sacrifice, and he explained himself in terms that deserve to be heard:

We have not undertaken the general study that would be necessary to bring out its importance [of the gifts made to the gods and to nature]. Moreover, the facts we have available do not all relate to those geographical areas to which we have confined ourselves [Melanesia, Polynesia, North America, India]. Finally, the mythological element that we scarcely yet understand is too strong in them to leave it out of account.

Lévi-Strauss was to devote a part of his life to this very study of mythologies.

A forgotten Mauss

Among the important remarks Mauss made concerning the gifts men make to the gods are several allusions to the fact that not all kinds of wealth enter into exchange, that, for example, the Trobrianders have two kinds of valuables, of uvygu’a (armshells and necklaces),
"those of the kula and those that Malinowski for the first time calls the ‘permanent wayuwa’ [which] are displayed and offered up to the spirits on a platform identical to that of the chief. This makes their spirits benevolent. They carry off to the land of the dead the shades of these precious objects." 48 Here Mauss, having laid so much stress on exchange and gift-giving, carefully distinguishes the two categories of objects, those that must or may be given or exchanged, alienable objects, and those that must be neither given nor exchanged because they are inalienable:

Among the Kwakiutl a certain number of objects, although they appear at the potlatch, cannot be disposed of. In reality these pieces of "property" are sacra that a family divests itself of only with great reluctance, and sometimes never. The sum total of these precious things constitutes the magical dower... all of these things are always, and in every tribe, spiritual in origin and of a spiritual nature. 49

Mauss saw clearly, then, that there are two spheres of wealth, one comprised of alienable goods and the other, of inalienable goods, and that the former opens onto the vast, frantic field of gifts, counter-gifts, and other forms of exchange, while the latter follows the paths of transmission, of anchorage in time. This is further illustrated in the following passage, again on the Kwakiutl:

It would seem that among the Kwakiutl there were two kinds of copper objects: the more important ones that do not go out of the family and that can only be broken to be recast, and others that seem to serve as satellites for the first kind. The possession of this secondary kind of copper object doubtless corresponds among the Kwakiutl to that of the titles of nobility and second-order ranks with whom they travel, passing from chief to chief, from family to family, between the generations and the sexes. It appears that the great titles and the great coupers at the very least remain uncharged within the clans and tribes. Moreover, it might be difficult for it to be otherwise. 50

But if Mauss seems to find it easy to understand that it might be difficult for it to be otherwise, it became very difficult after Lévi-Strauss to understand that it had to be the way it was.

Concerning things that can be given and things that must be kept (Annette Weiner and the paradox of the gift)

After a long detour, we now come back to Annette Weiner and the fundamental question of the nature of the social, of the basic components of any human society. Using her own direct knowledge of the mechanisms and representations of Trobriand society, Annette Weiner managed to find in Mauss what a half-century of commentaries had overlooked. 51 In a series of publications, the latest of which is entitled Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-Giving (1992), she developed two essential ideas.

We are already familiar with the first and have explored it in our fashion. This is the thesis according to which the interplay of gift and counter-gift, even in a society with "an economy and a moral code dominated by gift-giving," does not completely dominate the social sphere. Here as elsewhere there are some things which must be kept and not given. These things that are kept - valuables, talismans, knowledge, rites - affirm deep-seated identities and their continuity over time. Furthermore they affirm the existence of differences of identity between individuals, between the groups which make up a society or which want to situate themselves respectively within a set of neighboring societies linked by various kinds of exchanges.

But such differences of identity are not neutral: they constitute a hierarchy, and it is in this process of the production and the reproduction of hierarchies among individuals, groups, and even societies, that the strategies of giving and keeping play distinct but complementary roles. Enlarging on Mauss' comment concerning the Kwakiutl's best coppers, Annette Weiner goes on to suggest that, in an economy based on gift-exchange, it is necessary to withhold from the giving process objects (mats, nephrites, and so on) of the same kind as those that are given, but which are finer, rarer, more valuable. Hence her formula keeping-while-giving. I think that it is possible to go further and, keeping in mind the gold that is kept in bank vaults for the purpose of guaranteeing the value of the other monetary signs that circulate, that a more fitting formula might be keeping-for-giving. Although Annette Weiner does not make the distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, I would point out in passing that it is highly likely that the valuables, treasures and talismans which are not given but are kept are those which concentrate the greatest imaginary power and, as a consequence, the greatest symbolic value.

Annette Weiner's second idée-force concerns the importance of women and/or the feminine element in the exercise of power, in the mechanisms of legitimation and redistribution of political and religious power among the groups that comprise a society. Taking the bulk of her examples from Polynesia, she demonstrates that a large part of the valuables held as clan treasures, symbols of a rank or
title, or circulating in the gifts and counter-gifts associated with birth, marriage, and death rituals are women’s goods, goods produced by women and over which they have individual rights.

Annette Weiner thus revitalizes the role of women and/or the feminine in the production and exercise of the political power from which they seem to be excluded or in which they seem to occupy an altogether minor place. In Polynesia, the woman as sister enjoys a higher rank than the man as brother, and the sister as woman is supposed to be closer to the ancestors and the gods, to the sacred. It is the relationship entertained with the sacred which, as a rule, confers the highest degree of legitimacy on a political power, then behind the appearances which dissipate their importance, women and the feminine are actively present at the heart of Polynesian institutions as well as, to be sure, in intimate relations. Annette Weiner acknowledges her debt for this idea to Mauss, who, with regard to the two categories of valuables in the kingdom of Samoa, oloa and le’tonga, writes:

[...tonga] ... designates the permanent paraphernalia, particularly the mats given at marriage, inherited by the daughters of that marriage, and the decorations and talismans that through the wife come into the newly founded family, with an obligation to return them. In short, they are kinds of fixed property - immovable because of their destination. The oloa designate objects, mainly tools, that belong specifically to the husband. These are essentially movable goods. Thus nowadays this term is applied to things passed on by Whites. 

Annette Weiner’s analyses of the role of women and of the existence of “women’s goods” indispensable for producing and legitimizing political power led her to look into the strategic role of brother-sister relations in the constitution of the social sphere and in the establishment of power. Reasoning from the fact that, in the Trobriand Islands, where descent is reckoned matrilineally, the identity and continuity of the clan are transmitted exclusively through women and therefore through women as sisters, she rejects, at least for this case, Lévi-Strauss’ formula that kinship is based on the “exchange” of women among men. Instead, she advances an argument which she feels to have a more general critical bearing and goes on to contest that a sister given as a wife can be regarded as the equivalent of a wife received in place of that sister, which ultimately raises the question of brother-sister incest. She recalls that incest between brother and sister, which combines the greatest number of positive and negative forces, the greatest number of sacred powers, was practiced by...

the important noble and royal families of certain Polynesian societies, thus bearing witness to their supernatural origins.

We will not follow her on all of these grounds. As far as Lévi-Strauss’ thesis on kinship is concerned, we have shown elsewhere that the prohibition of incest did not necessarily, as Lévi-Strauss claimed, bring about the exchange of women among men. The prohibition of incest opens up three logically equivalent possibilities. Either men exchange their sisters among themselves, or women exchange their brothers among themselves, or groups exchange men and women. Lévi-Strauss retained only one of these three possibilities when he posited the exchange of women among men as the crux of kinship and therefore as a universal fact. Yet all three possibilities exist sociologically. Women exchange men among the Tetum of Indonesia,54 the Jorai of Vietnam and in a few other societies.55 In place of bridewealth, these groups pay groomwealth, a matrimonial compensation for the services of the future bridegroom. The third logical possibility, the exchange of men and women by family groups, is obviously more common: it is practiced by the present-day societies of Europe and by many cognatic societies in Polynesia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. In any event, the exchange of women is not a universal fact, as Lévi-Strauss claims. It is merely the most statistically frequent form of matrimonial exchange. (In passing let it be said that the fact that Jorai women exchange their brothers does not prove that male domination does not exist in this society; it is very real, but that is not where it operates.) Not only does Lévi-Strauss’ theory suffer from having rejected out of hand two logically possible ways of exchanging marriage partners by declaring that they might exist in the imagination or might be evoked to placate women, but that they would not be found in the real world; it also sins in having “reduced” kinship to exchange, to reciprocity, to the symbolic. In so doing, he has left unmentioned or has diminished everything in kinship which falls outside the area of exchange, which partakes of (imaginary) continuity, which is rooted in time, in the blood, in the soil, and so on.

Whatever approach is taken to the question, the same is always found to be true of the essential nature of the social and thus of the origin of society. Henceforth it seems clear that the social cannot be reduced to the sum of all possible forms of exchange among humans and therefore cannot originate or be grounded solely in exchange, contract or the symbolic. Beyond the sphere of exchanges lie other domains, another sphere constituted of all that humans imagine they must withhold from exchange, reciprocity, and rivalry, which they must conserve, preserve, and increase.
Nor is the social merely the juxtaposition or even the addition of the alienable and the inalienable, for society is brought into existence and sustained only by the union, by the interdependence of these two spheres and by their difference, their relative autonomy. The formula for maintaining the social sphere is therefore not *keeping-while-giving*, but *keeping-for-giving* and *giving-for-keeping*. I believe that this double viewpoint enables us to take the true measure of man as a social being, and of the preconditions for any society.

**Concerning the twin foundations of society**

If the social sphere rests on a twin proposition, then society cannot have a simple origin or be underpinned by a single foundation. Human society drew on two sources for its emergence: contractual exchange on the one hand, and non-contractual transmission on the other. And it continues to advance on these two legs, to rest on these two bases, both of which are equally necessary and exist only by means of one another. Thus there are always things in the human social domain which are not governed by contract, which are not negotiable, which are located outside or beyond the domain of reciprocity. Whether in the sphere of kinship or of politics, there is always, in every human activity if it is to become constituted, something that precedes exchange and in which exchange takes root, something that exchange both alters and preserves, extends and renews at the same time. This chronological precedence and this logical priority exist only as moments in a continuous movement, which flows from man's original mode of existence as a being that not only lives in society (like other social animals), but which produces society in order to live.

If it were necessary to cite a philosopher in conclusion, why not Aristotle, who, on the one hand contends, in his *Ethics*: "If there were no exchange, there would be no social life," but who, in his *Politics*, rejected the idea that human society could have sprung from a contract. The *polis*, he writes, is more than a contract, more than an alliance, a *summachia*. Were it not, he says, "Etruscans and Carthaginians and all peoples between whom there are mutual *sumbola* would be citizens of a single city." It is not a matter of chance then that most of the theoreticians who proclaim the primacy of the symbolic over the imaginary base the origin of society on a contract. Before the symbol there was nothing, afterwards, there was everything. Before the appearance of language, before the prohibition of incest, before the primal social contract, society did not exist, or if it did, it had no signification. Afterwards it sprang up and it began to signify something.

Having come to the question of whether the origin of society is single or multiple, we will go no further than these few suggestions, formulated in the guise of a preliminary approach. But they have enabled us to measure what is at stake in analyzing the place and importance of gift-giving in the functioning and the evolution of human societies. This place can be defined and its importance measured only if we can arrive at a more accurate view of the relations between the sphere of sacred things that are not exchanged and that of valuables or monies which enter into exchanges of gifts or exchanges of commodities.

To this end, I am now going to re-examine the ethnographic material I know best, namely the material on the Baruya of New Guinea. This is a paradoxical endeavor, however: as it is practiced among the Baruya, the gift and counter-gift of women between lineages is an attenuated form of total prestation and, while it is of enormous importance to society, it is not found in the other areas of social life. Political relations, for instance, revolve entirely around the ownership and use of sacred objects treasured by each clan, which is forbidden to give or exchange. Moreover the Baruya also produce a "quasi-money", salt, which they use to procure a variety of means of subsistence and valuables, but without accumulating these in a power contest. The paradox is that, in order to analyze the logic of potlatch societies, we are going to begin by analyzing a non-potlatch society. But we will see that this method follows Mauss' indications and enables us to determine the differences, the significant discrepancies between non-potlatch gift-giving societies and those which engage in potlatch. Furthermore, beginning with societies in which gift-giving does not give rise to competition may also enable us to clarify the social and historical transformations that allowed the emergence and development of those societies in which gifts are systematically given in a spirit of rivalry and antagonism in order to win power and fame.

**A critique of Mauss which completes his theory and takes other approaches as well**

The better part of the "Essai sur le don" is devoted to analysis of the potlatch, that is to say to the analysis of agonistic forms of gift-giving. But it is frequently forgotten that, for Mauss, the potlatch
was merely an “evolved” form of total prestation in which “the principle of rivalry and hostility dominates.” Accordingly, we must look elsewhere for the point of departure of his analysis, as he himself affirmed: “In fact the point of departure lies elsewhere. It is provided in a category of rights that exclude the jurists and economists, who are not interested in it. This is the gift, a complex phenomenon, particularly in its ancient form, that of total prestations,” with which we do not deal in this monograph.\(^{18}\)

If the potlatch is an evolved, altered form of gift-giving-as-total-prestation, it is obvious that it cannot be thoroughly analyzed without having a clear idea of what Mauss meant by “total prestations.” I have therefore selected several passages from the “Essai sur le don” and the Manuel d’ethnographie which deal with the subject. The French word prestation, as Mauss indicates in his Manuel, comes from the Latin præstare, “to hand over” and designates “a contract to repay a thing or a service.”\(^{59}\) He makes a distinction between total-prestation “contracts” and “contracts” in which the prestation is only partial. He further distinguishes two categories of total prestations, depending on whether the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts takes an antagonistic form or not. He considers the non-antagonistic category of gifts and counter-gifts to be the oldest, and suggests that over time it evolved into increasingly competitive and individualistic forms, culminating in the potlatch. This overall set of non-antagonistic and antagonistic forms he calls “a system of total prestations.”\(^{60}\) His models for non-antagonistic total prestations are taken from the exchanges occurring in societies divided into complementary moieties like the Australian and North American Indian tribes: “The purest type of such institutions seems to be characterized by the alliance of two phratries in Australian or North American tribes in general, where rituals, marriages, inheritance of goods, legal ties and those of interest, the military and religious – in short, everything, is complementary and assumes co-operation between the two halves of the tribe.”\(^{61}\) Elsewhere he writes:

Total prestation is the fact, for two clans, of being in a continual state of contract, each person owes everything to every other person in the clan and to everyone in the opposing clan. The ongoing and collective character of such a contract makes it a veritable treaty involving a necessary display of wealth with regard to the other party.\(^{62}\)

Mauss adds that this type of prestation can still be found in French society: “Originally much more widespread, total prestation still exists in our society between spouses, unless it has been otherwise stipulated at the time of the marriage contract.”\(^{63}\)

But let us return to the description of the essential characteristics of the total services analyzed in the “Essai sur le don”:

First characteristic: “it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting ‘persons’ are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups who meet face to face in one spot, or through their chiefs, or in both these ways at once.”\(^{64}\)

Second characteristic: “what they exchange is not solely property and wealth ... things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness, banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract.”\(^{65}\)

Lastly: “these total prestation and counter-prestation are committed to a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare.”\(^{66}\)

Agonistic total prestations differ in the greater or lesser violence of the rivalry and competition exhibited by the individuals and the groups engaged in the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts. The potlatch style of “Indians from Vancouver to Alaska” appeared to Mauss as a “typical,” “evolved and relatively rare” form of agonistic total prestations:

Yet what is noteworthy about these tribes is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices ... they even go so far as the purely conspicuous destruction of wealth that has been accumulated in order to outdo the rival chief who is at the same time his associate ... There is total prestation in the sense that it is indeed the whole clan that contracts on behalf of all, for all that it possesses and for all that it does, through the person of its chief. But this prestation, on the part of the chief, takes on an extremely marked agonistic character ... It is a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date.\(^{67}\)

Mauss observes that this type of agonistic gift and counter-gift is found elsewhere than in North America or Melanesia, but he chooses to use the word “potlatch” to designate the phenomenon, thus transforming a term taken from a particular Indian language
into a general sociological category: “We propose to reserve the term potlatch for this kind of institution, that, with less risk and more accuracy, but also at greater length, we might call: total prestation of an agonistic type.”

In contrast to the potlatch, he writes, in non-agonistic total prestation, “the elements of rivalry, destruction and combat appear to be lacking.”

Such prestation, whether antagonistic or not, are total in the sense that they involve “juridical, religious, mythological, shamanistic, and esthetic” phenomena and aspects of the “social morphology”; in other words, they engage groups which shape the society (families, clans, tribes). The social fact of exchanging gifts is total because in it are combined many aspects of social practice and numerous institutions characteristic of the society. This is the sense Mauss gives to the word “total.” But the word has another meaning. Social phenomena can also be considered to be “total,” not because they combine many aspects of a society, but because in a way they enable the society to represent itself (to others and to itself) and to reproduce itself as a whole. Mauss rarely uses the concept of “totality” in this sense, although it applies to the functioning of those societies divided into moieties. In such societies, the reproduction of one of the moieties is the immediate condition of the reproduction of the other, while in turn depends on the other half for its own reproduction; each part is itself while simultaneously including the other and being included in it.

These clarifications having been made, we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. Mauss indicated a starting point for the understanding of his analysis, but he did not develop this point in his work. There is a piece missing somewhere, and we are going to look for it by analyzing a case of non-agonistic exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts, a case I observed personally when I was doing fieldwork in New Guinea.

In 1967, ten years after having read Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, and having meanwhile decided to become an anthropologist, I arrived among the Baruya, a population living in one of the high mountain valleys in the interior of New Guinea. I did not know at the time that I would observe an institution that has enormous impact on the functioning of collective and individual life: this was the practice of marriage by direct exchange of two women between two men and two lineages, ginamare.

A brief analysis of an example of non-agonistic gift and counter-gift

It took me some time and effort to understand that this reciprocal exchange in no way erases the debt each of the two men contracts with respect to the other when he receives one of the other’s sisters as a wife. From that moment onward, as long as they live, the two men, now doubly brothers-in-law, will share part of the product of their hunting, part of their salt, will invite each other to clear new gardens in the forest. Each will need to stand by the other in feuds between villages and of course each will need to protect and show generosity to the children of his brother-in-law, in other words of his sister. Of course it can happen that a man gives a sister without receiving a wife in exchange. In this case, the credit passes to his son, who will have the right to take a wife, without repayment, among the daughters of this woman, his father’s sister. The counter-gift is made, but a generation later. This second type of marriage is called kouremandjinaue, an expression designating the shoot of a banana tree, koure, that which grows at the base of the tree and, according to the Baruya, replaces it when the plant has finished bearing fruit.

The Baruya also have another type of marriage, called apmuetsalairaveumatra, which means to get together (irata) salt (tsala) in view of taking (matna) a wife (apmuvea). This marriage formula is not based on the direct exchange of women but on the exchange of wealth for women. It is never practiced between Baruya, but only with individuals and lineages from tribes with whom they trade. These tribes do not participate in the war—peace cycle that characterizes the Baruya’s relations with their neighbors; they are outsiders, but “friends forever.” I will return to the problems raised by the coexistence within a single society of two separate types of marriage, the exchange of women for women and the exchange of wealth for women. This is an important point because, as I will show, although the Baruya give gifts and counter-gifts, there is no potlatch, which strongly suggests that the development of the potlatch presupposes that marriage within the society does not rest exclusively or even primarily on the principle of direct exchange of women.

The interest of this example—which is one of several hundreds like it, with the sole difference that I personally observed this one in the field whereas I read about the others in colleagues’ books—lies in the sociological fact that the counter-gift of a sister does not cancel the debt that each man has contracted with respect to the other by receiving a wife from him. The gift and the debt alike concern not only the individuals, in this case the two men and two
of their (real or sometimes classificatory) sisters, but their two lineages, which among the Baruya are kin groups organized according to a principle of patrilineal descent reckoning, that is to say groups of men and women claiming to descend from the same ancestors through the men. In short, the exchange of women, the gift of one woman followed by the counter-gift of another woman, is a good example of Mauss’ non-agonistic total prestations.

But it is also important to note that, at the conclusion of these reciprocal exchanges, the two men and the two lineages find themselves on an equivalent social footing. Each is, with respect to the other, both creditor and debtor. Each is superior to the other as a giver of women and inferior to the other as a taker of women. Each lineage therefore ultimately finds itself in two unequal and opposing relationships with the other. But the addition of these two opposite inequalities in fact re-establishes the equality of their status within society (which supposes that there exists a common code by which all members of the society reckon status). This means that even when exchanges (of gifts or commodities) involve only two individuals or two groups, the presence of a third party is always implied — or rather the presence of others as a third party. Exchange always involves a third party.

It also explains why, between two lineages linked with and obligated to each other by their gifts and counter-gifts, a flow of foods and mutual assistance is set up which continues over an entire generation. In this sense gifts and counter-gifts leave a deep imprint on both the economy and the morality of social life. For the Baruya, these reciprocal obligations and solidarities gradually fade over the following generation, since a Baruya boy must not repeat his father’s marriage by re-exchanging a sister with the group from which his mother came. It is only after several generations, two at least, that a new marriage may be contracted between the same lineages.

Here we are at the heart of cultural worlds in which all of the kin groups that make up the society are compelled, in order to continue to exist, both to become indebted to others and to make others indebted to themselves. But the essential problem remains, namely why is the debt created by a gift not cancelled or erased by an identical counter-gift? The answer may be hard to understand for a mind immersed in the logic of today’s commercial relations, but it is basically simple. If the counter-gift does not erase the debt, it is because the “thing” given has not really been separated, completely detached from the giver. The thing has been given without really being “alienated” by the giver.

The thing given therefore takes with it something of the person, of the identity of the giver. Moreover, the giver retains some rights over the thing after having given it. This is clear in the example of ginamare, sister-exchange among the Baruya. At the conclusion of the exchange, each woman has taken the place of the other, but without having ceased to belong to the lineage from which she originated, by birth or adoption. To give, in this instance, means to transfer without alienating, or to use the legal language of the West, to give means to cede the right of use without ceding actual ownership. And this is why giving a woman also confers certain rights over the children she will bear; this holds not only for societies where descent is reckoned exclusively through women, matrilineally, where as a consequence children do not belong to their father’s lineage but to their mother’s.

Two things happen, in fact, when sisters are exchanged. One person takes the place of another, and this replacement of one person by another constitutes at the same time the production of a relationship, an alliance between two men and two groups. Behind this twin mechanism, a fundamental social constraint is at work, the fact that a man cannot marry his sister, nor a woman her brother. And therefore at the heart of the exchange of women lies, as Claude Lévi-Strauss showed, the compelling action, the permanent mediation of the incest taboo.

This logic of gift-exchange is entirely separate, as Christopher Gregory has shown so strikingly, from the logic of commercial exchange. When bartering for commodities or buying them with money, at the conclusion of the transaction, the partners own what they have bought or traded. Whereas before the exchange, each partner was dependent on others to satisfy his needs, afterwards each party is once more independent and free of obligations to others. Of course it may be that the buyer did not pay and was given credit, but as soon as he has paid his debt (with or without interest) he is free. This presupposes that the things or the services that are bartered, sold or bought are wholly alienable, detachable from the sellers. This is not the case in an “economy and a moral code based on gift-giving,” since the thing given is not alienated and the giver retains rights over what he has given, and subsequently benefits from a series of “advantages.”

No sooner given than returned (is there such a thing as an absurd gift?)

Nowhere is this logic more evident perhaps than when the gift of a thing is immediately followed by a counter-gift which returns to the
initial donor the same thing as he has just given. For a Western
observer, this round trip seems senseless since, if the thing is given
right back, it seems to have been exchanged “for nothing”, and gift-
giving once again becomes an “enigma.”

In reality, the nearly immediate reciprocation of the object given is
perhaps the clearest illustration of the implicit logic of gifts which
create debts that are not cancelled by counter-gift. For the object
which returns to its original owner is not “given back,” but is
“given again.” And in the course of this round trip the object has
not traveled in vain. Many things have come about as a result of this
transfer. Two social relationships, identical but going in opposite
directions, have been produced and are linked to each other, thus
binding two individuals or two groups into a twin relationship of
reciprocal dependence. Gift and counter-gift of an identical object
are perhaps the minimum transfer required to set in motion a
“total” prestation. At the conclusion of this analysis of an example
of non-agonistic gift-counter-gift exchange, which for Mauss is the
distant origin of the potlatch, let us compare the results with the two
questions that opened the “Essai sur le don.”

It is clear now, at least as far as the logic of non-agonistic gift and
counter-gift goes, that these questions are ill formulated in part: first
of all, because in this type of gift-giving, nothing is really “given
back.” “Things” and persons take each other’s place, and these
transfers produce specific social relationships between the individu-
als and groups involved which give rise to a set of reciprocal rights
and obligations; and secondly, there is, properly speaking, nothing
“in” the thing which creates an obligation to return the gift except
the fact that the giver continues to be present in the gift and through
it to bring pressure on the receiver, not to give it back, but to give in
return, to reciprocate. The effect, then, is one of a rule of law; but this
does not mean, as Mauss wrote, that those who follow it belong to a
“primitive” or even an “archaic” society. We know of many
ancient or modern societies where land, for instance, is inalienable,
where usage may be ceded, but never ownership. But the rule of law
is also a rule of interest, since by giving, receiving, and giving in
return, each party accumulates the advantages created by this type
of reciprocal dependence.

Coming back to Mauss’ second question, if there is some power in
the thing, it is essentially that of the relationship which binds it to
the person of the giver. This is a twofold relationship since the giver
continues to be present in the thing given, which does not become
detached from his (physical or legal) person, and this presence is a
force, that of the rights he continues to exercise over the thing given
and through it over the recipient who accepts it. In accepting a gift,
one accepts more than a thing, one accepts the fact that the giver has
rights over the receiver. Now we come to the point that so fasci-
nated Mauss: there is in the thing given a “power” which works on
the recipient and compels him to “give in return.” We have seen that
this power resides in the fact that the thing or person is not alienated
when given. It continues to form part of the realities that constitute
the identity, the being, the inalienable essence of a human group, of
a “moral person.” It is what we call common or collective “prop-
erty,” of which the use may be ceded but not the ownership. We
must therefore ask ourselves why certain realities appropriated by
human groups – land, sacred objects, ritual formulas, and so on –
are inalienable.

This is where I part company with Mauss. For Mauss, the reasons
for this inalienability and this “obligation to give in return” are
essentially “spiritual”, they are of a “moral and religious essence.”
They arise in the world of beliefs, of ideas and ideologies. I do not
deny either the existence or the importance of religious representa-
tions and beliefs in attributing an inalienable character to clan,
family, or tribal lands (inherited from the ancestors; it is there in that
ground that they are often buried, and they watch over it and their
descendants). But it seems difficult to explain by religious beliefs
alone that, over the course of history, human groups have struggled
to preserve their conditions of existence (material or not but always
real to them), to prevent their dispersal, their division or their frag-
mentation, by imbuing them with the character of a possession to be
kept and transmitted intact, thereby ensuring the survival of the gen-
erations to come. Religion is certainly not the ultimate explanation
for the obligation under which individuals and groups have placed
themselves to not surrender – or at least not completely – certain
“things” necessary to the reproduction of one and all. It is not only
“moral” reasons that command to not disperse or surrender –
without replacing – realities which are presented and experienced as
necessary to the reproduction of one and all. This necessity can be
material or mental, but in any case it is social. The effect of religion
is not to endow common property with an inalienable character, but
to impose a sacred character on the prohibition of its alienation.

It is here, confronted with the necessity of explaining the presence
of a “power” in that which is given, that, in my opinion, Mauss’
analysis veers off course, thus laying itself open to Lévi-Strauss’ criti-
cisms. Mauss was certainly not unfamiliar with the notion of
alienable goods and collective ownership, but curiously he did not
bring them into his explanation of gift-giving. There were perhaps
two reasons for this. One is easily understandable: when speaking of inalienable things, such as the important titles and copbers of the Kwakiutl, he states that these “things” are precisely not given. And without further comment, he adds, “it might be difficult for it to be otherwise.”

It is as though, for Mauss, things could not be given simply because they were inalienable. The other reason is less clear. Several times he mentions, without using it in his analysis, the existence of common rights over land or other clan or family belongings. For instance, alluding in the “Essai sur le don” to Chinese real-estate law, he writes:

But we do not place too much reliance on this fact: definitive sale of land is, in human history and especially in China, something so very recent. It was, right up to Roman law, and then in our ancient German and French legal systems, hedged in with so many restrictions, arising from the domestic form of communism and the deep attachment of the family to the land, and the land to the family, that the proof would have been too facile. Since the family is the home and the land, it is normal that the land should be exempt from the law and the economy of capital. ... Actually we will be talking especially about movable goods.

It is interesting to see that Mauss had no difficulty associating sacra, family sacred objects, with land as clan property and seeing them as the same type of inalienable reality. But he seems to have taken it for granted that inalienable realities cannot be given. In a way, as soon as persons or things begin to circulate through exchange, Mauss regards them as “movables,” thus occluding or thrusting into the background the inalienable character of the things exchanged.

In fact he focused his critical attention primarily on one fundamental aspect of Western law, which has separated things and persons and created two systems, one pertaining to things and the other to persons. In order to understand the way gift-giving functions in contemporary non-Western societies, he felt it necessary to place himself beyond this distinction. Paradoxically, though, he did not analyze the union of thing and person in terms of law but, as I have said, in terms of an almost religious union. To be sure, he began with the fact that the thing given takes with it something of its original owner and giver, but he did not take into account the fact that it is not only a personal presence but also rights that leave with the object in question. Instead of the force of the rights, he saw a spiritual power, that of a soul inhabiting the thing and urging it to return to its original owner. Lastly, as several of Mauss’ commentators have remarked, the thing given is not inhabited by a single power but by two: first of all it contains the permanent presence of the giver, but since, in this world of beliefs, the object too is a person, it therefore has a soul, it has its own spiritual power which also urges it to return to its place of origin.

Perhaps Mauss’ lack of interest in analyzing the facts from the standpoint of the notion of inalienable property can be explained by a desire to get away from what he regarded as the chaotic discussions that had surrounded the notions of collective and individual ownership since the end of the nineteenth century and which had been rekindled by the Bolshevik victory in Russia. For we must not forget that Mauss was a lifelong staunch anti-Bolshevist. In 1947 he even took care to reaffirm his position:

The major distinction dominating our law, that between personal law and real law, is an arbitrary distinction which other societies largely ignore. After Roman law, we made enormous strides in synthesis and unification; but law, and particularly laws governing ownership, jus utendi et abutendi, does not start from a single principle, that is where it finishes ... The question of whether ownership is collective or individual will not be dealt with here. The terms we attach to things are of no importance, there are collectively owned properties administered by a single individual, the patriarch, in extended families, etc., etc.

The reasons for his lack of interest are understandable. The notion of common ownership seems to him vague and to cover very different realities. He feels that “wherever we look we are confronted with a plurality of laws governing ownership ... Ownership by the king, the tribe, the clan, the village, the quarter, the joint family may all be superimposed on the same object.”

In addition, we saw earlier that the collective ownership of land as an inalienable possession seemed to him to be excluded from exchange and gift-giving by the very fact of its being inalienable:

Land ... which is non-transmissible, tied to the family, the clan, the tribe more than to the individual ... cannot leave the family to be ceded to an outsider. Remnants of this state of affairs can be seen in Norman law, sale with privilege of repurchase and droit de parage [rights associated with (high) birth] which are still in force on Jersey.

These passages clearly show that what interested Mauss primarily was not the inalienable character of the thing given, but the fact that it was a person and acted as one. That is the reason for his enthusiasm and for his gratitude to Tamati Ranaipiri, who handed him completely by chance the key to the problem ... In reality, it is the
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hau that wishes to return to its birthplace." The question arose with the publication of the "Essai sur le don" of whether Mauss had not made Ranaipiri say something other than what he had actually told Best when he questioned him about the hau of the forest. Before elucidating this point, however, this would be a good time to take stock of the findings produced by our analysis of non-agonistic gift-giving which, although he did not analyze it, Mauss designated as the starting point for understanding the potlatch.

In non-agonistic gifts and counter-gifts:

The thing or the person given is not alienated. To give is to transfer a person or thing whose "usage" is ceded, but not its ownership. Because of this, a gift creates a debt that cannot be cancelled by a counter-gift.

The debt creates an obligation to give in return, but to give in return does not mean to give back, to repay; it means to give in turn.

The giving of gifts and counter-gifts creates a state of mutual indebtedness and dependence which presents advantages for all parties. To give therefore is to share by creating a debt or, which amounts to the same thing, to create a debt by sharing.

Gift-giving in these societies is not simply a mechanism for setting possessions and people in circulation, thereby ensuring their distribution and redistribution among the groups comprising the society. It is also, on a deeper level, the condition for the production and reproduction of the social relations which constitute the framework of a specific society and characterize the bonds that are formed between individuals and groups. While a woman must be given in order for a woman to be received, this exchange does not merely replace one woman by another, it creates an alliance between two groups, a relationship which enables each to have descendants and to continue to exist.

If we take the societies that practice this type of gift-exchange on the level of their overall functioning as totalities which must reproduce themselves as such, then the transfers of persons and goods engendered by the succession and sequence of gifts and counter-gifts between the groups and the individuals comprising the society ensure that, in the end, the available material and immaterial resources necessary to their social reproduction, and which belong to the category of "things" which may be given, are spread in a relatively equal way throughout the society.

Soon we will be entering another world, one of rivalries and inequalities, when we analyze the potlatch. But let us not forget that,

for Mauss, this new world was a transformed version of the one I have just described, a version which was at the same time an extension of and a break with the former.

Is the hau really the key to the mystery? (or how Mauss read the lesson of the sage Tamati Ranaipiri, from the Ngati-Raukawa tribe, as collected by the ethnologist Elsdon Best in 1909)

From the time the "Essai sur le don" was published, Mauss' interpretation of Ranaipiri's account of the hau has been contested. As early as 1929, Raymond Firth, in his Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori, maintained that Mauss' "excessively religious" interpretation of the notion of hau was utterly without foundation: "When Mauss sees in the gift exchange an interchange of personalities, a 'bond of souls', he is following not native belief, but his own intellectualized interpretation of it." 80

Firth recalled that the Maori term for a reciprocal exchange of goods is *utu*, and that the general rule of these exchanges is that a gift must be repaid by a counter-gift of at least equal value. Firth was careful to stress that this rule not only applied to economic exchanges, but extended to all areas of social practice. He did not deny the religious content of the notion of hau, but he rejected Mauss' principal hypothesis, namely that it is the hau of the object which makes it want to return to its place of origin or demands to be replaced by something equivalent. The debate wore on, but it was the publication in 1970 of an article by Marshall Sahlin, "The Spirit of the Gift: une explication de texte", in the Mélanges in homage to Claude Lévi-Strauss on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, that marked a turning point. 81

Elsdon Best had taken the precaution of publishing Tamati Ranaipiri's account in Maori, accompanied by his own translation and comments. Sahlin's first went back to these two texts, placing the French and English versions side by side, followed by a new English translation of the Maori text produced by a linguist and Maori specialist, Bruce Biggs. For purposes of comparison, here is Mauss' own rendering in French, followed by Biggs' English translation of the Maori original.

Mauss:

Je vais vous parler du hau ... Le hau n'est pas le vent qui souffle. Pas du tout. Supposez que vous possédez un article déterminé (taonga) et que vous me donnez cet article; vous me le donnez sans prix fixé.
I will explain something to you about the forest hau. The mauri was placed or implanted in the forest by the tohunga. It is the mauri that causes birds to be abundant in the forest, that they may be slain and taken by man. These birds are the property of, or belong to, the mauri, the tohunga, and the forest: that is to say, they are an equivalent for that important item, the mauri. Hence it is said that offerings should be made to the hau of the forest. The tohunga (priests, adepts), eat the offerings because the mauri is theirs: it was they who located the forest, who caused it to be. That is why some of the birds cooked at the sacred fire are set apart to be eaten by the priests only, in order that the hau of the forest-products, and the mauri, may return again to the forest — that is, to the mauri. Enough of these matters.44

This text is illuminated by several comments that Best makes on the mauri and the hau in his book, Forest Lore of the Maori, a posthumous publication which brings together a series of writings devoted to Maori hunting and gathering techniques, and to their knowledge of botany, zoology, and cosmology:

We now come to a remarkably interesting institution that illustrates a peculiar phase of Maori mentality, and which is known as the mauri. We have already seen that the prosperity and fruitfulness of the forest, of trees, birds, etc., is represented by the life-principle or mauri of such forest, which is an immaterial quality, but a material symbol of that quality was also employed, and it was also known by the same name. This material mauri was usually a stone, and it was carefully concealed in the forest. It acted really as a shrine or abiding place for the spirit-gods in whose care the forest was placed. ...

... the mauri serves as a medium between the charms recited and the forest they are meant to affect. The mauri is said to protect and preserve the mana of the forest ... when the mauri calls for birds to become numerous in a forest, then assuredly they will become so; for... that stone medium acts as a voice to the spirit beings (atua), who control all things. ...

It should here be explained that the life-principle of a forest, etc., termed mauri is also defined by the word hau. So far as I have grasped the matter the hau and the mauri of a forest are one and the same thing, but we must certainly distinguish between the hau and mauri of man.83

If I understand these texts correctly, fowlers who have had luck with their hunting owe their success as much to the spirit of the forest as to the priests who placed the sacred stone there and with their magic spells attracted its hau, the life-giving spirit which came to dwell in the stone. The mauri then is the material presence of the
forest’s *hau*. So we have three categories of actor: the forest, a supernatural entity, the source of life and plentiful game; the priests, who possess the stone *mauri* and the spells for invoking the spirit of the forest and are the mediators between forest and hunters; the fowlers themselves, who, after the rites performed by the priests, have gone into the forest, killed a great number of birds and are about to share them. It is with reference to this situation that Ranaipir makes the comparison with one involving three human actors, in which the first, A, has given the second, B, a valuable object which B then gives to a third, C, who later makes B a present in return.

Two ideas are associated in the example of the forest, the priests and the fowlers. The first is that the forest is the source of life and its abundance. Ultimately it is the forest that presents hunters with game. The second idea is that the game taken by the hunters still belongs to the forest and to the priests who own both the sacred object and the charm that goes with it and which enables them to persuade the forest to be generous with men. The game that the hunters give to the priests, who will cook it at a sacred fire before eating it (leaving a portion for the forest), is an offering of thanksgiving in the hope that the forest and the priests will continue acting on behalf of the hunters, will continue to provide them with food. But making these gifts is also a way of returning part of the game given by the forest to its original donor.

Transposed to the world of gift-giving among humans, the example of the fowlers, the priests and the forest illuminates two things at once. First, it underscores the fact that the object given by the first donor, A, and which is thereby put into circulation, does not, even as it circulates, cease being attached to its first owner, does not stop belonging to him. And second, it illuminates why the series of counter-gifts, induced by the circulation of a given object, must return to the original donor because he is still the sole owner. As a consequence, he also has rights over the “good things,” the positive effects entailed by the handing on of the object he gave at the outset. Should it happen that one of the people among whom the object is circulating and who has already had it for some time wants to keep it for himself, to side-track the “good things” (in Maori *hau whiti*, side-tracked *hau*) that have come to him from having given in turn, he would become ill (*mate*), or, as Best wrote elsewhere, “the dread terrors of *makuta* [sorcery]” would be unleashed on him.  

Marshall Sahlin, who had the merit of comparing these texts and others, concluded as Firth had long since, that Mauss was on the wrong track when he interpreted the return gift as the effect of the “spirit of the thing” wanting to return to its owner. He adds, after Firth, that the threat of punishment by sorcery cannot come from the *hau* of the thing itself, but must come from the real persons who have been frustrated by their failure to receive a return gift and who therefore cast a spell on the guilty party. Sahlin thus rejects the hypothesis of action on the part of the spirit of the thing for the following reason:

To illustrate such a spirit needs only a game of two persons: you give something to me; your spirit (hau) in that thing obliges me to reciprocate. Simple enough. The introduction of a third party could only unduly complicate and obscure the point. But if the point is neither spiritual nor reciprocity such as, if it is rather that one man’s gift should not be another man’s capital and therefore the fruits of a gift ought to be passed back to the original holder, then the introduction of a third party is necessary. It is necessary precisely to show a turnover: the gift has had issue; the recipient has used it to advantage.  

Finally, having rejected Mauss’ “animistic, spiritual” explanation for returning the thing given, Sahlin advances the notions of “profit” and of the initial giver’s rights over the benefits induced by his gift. But he does not take a closer look at the bond which allows the donor to claim these “profits.” He stops midway, contenting himself with formulas that do not really satisfy him: “The term ‘profit’ is economically and historically inappropriate to the Maori, but it would have been a better translation than ‘spirit’ for the hau in question.”

Furthermore Sahlin reminds us that, with the Maori, we are dealing with a society where “the freedom to gain at others’ expense is not envisioned by the relations and forms of exchange.”  

In reality, we need to focus once more on the essential idea, which Sahlin mentions but does not dwell on, namely that the original donor does not forfeit his rights over the object he has given, regardless of the number of times it may change hands. Of course the fact that it circulates means that every person who receives it, each recipient, in turn becomes a donor. But none will have the same rights over the object as the original donor. His ownership is inalienable; the others merely enjoy rights of possession and use, which are alienable and temporary and are transferred with the object.

It is this essential fact of the permanence of the original donor’s rights over the thing given which is translated on the conceptual level (in other words on the level of the indigenous representations and interpretations of this permanence) by the idea that a part of the original donor is present in the thing given, that he is attached to it...
you what is in reality the effect of the hau of your taonga ... In reality, it is the hau that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan, and to the owner.99

Here Mauss invokes and combines two reasons to explain the return of the object to the initial donor. Reason one: the object itself possesses a spirit, a soul, and it is this spirit that makes it want to return to its original owner. Reason two: the giver has a hold over the receiver because the object takes something of the giver with it which compels the receiver to give in return. This something is soul, a spiritual presence. Mauss lays the stress on this spiritual presence rather than on the fact that the original donor continues to have permanent rights over the thing he has given. Mauss thus leaves another reality in the background, a social reality this time: the fact that, in these societies, givers retain ownership of what they have given. This social reality is a force present in the object, which controls and pre-defines its use and movement:

What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. ... This is because the taonga is animated by the hau of its forest, its native heath and soil. It not only follows after the first recipient, and even, if the occasion arises, a third person, but after any individual to whom the taonga is merely passed on. In reality it is the hau that wishes to return to its birthplace, to the sanctuary of the forest and the clan, and to the owner. The taonga or the hau - which itself moreover possesses a kind of individuality - is attached to this chain of users until these give back the equivalent or something of even greater value. This in turn will give the donors authority and power over the first donor, who has become the last recipient.91

Mauss adds a note to the effect that "the taonga seem to be endowed with individuality even beyond the hau that is conferred upon them through their relationship with their owner."92 This text confirms our interpretation that, for Mauss, two spiritual principles abide, side by side, in a single thing: one is the presence of the owner in the object; the other, the presence of a spirit peculiar to this object and independent from its owner. It is above all this latter spirit which, according to Mauss, makes the object want to return to its original owner, a part of whose spirit is also present in the object. Mauss' explanation therefore does indeed place the emphasis on beliefs and on "spiritual," ideological reasons.

With this example we have already stepped beyond the world of
gift and counter-gift and across the border into the world of the pot-latch.93

**Potlatch: the gift-exchange that fascinated Mauss**

Mauss was fascinated by gift-exchanges featuring rivalry, competition, and antagonism. The potlatches of the Kwakiutl Indians and their neighbors on the northwest coast of North America seemed to him an extreme case; nevertheless after the description Malinowski had just published (1922) of the kula practiced by the societies of northeastern New Guinea, which followed Thurnwald's description of analogous events on Buin in the Solomon Islands, and those of other authors, Mauss concluded that this was a human phenomenon widely distributed in space and over time. He therefore made a broad sociological category of the potlatch, and it is by this name that agonistic gift-exchanges have become known and popularized.

The rules of potlatch seem to oppose term for term the principles animating the gift-exchanges we have just analyzed. In potlatch, one gives in order to "flatten" the other. To do this, one gives more than (one thinks) the other can repay or one repays much more than the other has given. As in non-agonistic exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts, the potlatch-gift creates a debt and an obligation for the receiver, but in this case the goal is explicitly to make it difficult or impossible to give back the equivalent: it is to put the other lastingly in debt, to make him lose face publicly, thus affirming for as long as possible one's own superiority.

Arguing from an abundant literature and not only, as has too often been claimed, from the writings of Boas,94 Mauss stresses that the potlatch is above all "a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date."95 This rivalry can go as far as "the purely sumptuary destruction of wealth that has been accumulated by the clan in order to outdo the rival chief who is at the same time his associate."96 For Mauss, the "exasperated rivalry" of the potlatch leading to the ostentatious destruction of wealth makes it an evolved but relatively rare form of total prestation: "There is total prestation," he writes, "in the sense that it is indeed the whole clan that contracts on behalf of all for all that it possesses and for all that it does, through the person of its chief."97 But between this exacerbated form and the "more moderate rivalry" encountered in Melanesia, Mauss finds a considerable number of intermediate forms, in Polynesia, Malaysia, South America, and elsewhere, and in antiquity, in Thrace and further afield in the Indo-European world. Keeping to the Kwakiutl potlatch, here is Mauss' reconstruction of the way it works.

The primary aim of these contests is, from a certain standpoint, "political" supremacy:

> The political status of individuals in the brotherhoods and clans, and ranks of all kinds, are gained in a "war of property", just as they are in real war... everything is conceived of as if it were a "struggle of wealth". Marriages for one's children and places in the brotherhoods are only won during potlatches, exchanged and given back.98

And further on: "The potlatch, the distribution of goods, is the basic act of 'recognition', military, juridical, economic, and religious in every sense of the word. One 'recognizes' the chief or his son and becomes 'grateful' to him."99

Mauss saw clearly that competition between clans and between chiefs was bound up with the desire either to validate the transmission of a title or a rank already acquired, or to acquire or conquer a new title or rank. The escalation of the gifts culminates in the ostentatious destruction of wealth and precious objects in front of a large audience:

In a certain number of cases, it is not even a question of giving and returning gifts, but of destroying... the most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown into the water, in order to put down and to "flatten" one's rival. In this way one not only promotes oneself, but also one's family, up the social scale. It is therefore a system of law and economics in which considerable wealth is constantly being expended and transferred.100

Mauss stresses the fact that, in these societies, there is a direct connection between wealth and power or authority:

> ... the rich man is one who has mana in Polynesia, auctoritas in Rome, and who, in these American tribes is "open-handed". But strictly speaking we need only point out the relationship between the notion of wealth, that of authority, and the right of commanding those who receive presents, and the potlatch: it is a very clear relationship. ... The chief is said to "swallow the tribes" to whom he distributes his wealth; he "spits forth property", etc.101

The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch. A chief must give potlatches for himself, his son, his son-in-law, or his daughter and for his dead. He can only preserve his authority over his tribe... he can only maintain his rank among the chiefs - nationally and internationally - if he can prove he is haunted and favoured both by the spirits
and by good fortune, that he is possessed, and also possesses it. But he can only prove his good fortune by spending it and sharing it out, humiliating others by placing them “in the shadow of his name”.

In these circumstances, it is easy to understand that, in such a world,

[10] to refrain from giving, just as to refrain from accepting is to lose rank, as is refrain ing from reciprocating. The obligation to reciprocate constitutes the essence of the potlatch, in so far as it does not consist of pure destruction ... One loses face forever if one does not reciprocate, or if one does not carry out destruction of equivalent value.

Reciprocate, to be sure, but, as Mauss states further on, if the potlatch is an imposed strategy for capturing a rank or validating a title, it is the act of giving and of outgiving that counts (to fall short is to fail):

Between chiefs and their vassals, between vassals and their tenants, through such gifts a hierarchy is established. To give is to show one’s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, magister. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become a client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (minister).

Of course, since there are several chiefs competing for each title or each rank and none either wants or can afford to admit defeat at the outset, each must therefore strive to outdo the others in order not to “lose face”: his honor and reputation are at stake. In all aspects of this struggle the supreme obligation is to give, but paradoxically this means to give with the intention of breaking the chain of reciprocity, of breaking it to one’s own advantage, or at least this is the hope of each competitor. Moreover, in one of his footnotes, Mauss says in passing, even though the statement weakens the idea that the obligation to repay is central to the potlatch: “The ideal would be to give a potlatch that is not returned.”

Potlatch logic is therefore wholly different from that of non-agonistic exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts, since, at the end of the latter, every lineage has given some of its own resources to the others but has received the equivalent in return, a woman for a woman, for example.

We have seen how Mauss reconstitutes the sociological context of the potlatch. But we have not yet examined what kind of exchanged wealth fuels this war of property. Basically there are precious objects, shells, coppers, carved objects, but also dances, rites, and so

on. These were given publicly in the course of ceremonies accompanied by feasts at which enormous quantities of food were distributed. But, Mauss remarks after Boas, the Kwakiutl did not really count these “provisions” as constituting wealth. Just what are these precious objects, the most valuable of which are the famous emblazoned coppers? Again Mauss stresses the spiritual essence of the precious objects that circulate in these exchanges: “One can push the analysis further and demonstrate that in the things exchanged during the potlatch, a power is present that forces gifts to be passed around, to be given, and returned.” The emblazoned coppers that are the stars of the potlatch “are the focus of important beliefs and even of a cult. ... Copper, at least among the Haida and the Kwakiutl, is identified with the salmon, which is itself the object of a cult. [Amongst the Tlingit], because it is red, copper is identified with the sun; a ‘fire falling from heaven’.”

There is one essential point (at least in my opinion) in Mauss’ text that he did not see fit to dwell on and which did not give rise to subsequent comment from Firth, Lévi-Strauss, or Sahlin. This silence went unbroken until Annette Weiner’s publications. Here is the point in question. In a note, referring to Boas, Mauss indicates that the Kwakiutl had two kinds of coppers:

The most important ones that do not go outside of the family and that can only be broken to be recast, and certain others that circulate intact, that are of less value, and that seem to serve as satellites for the first kind. The possession of this secondary kind of copper object doubtless corresponds among the Kwakiutl to that of the titles of nobility and second-order ranks with whom they travel, passing from chief to chief, from family to family, between the generations and the sexes. It appears that the great titles and the great copper objects at the very least remain immovable within the clans and the tribes. Moreover, it might be difficult for it to be otherwise.

In addition to coppers there are other valuables which do not leave the family. “The large abalone shells, the shields that are covered with these shells ... the blankets themselves that also bear emblems, covered with faces, eyes, and animal and human figures that are woven and embroidered on them.” Each of these objects and tokens of wealth has, “as in the Trobriand Islands, its individuality, its name, its qualities, its power.” Among the precious named objects are also male and female noble titles, privileges, dances, and the like. These sacred items are transmitted from one generation to the next through marriage and inheritance. They leave the clan to return to it, since the “privileges” are ceded by a
father-in-law to his son-in-law, who hands them on in turn to his son. Thus the privilege ceded to the son-in-law returns with the grandson to the original clan. Hence Mauss' comment:

It is even incorrect to speak in this cases of transfer. They are loans rather than sales or true abandonment of possessions. Among the Kwakiutl a certain number of objects, although they appear at the potlatch, cannot be disposed of. In reality these pieces of "property" are sacra that a family divests itself of only with great reluctance, and sometimes never.111

These sacred things, these valuables constitute as a whole a sort of "magical dowry"112 for each family. The objects themselves seem to be the direct source of the clan's wealth. Not only do they produce it in abundance, but they attract wealth from outside. "[Coppers] have a power of attraction that is felt by other copper objects, just as wealth attracts wealth, or dignities bring honours in their train, as well as the possession of spirits and fruitful alliances - and vice versa."113

Where does this power, this capacity to produce and to attract wealth come from? The answer is simple: from the fact that these things are "divine": they are gifts from spirits or the gods to men, and the spirits or the gods continue to dwell in them and to act on the humans who now own them because they received them from their ancestors or from the clan's founding hero, who received them from a spirit.

Mythology affirms the continuity and the identity of a spiritual presence or essence flowing from the gods or spirits who originally gave these sacred items to the items themselves and to the humans who now own them because they received them from more or less legendary ancestors reputed to have been the first recipients and the first donors. The important coppers

are "the flat, divine things" of the household. Often the myth identifies them all, the spirits that have given the copper objects, their owners, and the copper objects themselves. It is impossible to distinguish what makes the strength of spirit in one and wealth in the other: the copper object speaks, and grumbles. It demands to be given away, to be destroyed; it is covered with blankets to keep it warm, just as the chief is buried under the blankets that he is to share out.114

Of course, Mauss does not personally believe that the big coppers were made by the gods. He refers to Rivet's work on pre-Columbian gold work (published in 1923 in the Journal des américanistes), regretting that he left out the northwest American copper industry, which is still not well known.115 The native copper came from Copper River and was melted down elsewhere. Mauss suggested that the Tsimshian and Kwakiutl aristocracies most probably had something to do with possession of the secret of melting down and extracting copper and the control of the copper trade. But he did not pursue his analysis of the real conditions of copper production and trade. In fact, as a rule, Mauss does not concern himself with the relations men entertain in the course of producing things, only with those formed between men by the circulation of the things they produce. He therefore simply tells us that the most valuable of these coppers were extremely rare and regarded as gifts from the gods to be hoarded. The other, more numerous coppers circulated in potlatches and were regarded, as he so nicely puts it, as "satellites for the first kind."

Finally, the world Mauss describes is a magical or enchanted world (he uses the word féerique)116 in which precious objects continually circulate through series of potlatches and return-potlatches, gravitating around things more valuable still, sacred things which do not move, which remain within the clan where the gods are said to have deposited them. These immovable objects are the embodiments of spirits, spirits which are things, things which are spirits. "They are alive and move autonomously, and inspire other coppers to do so."117

The effect of religious beliefs and representations is clearly visible. They propose an interpretation of the world and of human institutions in which, when all causes and origins have at last been explained, things have taken the place of humans, the objects have become the subjects, objects manufactured and exchanged by human beings have become objects made by gods and freely given, out of generosity, to a few distant ancestors of the people living today, preserved in memory, raised to the rank of heroes.

We know that religious beliefs not only are part of this world, but in part make this world. They do this in such a way that they efface another part of it, by replacing real humans with imaginary duplicates, stand-ins who act in their stead. But Mauss says nothing of this. Nor does he linger over the distinction he himself made between family treasures, the immovable sacra, and the other precious objects which move through the potlatch circuit. The first, he says, are owned in common by clans and families, and as such, it seems obvious to him that they must remain in place, inalienable. For Mauss, then, "inalienable" means "non-exchangeable." But having opposed these two categories of goods, a few pages later he seems to annul this opposition without giving his reasons:
All in all, when one considers both the copper objects and the other permanent forms of wealth that are likewise an object of hoarding and of alternating potlatches, masks, talismans, etc. — all are mingled together as regards use and effect. Everything holds together, everything is mixed up together. Things possess a personality, and personalities are in some way the permanent things of the clan. Titles, talismans, copper objects, and the spirits of the chiefs are both homonyms and synonyms of the same nature and performing the same function.\textsuperscript{118}

These are fine, even superb, formulas, but the fact that objects, precious, hoarded, or circulating in potlatches, have personalities or souls, is no license to confound them, and especially not to confound the functions they fulfill in each case. The problem of why certain things are more valuable than others because they are sacred and why, because they are sacred, they do not enter into the potlatch remains unexplained. Even if an object may, over its lifetime, pass from one category to the other, first hoarded and later given in potlatch (or the converse), over and beyond the fate of this object, there remains the question of why, in the production and reproduction of these societies, of society in general, there are two permanently distinct, clearly separate functions to be discharged, two functions which entail the appearance of two categories of precious objects which, as categories, are equally and always distinct. That, over its lifetime, an object can move from one category to the other is a very interesting point which I will analyze later. But the fact that it is immovable or immobilized for a time in one category, and always on the move once it enters the other category is the best proof that the functions it fulfills at various times in its life cannot be confounded.

It seems that here we are nearing the limits of Mauss to provide a theoretical explanation of the facts he was analyzing. Further on, when dealing with the same problem, the interpretation of the vaygu'a, the precious objects circulated in the kula, those far-flung intertribal exchange cycles described by Malinowski, we will encounter the same limits. But before attempting to elucidate the nature of these and the reasons for them, I would like to say that the limits of Mauss' theory cannot be explained, as certain Marxist authors would have it, by his having adopted Boas' descriptions without realizing that the latter was describing Kwakiutl society "in the image of his own society, at a time when the capitalistic ethic encouraged speculation on the stock market, a society driven by individualism and profit."\textsuperscript{9119}

More recently, when invited to comment on an article by Marie Mauzé, which is a solid, well-balanced assessment of Boas' work situating it clearly in its historical context,\textsuperscript{120} Meillassoux reoffends and again accuses Mauss of having " rashly endorsed Boas" and in so doing endorsed the liberal economic ideology that animated him and led him to "be so seriously mistaken in his interpretation of the potlatch." He alleges that Mauss, by his lack of rigor and his prejudged ideas, contributed to "derailing economic research in anthropology for a long time."\textsuperscript{121}

This depiction of a Mauss mystified by liberal capitalist ideology is deeply flawed and a caricature of what a critical analysis of a complex and powerful work should be; Mauss' work cannot be reduced to a few quotations which provide a cheap confirmation of the critic's pedantic presuppositions. In reality, Mauss' attitude is just the opposite. Despite his admiration for Boas and his even greater respect for Malinowski, because both were field men whose rich works proved the superiority of "descriptive sociology," Mauss greeted with great critical caution the interpretations these authors advanced of the facts they had observed directly. I will cite a few examples.

While the structures of capitalism are complex, its rules are simple and clearly different from (and even contradictory to) those governing the social systems analyzed by Mauss. The capitalist system is presented as the most highly developed system of commodity production of all time. It is based on the principle of private ownership of the means of production and of consumption, on money, and on the selling and buying of the intellectual and/or manual labor involved in the process of the production and circulation of commodities. The mainspring of capitalism, too, is simple: the desire to make money with money,\textsuperscript{122} which implies transforming money into capital, which is in turn invested in the process of the production and circulation of commodities. The use-value of a commodity, be it a material or an immaterial one, its usefulness in other words, is important only insofar as it is the indispensable support for its exchange-value and thereby the means, the instrument of enhancing capital.

But how does Mauss feel about capitalism? Let us not forget that the "Essai sur le don" was written only shortly after the end of the First World War and the Bolshevik victory in Russia. Nor should we forget that Mauss was a socialist and politically committed to reforming capitalist society, that he was a regular contributor to the newspaper L'Humanité, before it was taken over by the communists. Now the reform he suggests — we will return to this in the closing chapter of this book — is actually a forerunner of the
social-democratic program which combines a market economy and state-socialism. He criticizes communism as being "as harmful to [the individual] and to society as the egoism of our contemporaries and the individualism of our laws." And he condemns Bolshevism because it relies on violence to promote social advancement. It goes without saying that we do not recommend that any dismantlement of the law should take place. The principles of law that govern the market, purchase and sale, which are the indispensable condition for the formation of capital, must and can subsist side by side with new principles and more ancient ones. These ancient principles to which we need to return are gift-giving and "noble expenditures," by which people in other societies than our own acceded to wealth and power. "It is our Western societies who have recently made man an 'economic animal' ... For a very long time man was something different, and he has not been a machine for very long, made complicated by a calculating machine." Ultimately we find ourselves in a situation in which a whole section of the law, that relating to industrialists and businessmen, is nowadays at odds with morality. The economic prejudices of the people, the producers, arise from their firm determination to follow the thing they have produced, and from the strong feeling they have that their handiwork is resold without their having had any share of the profit.

To the ancient principle that the wealthy should nobly share their wealth, Mauss proposes to add and develop the new principle of a "State socialism," the need for which is obvious if we accept that it is not enough that the community merely pay the worker for his services. It "owes him ... a certain security in life, against unemployment, sickness, old age, and death." In light of this it is hard to accuse Mauss of having been, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a blind follower of "economic liberalism."

Let us therefore come back to the essential, which is not only to show that Mauss remained to a certain extent aloof from Boas' thinking, but above all that, in striving to interpret the reported facts, he even ventured to challenge the Western concepts of economics and the West's summary views of the economic history of mankind.

One needs only to read Mauss to realize that he was lucid about the limits of the material collected by Boas and those who preceded and followed him. "The attention of Boas and his companions on the Jesup Expedition was focused on the material aspects of civilization, on linguistics and mythological literature ... The juridical and economic analysis, as well as the demography, either remains to be carried out or at least to be supplemented." In matters of economy and law, he regarded the old Russian, German, French, and English authors he had read, whose works dated from before 1870, as "the best ... The dates of these works impart definitive authority to them." He regretted that too little was known about "social morphology" (today we would say, the social organization of these societies), about the nature of the groups that comprise these societies (clans, secret societies, and so on), and he argued that this should be looked into "before time runs out." He uses the term "feudal classes" to describe these tribal aristocracies, a Eurocentric expression used by most authors (before Marc Bloch) whether liberal or Marxist, Western or Eastern, to describe societies governed by various forms of aristocracy. All were readily dubbed "feudal" or "quasi-feudal." Mauss even adds a "general remark" in his notes, which is very important, to my mind, inasmuch as it shows that he was aware that he did not know enough to understand the relations between the thing given at a potlatch and its owner; this is the nodal point of his work, where we measure his strengths and his limitations.

A general remark: we know fairly accurately how and why, and during which ceremonies, expenditure and destruction are the means of passing on goods in the American Northwest. However we are still badly informed about the forms assumed by the act of passing on things, particularly copper objects. This question should be the subject of an investigation. The little we know is extremely interesting and certainly denotes the link between property and its owners.

All of these passages show just how aware Mauss was of the shortcomings of Boas' work and the other sources he had used, but they do not yet speak to the heart of his concerns, namely the critique of Boas' own interpretation of the facts he was reporting. This is truly where we measure not only Mauss' critical circumspection, but also his effort to construct an alternate theory, another theoretical interpretation of the facts reported by Boas.

First of all, concerning the word "potlatch" itself, it seemed to him that "neither the idea nor the nomenclature behind the use of this term have in the languages of the Northwest the kind of preciseness that is afforded them in the Anglo-Indian 'pidgin' that has Chinook [i.e. the trading language used between Indians and Europeans] as its basis." Next, after having examined Boas' glossaries, he notes that "it seems that even the words 'exchange' and 'sale' are
foreign to the Kwakiutl language.”135 But that is not his main criticism. This comes paradoxically at the end of a long note in which Mauss has taken the trouble to copy out the famous page in which Boas wrote: “The economic system of the Indians of the British colony is largely based on credit, as much as that of civilized peoples.”136 And Mauss comments: “Boas has written nothing better on the potlatch.” But he quickly adds: “By correcting the terms ‘debt’, ‘payment’, ‘reimbursement’, ‘loan’, and replacing them with such terms as ‘presents given’ and ‘presents returned’, terms that Boas moreover ends up by using himself, we have a fairly exact idea of how the notion of credit functions in the potlatch.”137

By correcting, and especially by replacing the terms used by Boas, Mauss carries out a theoretical recentering which leads him not only to question economists’ concepts and their simplistic views of the economic history of mankind, but to become aware of those limits he himself is unable to overcome, of the point at which his own movement is arrested, where his thinking runs aground, comes to a standstill, as it were:

Several times we have seen how far this whole economy of the exchange-through-gift lay outside the bounds of the so-called natural economy [not having exchange and/or commerce], that of utilitarianism [i.e. limited to the exchange of materially useful things]. All these very considerable phenomena of the economic life of all peoples ... and all these important vestiges of those traditions in societies close to our own, or of our own customs, fall outside the schemes normally put forward by those rare economists who have wished to compare the various types of known economies.138

Mauss goes on to say that he joins his efforts with those of Malinowski, who devoted “an entire study to ‘exploding’ current doctrines concerning ‘primitive’ economy.”139 But Mauss feels both that Malinowski’s criticism does not go far enough in demolishing these doctrines and that the theoretical analysis he himself developed as an alternative is not really satisfying.

However we can go even farther than we have gone up to now. One can dissolve, jumble up together, colour and define differently the principal notions that we have used. The terms that we have used – present and gift – are not themselves entirely exact. We are unable, however, to find others. These concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast: liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, and luxury, as against savings, interest, and utility – it would be good to put them into the melting pot once more.140

As an example, he takes the interpretation of the vaygu’a, precious articles that circulate in the kula cycle between the Trobriand Islands and the other islands of northeast New Guinea, which I will analyze in a moment.

Lastly, it is no accident that all of the theoretical difficulties cluster around the interpretation of the nature of the precious objects which circulate in gift-exchanges and whose mode of circulation, which may seem strange to us, needs elucidating. Most of these objects are material items whose value does not reside solely in the scarcity of their matter – mother-of-pearl, copper, bone, jade, feathers – or in the labor expended to manufacture and enhance them. The choice of material and the labor invested all count, of course, but less than a certain immaterial reality present in the objects. This reality is imaginary. Its content is comprised of ideas and symbols which endow it with a social power; this power is then used by individuals and groups to act upon each other, in order either to establish new social relationships or to reproduce old ones.

In no case can the imaginary, immaterial content of the things given be reduced to the mere presence of the giver in the thing given. To be sure, it is because the things which are given “are not completely separated” from their owner that they take part of his being with them and that, through these things, persons form bonds, commit themselves to each other. The relations established are “personal,” the obligations are between people, and the thing given is the token of the obligations they have contracted. And yet we cannot stop at this level, where the obligation to give flows from the fact that giving creates obligations, which immediately sets in motion a circle of mutual obligations since consenting to receive creates an obligation to give in return, to “pay back,” and so on. For while a man can choose to give to one person rather than to another, or to receive from one rather than another, no one in these societies – if he wants to go on existing, that is reproducing himself while reproducing his relations with others – can decide to cease giving and receiving. Behind individuals and their relationships lies another reality, which is social, impersonal, and objective, and which impinges on everyone at every moment, relentlessly.

Mauss saw this, recognized it, and expressed it in one of the few texts in which he attempts to delve beyond the imaginary and symbolic aspects of things that are given in search of an objective reality which cannot be reduced to these imaginary realities, a necessity which cannot be reduced to subjective and intersubjective conscious data, a necessity which could be the source of these other realities.
and which would explain their existence. Speaking of the “system of gift-exchange” in Melanesian and Polynesian societies, he writes:

Material and moral life, and exchange, function within it in a form that is both disinterested and obligatory. Moreover, this obligation is expressed in a mythical and imaginary way or, one might say, symbolic and collective. It assumes an aspect that centres on the interest attached to the things exchanged. These are never completely detached from those carrying out the exchange. The mutual ties and alliance that they establish are comparatively indissoluble. In reality this symbol of social life—the permanence of influence over the things exchanged—serves merely to reflect somewhat directly the manner in which the subgroups in these segmented societies, archaic in type—and constantly enmeshed with one another, feel that they owe everything to one another.¹⁴¹

The objective obligation for the component groups of archaic societies to exchange with each other in order to exist was, according to Mauss, expressed “somewhat directly,” but in an imaginary or symbolic manner (which I do not regard as being the same thing), by the fact that “the objects exchanged are never completely separated” from their owners. However, Mauss tells us nothing about why this obligation should take a mythic form except to say that this is what people believe. Furthermore, the obligation for individuals and groups to “exchange” in order to exist socially is certainly not typical of only segmentary or even more generally archaic societies. But above all, if the objects exchanged in gift-giving have a soul, they are not alone in this: sacred objects, too, have a soul, and theirs is even “stronger” because gods, spirits, illustrious ancestors, who are greater than human beings, dwell and act in these objects. And yet these sacred objects, which enjoy an additional portion of soul with respect to valuables that are given, are in general neither given nor exchanged.

Mauss should therefore have asked himself: why, of all these objects endowed with a soul, can those that are in greatest supply be given and circulate between individuals and groups “without ever being completely separable” from their original owners, whereas the others, the most valuable, the most sacred, do not circulate but remain immobilized in the clan and the family treasure? And as these two categories of objects exist in the “segmentary” societies he studied, it may be concluded that segmentation, the division of society into subgroups which are “constantly enmeshed with one another, and feel that they owe everything to one another,” in no way implies that they give everything to one another.

For him it was obvious that sacred things are not alienable, and he kept his questions and reservations for the problem of why those things that were given and exchanged were not done so completely. In focusing his analysis on a single category of objects (and phenomena), he failed to see that it could not be separated from the other, complementary, category, whose very existence was a necessary predicate for its own.

By excluding sacred objects from his field of analysis, Mauss may have unintentionally created the illusion that exchange was the be-all and end-all of social life, thereby preparing the way for Lévi-Strauss, who further simplified matters in his well-known formula which reduces society to the threefold exchange of women, wealth, and words.

In reality, as I will attempt to show later, no kind of exchange whatsoever fully accounts for a society’s functioning or fully explains the totality of the social. Alongside the “things”—goods, services, and persons—which are exchanged stands everything that is not given, not sold, and these are also the object of institutions and specific practices which are an irreducible component of total society and help explain that it functions as a whole.

This brings me to distance myself somewhat from Mauss’ description of the potlatch as a total social fact. However, in no way do I contest the importance of this notion, first introduced into the social sciences by Mauss and which brought him well-deserved renown. Mauss distinguishes two degrees, two classes of social phenomena, according to whether they “involve the totality of society and its institutions (potlatch, clans confronting one another, tribes visiting one another), [or] in other cases only a very large number of institutions, particularly when these exchanges and contracts rather concern the individual.”¹⁴²

It is probable that the potlatch concerns all groups of society and in this sense may draw the whole society in its train. And it is certain that the potlatch or the kula are even “more than systems of institutions divided, for example, into religion, law, economy, etc.”¹⁴³ they are “features” of social systems in their entirety, since, if we apply these analytical categories to such phenomena, we “dissect them producing rules of law, myths, values and prices,” and thus risk passing over the unity, the “movement of the whole.”¹⁴⁴ But neither the societies of northwest America nor even less those of northeast New Guinea can be completely summed up or expressed by the potlatch or the kula, even if the “economy and [the] moral” of both are deeply marked by them.

What Mauss did see clearly, however, was that, once the logic of
potlatch is set in motion, once a system of agonistic gift-exchange is put in place and embraces most of the groups comprising a society, nothing seems capable of stopping it. Gradually everything becomes the occasion for potlatch: life, marriage, death. Each gift supposes, presupposes other gifts, in an endless chain which seems to be self-driven.

At this point, for the members of these societies, individuals as well as groups, caught up in this perpetual-motion machine from which there is no escape (except significantly, for a few individuals and groups whose duties and position place them beyond rivalry, such as the families of chiefs who claim to be descended from the gods), it is as if the valuables given and received in potlatch (and the potlatches themselves) had a life of their own which endlessly moves them on, catching up the human beings as they go, turning them from subjects into objects and leaving them dominated by this round of wealth that they themselves set turning.

There is nothing out of the way in these processes. The same is true of our capitalist market societies, where wealth consists mainly of monetary signs and where the money accumulated is, in the last analysis, always the product of production, followed by sale and purchase of commodities of all kinds. These may be material or immaterial; they may have to do with means of production, of consumption or destruction, with people’s living or their labor, with the services of a priest or a prostitute; but the specific, concrete reality of each commodity is important only insofar as its use underpins an exchange-value and this is transformed into money which generates money, in other words into capital.

We see the same type of phenomena every day in our own societies. Once, at some point in history, the machinery is set in motion which enables and necessitates the accumulation of capital, the continual transformation of commodities and money into capital and vice versa, it is no longer possible to halt the circulation of commodities and money for long, and it is impossible to arrest it forever. The system reproduces itself “on its own.” It is as if money circulated by itself and engendered capital and commodities which in turn produced commodities and capital. We find ourselves, as Sraffa says, “in a world where commodities produce commodities by means of commodities.”145 Marx has said the final word on “it is as if.” But the two worlds, the world of gifts and that of commodities, are in fact comparable. To the fetishism of the objects given corresponds that of commodities, and to the fetishism of sacred objects corresponds that of money functioning as capital, as value endowed with its own power to engender value, as money capable of engendering money. This is the mythology of capital.

But we must take the comparison further and examine the difference between the forms of consciousness which exist in an economy dominated by gift-exchange and in a market-driven economy where intellectual and manual labor are also commodities.146 In societies dominated by the obligation to give (and in the case of potlatch societies by the obligation to outgive), objects seem ultimately to take the place of persons, objects behave like subjects. In societies dominated by the obligation to sell and to make money, to make a profit by competing in the sale of goods and services, people are, up to a point, treated like objects. In both instances, however, an identical process has been at work: in each case the real relations people entertain with the objects they produce, exchange (or keep) have vanished, disappeared from their consciousness, and other forces, other, this time imaginary, actors have replaced the human beings who originally produced them.

Whether the sacred things that are not given or the valuables that are given appear to have an in-dwelling spirit which drives them, or the commodities have an exchange-value, a price which fluctuates independently of conscious awareness and the control of those who produce or consume them, we are in either case in the presence of man-made worlds, but ones which have become detached from man and are populated by phantasmatic doubles, duplicates: these are often benevolent and succor man, often they crush him, but in all events they dominate him.

I have shown elsewhere,147 and I will return to this demonstration in the final chapter, that this production of phantasmic beings who dominate humans is the remote origin of classes and castes, and that it explains why people are willing to work for or to share the product of their labor with those among them who seem closer than they to the gods, with the spirits who bring plenty or misfortune, with priests, with chiefs who are favored by or descended from the gods. In these societies dominated by personal relations, such relationships are no more transparent than the impersonal relations prevailing in the market-based and state-bureaucratic societies described by Max Weber. Their opacity is simply different; for between individuals and groups stand the intercessors who populate their beliefs: gods, spirits, ancestors — benevolent or aggressive, nurturing or cannibalistic – to whom constant prayers must be said, offerings and even sacrifices made. It is hard for an anthropologist to believe that, in societies in which groups and individuals entertain direct relations and where much of the exchange is not conducted for commercial purposes, these relations are any less mystified or
more “transparent” simply because they are personal. And yet that is what Marx suggested several times in his Capital.\textsuperscript{148} I do not follow him on this point.

I come back once again to the imaginary and symbolic content of objects given, of the objects of the gifts and counter-gifts. In order for “things to work,” there must be in what is given something more than a gift of oneself to the other. The gift must contain something which appears to the giver as to the initial receiver, and to those who will subsequently receive it, and therefore to all members of the society – who must therefore share this representation from the outset – as a medium, the possession of which, even if it is only temporary, is necessary if one is to continue to exist, to produce or to reproduce social relations which enable individuals as well as groups, clans, families, brotherhoods, secret societies, and so on to continue as part of their society. The thing given must therefore – this much Mauss had foreseen and suggested without analyzing it further – contain more than the “constant influence,” the presence of the man who gave it. It must contain something more, something which seems to all members of society to be indispensable to their existence and which must circulate among them in order that each and all may go on living.

Now this something which the objects given must contain, is shared with sacred objects which, on the contrary, do not circulate. This something Mauss called a soul, a spirit, a source of wealth and abundance, of life. And we here come to the heart of the problem. How are we to interpret these valuable gifts which circulate while acknowledging their kinship with sacred objects which do not circulate? I will develop this point at length in the second part of the book and for the moment merely outline my hypothesis.

The precious objects which circulate in gift-exchanges can do so only because they are substitutes twice over: substitutes for sacred objects and substitutes for human beings. Like the former, they are inalienable; but unlike sacred objects, which do not circulate, these do. Not only in potlatches, in (competitive) exchanges of wealth for wealth, but also on the occasion of marriages, deaths, initiations; in these instances they function as substitutes for human beings, “compensation” for a life (marriage) or a death (that of an allied warrior or even an enemy killed in battle).

While they are substitutes for sacred objects and for the supernatural beings that inhabit them, they are also substitutes for human beings, for their substance, their bones, their flesh, their attributes, titles and ranks, for their possessions, material and immaterial. It is for this reason that they are able to take the place of humans and things in all circumstances in which it is necessary to displace them, or to replace them so as to produce new social relations of power, kinship, initiation, and so forth, between individuals and between groups, or more simply to reproduce the old ones, to prolong, or to preserve them. This twin nature of valuable objects makes them hard to define and therefore to think, in our world in which things are separated from persons. But it also enables us to understand why these objects functioned as currencies, without having all the attributes, and that they often became a currency by shedding a great portion of their former functions and becoming an impersonal means of developing impersonal commercial relations, an instrument which circulates only once it has been stamped with the seal of the institution representing the community as a whole and which is the source of power and law: the state.\textsuperscript{149}

The reader will understand the necessity of the meandering path he has had to follow in order to understand Mauss’ analyses of the potlatch. It was not simply a question of revealing the profusion and riches of a complex text, laden with important facts tucked away in notes and continually opening onto new questions; my primary aim was to make it understood that the ethnographic phenomenon that Mauss thrust into the foreground is the potlatch more than the kula, the other ethnographic phenomenon he favored. It is because the potlatch appeared to him as both the extreme and the supreme form of total prestation that he made it the starting point for his study of the kula and other similar phenomena; and it is for the same reason that he then turned to ancient history in an attempt to reinterpret the ancient customs and economies of Europe, striving as he did so to work back to “Roman law that predates the era,”\textsuperscript{150} before the appearance of the distinction between personal rights and real rights.\textsuperscript{151}

For the same reason, he inquired into Celtic custom, and into Germanic law, which seems to have been kept alive by the peasantry throughout the feudal era, since for Mauss, “Germanic civilization ... in earlier times had developed to the extreme the entire system of potlatch, but in particular, the complete system of gifts.”\textsuperscript{152} Likewise, he turned to ancient Hindu law because “[a]ncient India immediately after the Aryan colonization was in fact a land of the potlatch twice over.”\textsuperscript{153} Twice over, inasmuch as, according to Mauss, the Aryans had practiced potlatch before their arrival in India, and as the two major sets of tribes that made up the basis of the indigenous populations (the Tibeto-Burmese and the Munda tribes) were also familiar with the practice.

As the potlatch paradigm was the centerpiece of his work, it was
here that the theoretical difficulties collected. And it is therefore here that the strengths and limitations of Mauss' approach and concepts can be best seized and brought to light. It became evident to me that everything hinged on the interpretation given the nature of the precious objects that circulate in gift-exchange, and that Mauss found his path blocked because he did not seek to bring together and to think, within the same theoretical framework, the sacred objects which do not circulate and the precious objects which do. This criticism does not aim to deny the immense value of his work. It does not seek to destroy but to deconstruct, in order to reconstruct and complete it, either by pursuing the same lines of reasoning whenever possible, or by shifting the problems so as to open new perspectives and to continue to advance.

We cannot however leave the potlatch without mentioning two criticisms that have been addressed to Mauss. One seems to me to be founded, the other somewhat less. The first criticizes him for having glossed over the existence of elements of exploitation in the relations between aristocracy, clan nobles, and the mass of commoners. He uses the term "feudal" to designate this type of society. He speaks of "princes," "vassals," and "their tenants." Elsewhere he even evokes "feudal classes" (very different from Western feudalism), but he goes on to say that these were cut across by clans and brotherhoods.

He even speaks of "cross-class" potlatches, but does not elaborate. Mauss was not the only one to draw on the vocabulary of Western feudalism to describe exotic societies ruled by aristocracies. This Eurocentric view was common to all sorts of authors, proponents of Marxism as well as those with a more classic view of history. But his vocabulary is not the issue: Mauss is criticized for having said nothing about the contribution of the labor, staples, and precious goods demanded by clan chiefs from members of non-noble lineages which comprised the clan base. But where did these chiefs and this aristocracy come from? It seems that one was a noble or one was a chief because of the genealogical position of one's lineage in the clan. For instance, the chief belonged to the lineage of the direct descendents of the elder son of the founding ancestor of the clan. The other lineages, whatever their kinship with the chiefly lineage, comprised the mass of commoners. It was the chief who gave the potlatch on behalf of his clan and who requisitioned both the food for the feasts and the valuables that he gave to the chiefs of the invited clans.

But in addition to the mass of commoners, these societies also had slaves, and these, too, Mauss hardly mentions. He simply alludes to the fact that the value of Tlingit coppers was measured in slaves.

that sometimes during a potlatch slaves were put to death, or that a potlatch might be given to ransom a captive kinsman, thereby saving him from slavery while restoring the family "name." In short, relations of domination and exploitation did indeed exist in these societies, and this has been emphasized by several authors. It seems to me that Mauss' silence can be explained to a great extent if one looks at the general conclusion to his essay.

In his conclusion, Mauss on one hand confesses that he did not have the time "to try to perceive at this time the morphological foundations for all the facts we have indicated," which means that he had not fully grasped the inner workings of the groups engaging in potlatch. But, on the other hand, he stresses the idea that twentieth-century Western society, although obliged to adopt new principles in order to move forward, would also do well to come back to certain earlier principles, and in particular to the practice of "noble expenditures." What does the noble-ness of an expenditure signify for Mauss? This is expenditure on the part of nobles, but which is governed by a notion of interest and utility which does not present itself as it functions in our own minds.

If some equivalent reason animates the Trobriand or American Indian chiefs or once motivated generous Hindus, and Germanic or Celtic nobles, as regards their gifts and expenditure, it is not the cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker and the capitalist ... They hoard, but in order to spend, to place under an obligation, to have their own "liege men." On the other hand, they carry on exchange, but it is above all in luxury articles ... or things that are consumed immediately, as at feasts.

And we understand what Mauss intended when we read his description of the rich Westerner: "His expenditures on luxury, on art, on outrageous things, on servants — do not these make him resemble the nobles of former times or the barbarian chiefs whose customs we have described?"

I believe that it is this desire to see "the rich ... come back to considering themselves — freely and also by obligation — as the financial guardians of their fellow citizens" that kept him from examining in greater detail the relations between the "feudal class" of northwest American societies and the mass of commoners.

The second criticism addressed to Mauss was that he had not been clearly aware of the abnormal character of the potlatches Boas had observed at the beginning of the century, a potlatch that had "gone mad," growing more and more aggressive in the wake of the
upheavals spawned by the European presence and the pressures it placed on the northwest Indian societies.

The hypothesis that the potlatch observed by Boas was a profoundly altered version has long been argued by ethnologists like Barnett, and by Curtis before him, and it now seems substantiated on all points.

Let us take a brief look at the drastic changes which occurred in these societies, in particular among the Kwakiutl. Their first contacts with Europeans date back to the end of the eighteenth century, around 1780. At that time the Kwakiutl comprised some 20 tribes, who earned their livelihood from fishing, hunting, and gathering. Their economy and technology were characterized by a very high degree of productivity. In winter, each tribe assembled into a town divided into quarters, each one of which was inhabited by a numaym, a kin group that Boas, with some reservations, called a “clan,” but which bore a closer resemblance to what Lévi-Strauss later termed “houses.” Each numaym was at the same time a residential, an economic, and a political unit, since the group held fishing, hunting, and gathering rights in common, and possessed immaterial wealth, blazons, ranks, and so forth. A certain number of lineages within the numaym were considered to be noble, and it was they who represented their clans at potlatches.

Over the nineteenth century, three series of events profoundly altered the structure of these societies. The population fell by 75 percent owing to the introduction of new diseases and epidemics. The hunting-and-fishing economy (which favored the accumulation of huge surpluses) gave way to a colonial, trade-based economy which induced the importation of large quantities of manufactured goods, thus laying the foundations for the emergence of a class of nouveaux riches, capable of competing for status and power with the traditional chiefs. Last of all, the Europeans put a halt to tribal warfare, stopping the capture and sale of slaves; the society found itself with numerous vacant titles and ranks, and growing numbers of newly enriched men whose wealth gave them access to the potlatch arena from which they had traditionally been excluded.

Prior to these changes, the purpose of the potlatch seems to have been to validate the public transmission of the ranks and privileges already acquired. A chief desiring to pass on his rank to his son would invite the chiefs of the other numaym of the tribe and publicly distribute valuables and staples, the acceptance of which by the other chiefs was the equivalent of public recognition of the transmission of the title. Potlatches at that time were primarily an intratribal affair. To be sure sometimes two or three candidates might be vying

for the same title or function, and in this case potlatches of gifts and counter-gifts would determine the winner. But the potlatch had a much less antagonistic character, and it even seems that the highest positions during the pre-colonial epoch were transmitted outside the potlatch (a fact noted by Mauss).

It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the traditional structures underwent a change, and instead of serving mainly to validate acquired positions, the potlatch became a systematic mode of acceding to new positions, this occurring in the context of a large number of vacant positions and the growing power of the newly rich. According to Marie Mauzé, these alterations in the potlatch took two directions. First of all an increasingly marked individualization: the newly rich, with the help of their families and a few clients, took up the potlatch, whereas this had formerly been the purview of a chief backed by his entire clan, nobles and commoners together; and secondly, a radicalization of the competition: now whole tribes would come to grips in a context in which warfare was forbidden. A new hierarchy of tribes grew up based on wealth, while at the same time a society called the “order of eagles” was created which included “all those who were to be served first,” and where the former chiefs found themselves seated alongside the newly enriched.

It was in this context that the potlatch ran away, went mad (it is precisely this madness that Georges Bataille found so fascinating in the potlatch). European missionaries and government agents quickly became alarmed at these gift-giving contests, which they regarded as excessive, unbridled squandering. In 1884, potlatches were forbidden by a law presented as an amendment to the Indian Act of 1876. And it was in this context of European criticism and accusations aimed at the potlatch that Boas, pleading the case that the potlatch was not an irrational custom, wrote his famous text, cited and improved on by Mauss, to explain that the Indians were only doing as the Whites do, investing their capital and making it bear fruit, thereby ensuring the future of their children, and thus misrepresented the workings of the potlatch for a good cause. The Kwakiutl language has, it seems, two terms for gifts. The term yaquw applied to exchanges of practically equivalent gifts; the term p’asa meant something like “to give but to flatten at the same time, by crushing the name of a rival, of the receiver.” The upheavals of the nineteenth century may well have led to the multiplication of p’asa gift-exchanges to the detriment of yaquw giving.

Mauss probably did not take this historical context into account when analyzing the potlatch. Because he focused on the agonistic
character of the potlatch, he probably privileged a historically late and pathologized form of the institution. Yet Mauss was not unaware of the explosion of European goods in potlatches. We see him even copying the details of the worth of the famous lesaxalayo copper, belonging to "prince" Laqwigila, simply adding that Boas had "studied the way in which copper gains in value through a series of potlatches," but without expressing any surprise at the huge quantity of European manufactured goods (phonographs, sewing machines, wool blankets) on the list, and therefore at their value in dollars.¹⁶⁹

Indeed, Mauss seems to have been particularly sensitive, not to the chain of brutal transformations which occurred over the nineteenth century, but to the continuity of the potlatch, to the fact that, after two centuries of contact with Europeans, the Indians still did not transfer their wealth through the market but continued to do so "in the solemn form of the potlatch."¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Mauss stresses on several occasions the fact that the oldest documents are still the most valuable for reconstituting the logic of the potlatch, which concurs with the opinion held today. He even ventured to suggest that the potlatch, in its earliest form, was probably less agonistic and closer to the logic of total prestations, in other words to an exchange of equivalent gifts, than it was in Boas' day.¹⁷¹ This remark has manifestly escaped the attention of most critics, who, on the contrary, criticize Mauss for having too readily accepted Boas' interpretation of the potlatch.

The same problems will be encountered when we analyze the second ethnographic example of potlatch privileged by Mauss: the kula, practiced by the societies of northeast Papua New Guinea.

The kula (a Melanesian example of potlatch according to Mauss)

Let us now take a much more rapid look at the second major ethnographic example upon which Mauss built his theory, the Melanesian kula. "The kula," wrote Mauss, "is a sort of grand potlatch,"¹⁷² a "system of inter- and intra-tribal trade,"¹⁷³ which involves a large number of the island societies of northeast New Guinea. In 1925 Mauss had known Malinowski's early publications for several years, but he relies above all on his first major work, Argonauts of the Pacific, which appeared in 1922 in London. Mauss had read it at the time of publication and, in the "Essai sur le don," is unceasing in his praise for the author. This book, which is "one of the best volumes of descriptive sociology," deals precisely with "the subject that concerns us."¹⁷⁴ Mauss does not hesitate to write that, "in the present state of our observations and historical, juridical, and economic knowledge, it would be difficult to come across a custom of gift-through-exchange more clear-cut, complete, and consciously performed, and moreover better understood by the observer recording it than the one Malinowski found among the Trobriand people."¹⁷⁵ His book "shows the superiority of the observation of a true sociologist."¹⁷⁶

This admiration for Malinowski's fieldwork and for the fact that, on a more general theoretical level, he "devoted an entire study to 'exploding' current doctrines concerning 'primitive' economy," at the time also referred to as "natural" economies,¹⁷⁷ in other words economies not operating on the basis of commercial exchanges, currencies, and so on, did not prevent Mauss, who had spent years accumulating and comparing information on gift-exchanges in dozens of exotic or ancient societies, from writing: "Malinowski exaggerates the novelty of the facts he describes. First, the kula is in reality only an intertribal potlatch of a fairly common kind in Melanesia."¹⁷⁸ How then did Mauss interpret the data gathered and analyzed by Malinowski over the course of several years spent on the Trobriand island of Kiriwina?

The Trobrianders, Mauss says, "today are wealthy pearl fishermen, and, before the arrival of the Europeans, they were rich pottery manufacturers and makers of shell money, stone axes, and precious goods. They have always been good traders and bold navigators."¹⁷⁹ Mauss is aware that the kula is an ancient institution and he does not gloss over the changes forced on it by the introduction of European pearl-fishing. He is also aware that the kula exchanges exist side by side with another set of exchanges associated with marriage, festivals of the dead, and initiations, of which, he notes, "we still await from him [Malinowski] the description ... Consequently the description that we shall give is still only provisional."¹⁸⁰ We will see below that, precisely, in the Trobriand Islands, the kula operated (and still does) in a very special way, independently of the exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts connected with marriages, funerals, and initiations. Malinowski's kula, which set Mauss thinking, is therefore more an exception than the rule among the kula-ring societies.

Here is how Mauss describes the kula: "Kula trade is of a noble kind. It seems to be reserved for the chiefs. ... Trade is carried on in a noble fashion, apparently in a disinterested and modest way."¹⁸¹ Looking back on our analysis of the potlatch, we can understand that Mauss quickly saw an immediate likeness between kula and potlatch: exchanges carried on by chiefs, apparently disinterested
prediction has only partially come true. Not because the two economies have ceased to coexist (although the market economy has now taken the lead), but because tribal warfare has resumed on a very large scale, requiring more wealth given as “compensation”; and in order to get together the fee, a man must produce and sell increasing amounts; but to do so, peace must last at least a certain time. These societies today find themselves in the grip of new contradictions arising from the coexistence of local tribal powers, which are still quite strong, and a national state power lacking the capacity to intervene on the local level.

But the basis of these exchanges, despite the inflation and the rapid disappearance of pearl-shells, despite the injection of massive quantities of European currency and manufactured goods into these exchanges (Toyota trucks and the like), remains the pig. Not because it is the main source of protein, but because it continues to be used in marriage exchanges and in all other exchanges necessary for the reproduction of local social relations. The pig continues to be a substitute for persons. Pigs are given for a birth, a marriage, on the occasion of a death, and so on.

At the end of this analysis of moka, we find ourselves once more faced with the same problem, that of the nature of the valuables which circulate in ceremonial and competitive exchanges. Whether they are Maori taonga, Kwakiutl coppers, Trobriand wayu’u’a or Melpa pigs and pearl-shells, these objects are all to a varying degree substitutes for human beings. This will again be our starting point for analyzing things that are given, things that are kept, sacred things which, perhaps far from being simple substitutes for persons, are themselves seen as persons, but superhuman ones.

The reader has no doubt also been struck by the presence, in all of the phenomena I have reported, of two principles which combine to engender certain forms of exchange: a rule of right which asserts the inalienability of the ownership of certain objects, and another which authorizes the alienation of the possession, but only for certain purposes. We have thus seen that sacred objects are inalienable and must be kept and not given, whereas precious objects are given while being kept. We have also observed that in all these societies inalienability is based on or legitimized by the belief that there is present in the object a power, a spirit, a spiritual reality that binds it to the giver, and which accompanies the object wherever it goes. It seems to me that this presence is nothing other than the form taken by the inalienability of things in a world where men believe that visible realities are inhabited and controlled by invisible forces, beings who are greater than humans but who resemble them.

Has not humankind entertained an ambivalent attitude on this point from the beginning? Do men not know that objects do not move about of their own accord, without reason? But at the same time do they not do all they can to avoid knowing, to avoid seeing, to reject this knowledge? Why do they not want to know?

I will end the first part of this book by affirming my personal conviction that things do not move about without reason or of their own accord. My position is therefore not the “native” viewpoint. Nor is it that of Lévi-Strauss, who regards the notions of mana and bau as empty concepts which refer to unconscious operations of the mind. My position is that of Mauss, but only up to a certain point because I am unable to follow him to the end.

**Things do not move about without reason or of their own accord**

We have seen that a gift object does not move about without reason. When it does move, on the occasion of non-antagonistic gift-exchanges, its two-way transfer is the means of creating a two-way relation of reciprocal dependence which is known to entail a certain number of social consequences for the participants: obligations but also advantages. At the same time, when the exchanges are completed, both partners are once again balanced, since if they were of equal status before the initial gift, their equality is restored by the final counter-gift. Giving and giving in return the same object then is the simplest and the most direct way of producing dependence and solidarity while maintaining the individual’s status in a world where most social relations are produced and reproduced by creating bonds between persons. The gift followed by a counter-gift of the same object thus constitutes the basic molecule of all gift-exchange, the smallest move that can be made for this practise to have meaning.

But it has also become clear that, if the thing does not move about without reason, neither does it move of its own accord, Mauss and Polynesian beliefs notwithstanding. What sets the object in motion, what traces its path in advance, what causes it to leave and then return to its point of departure is the will of individuals and/or groups to produce (or to reproduce) among themselves social relationships which combine solidarity and dependence. Certainly this is not entirely a game, and behind it lie many necessities that are rooted in the social sphere, many social necessities. But man’s social being is more than the sum of his needs, of this and that social necessity, for the simple reason that human beings do not merely
live in their society and reproduce it, like other social animals; they
must produce society in order to live.

Let us come back to these two conclusions, which are in fact the
two sides of the same reality. Things that are given do not move
about without reason and do not move of their own accord. It goes
without saying that these “things” that are given are not necessarily
“things” in the sense of material objects having a cultural signif-
ance. The “thing” may also be a dance, a spell, a name, a human
being, support in a dispute or a war, and so forth. In short, as
Mauss emphasized, the category of “giveables” encompasses much
more than material objects, and I will say that it takes in everything
which can possibly be shared, a sharing which makes sense and
which can put someone else under obligation or create a debt. Of
course, the question of what object is given is never indifferent or
without significance. The nature of the object immediately testifies to
the intentions of the givers and the context of the giving: war or
peace, marriage alliance or perpetuation of a descent line, and so on.

Things do not move about of their own accord. What sets them in
motion and makes them circulate in one direction, then another, and
yet, another, is each time the will of individuals and groups to estab-
lish between themselves personal bonds of solidarity and/or depen-
dence. Now the will to establish these personal bonds expresses
more than the personal will of individuals and groups, and even
more than what comes under the heading of will, of personal liberty
(individual or collective). What is produced or reproduced through
the establishment of these personal bonds is all or part of the social
relations which constitute the foundations of the society and which
endow it with a certain overall logic that is also the source of the
social identity of the member groups and individuals. In short, what
appears in the goals pursued, the decisions taken, the actions volun-
tarily performed by the individuals and groups which make up a
given society is not only their personal wills but a-personal or im-
personal necessities having to do with the nature of their social rela-
tions, which spring up again and again in the process of producing
and reproducing them (whether relations of kinship, power, with the
gods and spirits of the dead).

Things therefore do not move about of their own accord; they are
always set in motion by human will, out this will is itself driven by
underlying forces, involuntary and impersonal necessities which are
constantly acting on individuals, on those who make decisions as
well as on those who obey them; through the actions of individuals
and groups, it is the social relations which are reproduced and once
more linked together, it is the whole of society which is re-created
and re-creates itself, and this occurs whatever form or degree of
awareness the actors may have individually and/or collectively of
these necessities.

Let us pause for a moment here and take stock. We can explain
why the gift of something is followed by a counter-gift of the same
thing or something equivalent without having recourse to the belief
that things are possessed by an in-dwelling soul, spirit, or power
which compels it to return to its point of departure. I therefore part
company with Mauss on this point and agree with Lévi-Strauss’ cri-
citicism. But neither does our explanation rely on the direct in-
tervention of “unconscious mental structures,” which by definition
can only be universal and timeless since they are present and operate
in every individual and in every people, whatever their context. Unlike
Lévi-Strauss, I have drawn on sociological as well as psychological
mechanisms; the realities and forces underlying movements of the
things given are social ones. They are not connected directly by
unconscious and universal structures of the mind but indirectly, by
means of specific social structures, which are therefore not present in
all forms of society.

This is not to say that the social is separable from the mental or
that it can exist independently and in a sense outside of thought. I
have shown elsewhere29 that a social relation (of kinship or power)
can only emerge, develop, be transmitted and reproduced because,
from the outset, it contains a mental or ideational (idée in French)
component, made up of conscious principles of operation, of rules
to be followed for its reproduction, of representations necessarily
associated with it, which found or challenge the legitimacy of its
production-reproduction in the eyes of the members of the society.
This mental component of social relationships exists at the outset
purely through and in individual and collective thought. It is there-
fore necessarily subservient to both the unconscious and the con-
scious structures of thought. To think is to establish relations
between various aspects of the real, and to discover, invent, and
imagine relations between these relations.

But to say that the social does not exist separately from thought is
not to say that the ultimate explanation of the social lies in the
“mind,” particularly in the unconscious structures of the mind. And
it is not to say that the social and the “mental,” conscious and
unconscious, can be explained only by the symbolic, although they
can always be reduced to it. For the mental realm, which arises in
the thought processes and through them, does not exist in the mind
alone. It is actively present in all of the social realities it engenders
and which embody it, that is to say which both materialize and
symbolize it at the same time. A kinship system cannot be reduced to
its mental components (descent and marriage rules, residence rules,
kin terms, and the like); it is present in every institution, in the cer-
emonies, in the bodily movements, in the objects through which it
gains a concrete social existence and which "symbolize" it. The sym-
bolic here makes the system visible, "communicates" it, but it is not
its ultimate source nor its basis.

I therefore diverge somewhat from Mauss' conclusions, without
necessarily feeling obliged to adhere to the theses of Lévi-Strauss.
But I stress that it is because I have undertaken to complete Mauss'
anthropological analysis that I have been able to point out its limita-
tions without being driven to the same impasse, without taking
indigenous representations of a society for the equivalent of those
constructed by an alien mind, striving to be scientific and critical,
and unable, on principle, to share these representations (even if it
must necessarily take them seriously and ultimately return and
explain them as well). Indeed it is readily understandable that if, to
this sociological base is added a system of magical-religious beliefs
in the presence in things of a soul, a spirit, a force which compels
them to act and to move about of their own accord, then it will look
as if the things themselves had the persons in tow, as thought, driven
by their spirit, by their own power, they felt compelled to return
more or less directly, more or less rapidly, to the person who first
owned them and gave them away.

From the moment most social relations in a society exist as and
through the creation of personal bonds, as relations between
persons, and from the moment these bonds are established by means
of exchanging gifts which themselves entail the transfer and shifting
of "realities," which can be of any kind (women, children, precious
objects, services) as long as they lend themselves to being shared, all
of the objective social relations which form the basis of a society
(the kinship system, political system, and so forth), together with the
intersubjective personal relations which embody them, can be
expressed and "materialized" by the exchange of gifts and counter-
gifts and by the movements, the trajectories followed by the
"objects" of these gift-exchanges.

And because gift-giving as a real practice is an essential com-
ponent of the production-reproduction of objective social relations and
of subjective and intersubjective personal relations which are the
mode of the former's concrete existence, it is simultaneously part of
both the form and the content of these relations. In this context, gift-
giving and the gifts given both re-present, signify and totalize the
social relations of which they are at once the instrument and the
symbol. And, as gifts are given by persons, and the objects given are
originally attached, then detached in order to be again attached to
persons, the gifts embody every bit as much the persons as their rela-
tions. It is in this sense and for these reasons that gift-exchange is
according to Mauss' superb expression - a "total social fact." It is
because it both contains and unites something which comes from
persons and something that is present in their relations that these are
totalized and symbolized in the giving and in the gifts which materi-
alisize this practice.

But add to this the belief that the things which are given have a
soul, that they are like persons and can act and move about by
themselves, and we can expect to find an entire series of transforma-
tions and metaphoricas of gift-giving and of the forms of indi-
vidual and collective consciousness associated with it. In such a world,
one can venture to say that "things" no longer exist, there are only
persons, sometimes in the guise of human beings and sometimes in
the guise of things. At the same time, the fact that human social rela-
tions (of kinship and power) must assume the shape of relations
between persons, intersubjective relations, is extended to the whole
universe. Nature, the entire universe, is now composed uniquely of
(human or non-human) persons and of relations between these
persons. The cosmos becomes the anthropomorphic extension of
humans and their society. The individual is connected to the whole
universe, which goes beyond his individual scope and which con-
tains and extends beyond his society as well. At the same time,
however, and conversely, the individual himself contains, in a
certain fashion, his whole society and the entire cosmos. The micro-
cosm of the individual contains the macrocosm which both encom-
passes and is encompassed by him. The part is the Whole, the Whole
is present in its entirety in each of its parts. Each of the two, the in-
dividual and the cosmos, in a sense mirrors the other, and any action
performed on one is believed to affect the other. The whole world,
humans included, has become "enchanted."

Thus, when in a society where the bulk of social relations takes
the form of personal relations it is prevailently believed that things
are also persons, then not only does gift-giving encapsulate some-
thing of the essence of these social relations, it amplifies and glorifies
their presence and their reality in the individual consciousness. Gift-
exchange amplifies their essence because the belief that things are
endowed with a soul extends this form of relations beyond the bound-
aries of society, imposing it on the whole cosmos, on all
objects and all relations that exist in the universe.

The practice of exchanging gifts is thus extended beyond the
world of humans and becomes a basic component of a practice that is religious, in other words, of the relations between humans and the spirits and gods who also inhabit the universe. Gift-giving in this case becomes sacrifice to the spirits and the gods, which Mauss designated as the fourth obligation founding gift-exchange. Belief in the soul of things amplifies, but also glorifies persons and social relations because it makes them sacred. For if things have a soul, it is because supernatural powers, gods or spirits, normally invisible, dwell in them, and with them circulate among men, attaching themselves sometimes to one, sometimes to another, and always attaching men to themselves. But, when it sacralizes objects, persons, and relations, belief in the soul of things not only amplifies and glorifies a universe comprised of personal relations, it alters the nature, the appearance and the meaning of these relations. It effects a metamorphosis. Instead of appearing to themselves as actors, humans appear to themselves as the target of actions. Instead of merely acting upon others by means of the objects they give, they appear to be acted upon by the objects they give or receive, to be subservient to their will and to their movements. The cause becomes the effect, the means becomes the agent, the agent becomes the means, and the object becomes the subject.

In short, combining this sociological base, this logic of personalized social relations with the belief in thing-persons produces a general metamorphosis of reality and an inversion in the way one thinks the real relations involved. Objects are transformed into subjects and subjects into objects. No longer is it (only) humans who act on each other, interact with each other, by means of things, it is now the things and their in-dwelling spirits which act on each other through human agency.

It is because he did not carry his reconstruction of the sociological basis of gift-giving far enough that Mauss ended up giving such weight to the magic-religious beliefs that endow things with a soul. Not that such beliefs do not have an important role in society, but they do not explain the true origin of the obligation to give in turn what one has received or its equivalent. They explain only how the social actors, the indigenous peoples of different cultures think, experience, and legitimize this obligation. What appears here is not only a symbolic world. More fundamentally it is the world of imaginary representations elaborated by the actors in order to explain the reasons for their actions, their origin, and their meaning: it is the world of the imaginary.

What a contrast between these types of society, these social and mental universes, and today's capitalist society where the majority of social relations are impersonal (involving the individual as citizen and the state, for instance), and where the exchange of things and services is conducted for the most part in an anonymous marketplace, leaving little room for an “economy and a moral code based on gift-giving.” When most exchanges are transacted through a market, and the value of goods and services is expressed in a universal currency, then debts contracted can be cancelled and things that are bought remain yours. Nevertheless, such a universe must necessarily have other forms of alienated and fetishized representations (and practices) of the social relations that underpin it. But that is another story.
2

Substitute Objects for Humans and for the Gods

Once again I found myself confronted with a number of problems which had, in a largely unexpected manner, been raised by my analysis of Mauss’ work on the gift.

In effect, it became increasingly apparent that, alongside what can be given or exchanged, it was urgent to look at the things which must be kept, and that the phenomenon of gift-giving itself would be greatly enriched by being examined in the light of what must not be given but must be kept. Now it happens that the things which are kept are quite often “sacred,” and it therefore became necessary to inquire into what it is that endows these objects with their sacred character, and hence into the nature of the sacred. Furthermore, there are no watertight partitions between sacred objects and valuable objects produced for the purpose of giving and selling, some of which even ultimately function as “primitive monies.” Objects do not need to be different in order to operate in different areas, and it is worthwhile looking at how sometimes the same object can be first sold, then given, and finally stashed away in a family or clan treasure. It is not the object which creates the differences, it is the different logics governing the areas of social life that endow it with different meanings as it moves from one domain to the other, changing functions and uses as it goes.

But there was another problem as well, that of a closer analysis of the sociological and therefore historical conditions of the appearance and the development of antagonistic gift-giving, of the potlatch, and of potlatch societies. On this point I simply listened to Mauss, who had suggested — without provoking much reaction — that the potlatch is an altered form of non-antagonistic gift-giving. The problem was that Mauss had really said too little about the nature of these gifts, about their particular logic, for me to identify the social transformations necessary to the appearance and development of the potlatch. Going from there, and having had the opportunity to live and work in a society which practiced the giving of gifts and counter-gifts, but not potlatch, I postulated that a relatively detailed analysis of what happens among the Baruya, a society without potlatch but with sacred objects, valuable objects and even a kind of “currency object” (salt bars, which are reserved for ceremonial use), should, by virtue of the contrast it provides, enable me to isolate the social conditions in which the potlatch is likely to appear and to establish the social basis of its development. The outcome of this reconstruction, which proceeded by a process of a contrario deduction, ultimately would allow me to situate more accurately than Mauss had done the position of “potlatch societies” among the variety of ways in which human society has evolved.

Finally, I turned back to the objects themselves in an attempt to discover what features an object must have in order for imaginary representations of life, wealth, and power to become projected onto and invested in it. The strength of objects lies in their capacity to materialize the invisible, to represent the unrepresentable. And it is the sacred object which most completely fulfills this function.

Of course this type of analysis raises at least two questions for the social sciences. First of all, it challenges a piously received and unanimously respected premise, famous particularly since Lévi-Strauss’ introduction to the work of Mauss, namely that everything within man’s being is exchange, and that it is by beginning with the necessity for exchange that one can come to understand the way societies function (even if their history, the various forms of their evolution remain external to the field of analysis or are even sometimes repudiated as purely contingent). Secondly, it restores to the social sciences their function of critically assessing the spontaneous beliefs and the illusions that societies and individuals hold about themselves, as well as evaluating the learned theories which do not take these beliefs seriously or do not account for them.

Sacred objects, precious objects and currency objects among the Baruya of New Guinea

The Baruya tribe lives in two high valleys of a mountain chain in the interior of New Guinea, known as the Eastern Highlands. Their reputation as salt-makers made them familiar to many tribes who had
never met them but who bought their salt from trading partners of the Baruya. The Baruya’s ancestors did not live in the place at present inhabited by their descendants: they lived in the Menyamya region, at Brawegareubaraminde, today a deserted spot to which the masters of the initiations return every three or four years, when the male initiation ceremonies are held, to gather magic plants and collect handfuls of clay and ancestral soil which are equally magic, in other words full of supernatural powers and the ancestors’ force.

Originally the ancestors of the Baruya formed part of a tribe called the Yoyue, and their name at that time was the Baragaye. At some time, probably around the end of the eighteenth century, they were forced to leave their territory after enemies burned their village and massacred part of its inhabitants. The survivors fled and eventually found asylum at Marawaka, among the Andje, who lived on the slopes of Mount Yelia, at a distance of four or five days’ walk. After a few generations, the refugees, abetted by the Ndelle, a clan belonging to the host tribe, drove the rest of the tribe from their territory, and a new tribe appeared which called itself the Baruya, from the name of the clan that exercised the most important ritual functions in the male initiations, those which transform boys from children into adolescents, make them into young warriors. Around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Baruya continued to expand their territory and invaded Wonenara valley. They waged war on the local groups, with whom they nevertheless exchanged women, and gradually absorbed a number of autochthonous lineages, who left their native tribe and went to live with the Baruya, their enemies but also their affines, thus repeating the Ndelle’s conduct a good century before with regard to their own tribe, the Yoyue.

To complete this sketch, I will add that the Baruya do not have a center of power, a paramount chief, like the Trobrianders, or Big Men who amass wealth and women, and try to outdo each other in the giving of gifts and counter-gifts, like the Melpa. They do, however, have men who are more important than the others, Apmwenangalo, “Great Men,” whose powers are either inherited (like those of the masters of the male initiations or the shaman initiations), or acquired, through merit (like those of the great hunters, the great cassowary hunters, the great horticulturists and the best salt-makers). The masters of the initiations always come from the same clans, but the other Great Men may be members of any clan.

So how do the Baruya deal with things that are given, sold, or kept? They have three coexisting categories of objects which, for lack of a better term, I will call sacred objects, “valuable” objects and objects, that function as a kind of currency.

Concerning the things one keeps among the Baruya

Chief among the sacred objects of the Baruya are the kwaimatnie, cult objects kept hidden away by the masters of the initiation rituals and taken out and displayed solely on these occasions. Only the clans descended from the Menyamya refugees possess kwaimatnie. The autochthonous lineages have none, with the exception of the Ndelle, the clan which betrayed their tribe and helped the Baruya’s ancestors, the Baragaye, to seize the territory of the Andje tribe, which had taken them in. Following their victory, the Kwarrandari lineage, the lineage of the Baruya clan which conducts the third-stage male initiations, had given a pair of kwaimatnie to the Ndelle to thank them for their help, and also to associate them in the performance of the initiations; for it is through these initiations that the Baruya tribe presents itself to itself and to all the friendly and/or hostile neighboring tribes as a whole, as one “body,” as they say.

Among the sacred objects were also the dried fingers of the right hand— the hand that draws the bowstring — of Bakitchatche, a legendary Baruya hero who led them into battle against the Andje and in seizing their lands. He is credited with a series of fabulous exploits. For instance, it is said that by the sole force of his spirit he struck down a tall tree which fell across a precipice, allowing the Baruya warriors to surprise and massacre their enemies, who could not imagine they would attack from that side. His fingers, which were carefully preserved, as is often done with the fingers of great warriors, used to be shown, during the initiation ceremonies, to the future Baruya warriors by Bakitchatche’s descendants, in the belief that part of the hero’s supernatural powers were preserved in them and would give the Baruya strength. The Baruya believe that objects have a spirit, koulie, which is at the same time a power as well as power itself. In this sense, the notion of koulie corresponds to the Polynesian ideas of mana and hau.

The Andavaikia clan, for its part, used to own a pair of flint stones which were used uniquely when the tsimia was built; this is the big ceremonial house erected by the Baruya every three or four years for the initiation of their boys. On each occasion, all village fires were extinguished and, whereas, before the Europeans arrived, the Baruya used to light their daily fire by rubbing, the ceremonial fire was lit by
the victim's chest. His blood was collected and smeared onto the onlookers, and finally his abdomen was opened and the liver torn out and shared among the men.

All these objects (kwaimatnie, Bakitchatche's dried fingers, flint stones, plants gathered on the sacred site of the ancestors) are different from other sacred objects because they contain sacred powers that are to be used on behalf of all the Baruya. To these must be added the flutes and bull-roarers, instruments whose sounds accompany the most solemn ritual moments, or at least those that occur away from the village and from inhabited places, deep in the forest or in the cleared grassland surrounding the villages. Only men from the same clans as the masters of the initiations may make and play these instruments. However, whereas the bull-roarers are kept by the men of these clans, carefully wrapped in strips of bark and always carried on their person in a small net bag along with other magic objects, the bamboo flutes are made for each ceremony and then destroyed as soon as it is over. They are smashed, and the bits thrown into the jungle, when the band of men and initiates nears the village. We will see why later.

But first let me say once and for all that alongside these durable or non-durable sacred objects used on behalf of all the Baruya in the framework of the initiations, each clan or lineage has other objects endowed with a more limited "effectiveness," a power which we think of as imaginary and symbolic. Among these are certain stone or wooden clubs that once belonged to famous warriors and which are carefully preserved by their descendants. There are also fertility stones owned by each lineage, which the men of the lineage bury in the gardens they clear in the forest and which they unearth again when they abandon the plot. Of course all these objects are without effect until the proper spells, the secret words, have been pronounced.

A few words about bull-roarers: the Baruya bull-roarer is a slender piece of polished black-palm some 20–25 cm in length, with a hole in one end that is threaded with a length of bark string. The bull-roarers are shown in utmost secrecy to the young initiates when they go through the second-stage initiations. At this time they are told never, on pain of death, to reveal to the women that the bull-roarers are worked by the men, who whirl them over their heads, producing a loud roaring sound which is like no other sound in nature, and which is supposed to be the voice of the spirits with whom the men converse and communicate during the initiations.

The bull-roarers are manufactured by the men and passed on as treasures to their sons. But in the beginning, the Baruya say, they
The Dis-enchanted Gift

Our journey is drawing to a close. The enchanted land of sacred objects and gift-objects is receding into the distance. The objects are still there, to be sure; however the answers we have found to Mauss’ questions about them have broken the spell. More to the point, our analyses lead us to the conclusion that there can be no human society without two domains: the domain of exchanges, whatever is exchanged and whatever the form of this exchange – from gift to potlatch, from sacrifice to sale, purchase or trade; and the domain in which individuals and groups carefully keep for themselves, then transmit to their descendants or fellow-believers, things, narratives, names, forms of thinking. For the things that are kept are always “realities” which transport an individual or group back to another time, which place them once again before their origins, before the origin.

It is beginning with these fixed, still points, these realities “anchored in the nature of things” that individual and collective identities are constructed and can develop. These are what give time its duration. One appreciates the forces able to destroy such anchor points, either bit by bit, nibbling away at them, or all at once, cutting them through in one stroke. And it is not indifferent for a society’s future whether the forces that destroyed these anchor points arose from within the very modes of life and thought they had anchored, or whether they came from without, imposed by the conscious or involuntary pressures and aggressions from societies anchored elsewhere.

The following is a description of the life of the mikado, the Japanese emperor, written nearly three centuries ago by a Dutch traveler, Kaempfer, who set down a History of Japan, after having lived in the country as it was in the process of opening its doors to the West. The description is reproduced by James Frazer in The Golden Bough:

The Mikado thinks that it would be very prejudicial to his dignity and holiness to touch the ground with his feet; for this reason, when he intends to go anywhere, he must be carried thither on men’s shoulders. Much less will they suffer that he should expose his sacred person to the open air, and the sun is not worthy to shine on his head. There is such a holiness ascribed to all the parts of his body that he dares to cut off neither his hair nor his beard, nor his nails. However, lest he should grow too dirty, they may clean him in the night when he is asleep; because, they say, that which is taken from his body at that time, hath been stolen from him, and that such a theft does not prejudice his holiness or dignity. In ancient times, he was obliged to sit on the throne for some hours every morning, with the imperial crown on his head, but to sit altogether like a statue, without stirring either hands or feet, head or eyes, nor indeed any part of his body, because by this means, it was thought that he could preserve peace and tranquility in his empire; for if, unfortunately, he turned himself on one side or the other, or, if he looked a good while towards any part of his dominions, it was apprehended that war, famine, fire, or some other great misfortune was near at hand to desolate the country. But it having been afterwards discovered, that the imperial crown was the palladium, which by its immobility could preserve peace in the empire, it was thought expedient to deliver his imperial person, consecrated only to idleness and pleasures, from this burthensome duty, and therefore the crown is at present placed on the throne for some hours every morning.

The mikado, or emperor, is truly the still point, in this case, the point which anchors society in the cosmic order. Although he was a god, some human trait prevented him from achieving perfect physical immobility, the complete stillness which would have forever ensured the well-being of his subjects. Unfortunately for them, the mikado could not help an occasional twitch, consequently occasioning disturbances and misfortunes in some corner of his kingdom. An object was therefore placed in his stead which partook of his divinity but which could remain totally immobile: his “crown.”
Frazer makes two comments on this, one analytical, the other ideological:

[The monarch] is the point of support on which hangs the balance of the world, and the slightest irregularity on his part may overthrow the delicate equipoise. The greatest care must, therefore, be taken both by and of him; and his whole life, down to its minutest details, must be so regulated that no act of his, voluntary or involuntary, may disarrange or upset the established order of nature. Of this class of monarchs the Mikado or Dairi, the spiritual emperor of Japan, is or rather used to be a typical example. He is an incarnation of the sun goddess, the deity who rules the universe, gods and men included; once a year all the gods wait upon him and spend a month at his court. During that month, the name of which means “without gods”, no one frequents the temples, for they are believed to be deserted. The Mikado receives from his people and assumes in his official proclamations and decrees the title of “manifest or incarnate deity” [akitsu kami], and he claims a general authority over the gods of Japan. For example, in an official decree of the year 646 the emperor is described as “the incarnate god who governs the universe”.4

Frazer’s remarks5 correctly identify the existence and importance of these anchor points fixed in time and necessary for grounding and legitimizing the way a society is organized, its structure and order. His observations converge with my own. But he adds, in a note, this judgement, which is that of a Westerner convinced of the superiority of the philosophies and sciences developed in his own culture:

No doubt it is very difficult for the Western mind to put itself at the point of view of the Oriental and to seize the precise point (if it can be said to exist) where the divine fades into the human or the human brightens into the divine. In translating, as we must do, the vague thought of a crude theology into the comparatively exact language of civilised Europe we must allow for a considerable want of correspondence between the two: we must leave between them, as it were, a margin of cloudland to which in the last resort the deity may retreat from the too searching light of philosophy and science.6

Frazer was surely one of the European figures who was the least unaware that such figures, such institutions, such societies were found the world over, including in Europe, and at very different periods. But he was persuaded that, in the West, beliefs in divine kings and the process of divinizing humans belonged to a bygone era, were a phase that had been superseded by the progress realized over the course of civilization. By the early twentieth century, when

Frazer was writing his Golden Bough, the European monarchies had become “constitutional” ones, and the princely families as a rule contented themselves with non-speaking roles on the stages left them by the now “sovereign” peoples.

Did not history confirm Frazer’s theses when Japan surrendered at the end of the Second World War. Emperor Hirohito had done nothing to keep his people from entering the war on the side of Nazi Germany, quite the contrary. After Japan’s surrender, there was much discussion among the Allies over which of two positions to adopt. Some advocated eliminating the monarchy and entirely dismantling the former imperial system. Others, afraid of offending deep-seated Japanese sensibilities and thus causing civil strife, argued in favor of keeping the emperor but turning the divine-right monarchy into a European-style constitutional monarchy.7 The latter prevailed. And for the first time in history, a living god was forced to confess that he was not god. Such was the content of the rescript that Emperor Hirohito was compelled to draw up on January 1, 1946 and which he addressed (in English) to General MacArthur, chief of the occupying forces: “The ties between Us and Our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world.”8

A new monarchy, a symbol-monarchy came into force on May 3, 1947. On the other side of the world, a Western people, heir to Christianity and the Holy German Empire, had also attempted to govern the world, this time in the name of the superiority of the Aryan race. Their Führer did not renounce his superhuman status; he committed suicide in his bunker. The Allies then undertook the process of denazifying the people who had waged war on them and of instructing them anew in democracy. Western-style democracy became the future of the free world. In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, it became the future of the whole world. This is why some entertained the idea that history might be coming to its end.

The “end” of history thus began in 1989, when “mankind” – confronted with the sudden and generalized collapse of communism, in other words of a form of society which had grown out of the union between a state-run economy and a dictatorship disguised as popular democracy – was obliged to admit that its only future lay in generalizing to all human societies the marriage between capitalism and democracy, two systems that arose in the West in different periods, but which gradually converged between the end of the
eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, depending on the country,
as the old-regime societies disappeared.

What, in this form of society which imagines itself to be eternal, is
the place of exchange, and is there anything else beyond exchange?
Apparently everything, or nearly, is for sale: means of consumption,
means of production (including the land), means of destruction,
means of communication, individuals' manual and/or intellectual
labor, the use of their bodies. Ordinary things and precious things,
works of art. And as everything which is bought and sold is bought
and sold in exchange for money, the possession of money has
become the necessary condition for a physical and social existence.

Money stands at the heart of all that is "alienable." It is continually
entering and leaving the market and, as it circulates, it sweeps
along thousands of other material and immaterial realities for which
it is exchanged and into which it is changed — for a time. It does
whatever it is made to do by the market relations contracted
between individuals and between groups. Money is neither moral
nor immoral. It is neutral. Let us say it is useful. It covers everything
that is covered by the market. And it is always extending its range,
driven by the necessity for capitalist production and trade to
encompass more and more ground.

Money and profit therefore stand at the very heart of the system.
They are inseparable from it and should therefore not be used as
scapegoats when criticizing the negative consequences of the
system's workings. For such a system, which is presented as the least
bad of all possible systems, regularly and necessarily excludes from
production — and therefore from the "job market" — hundreds
of thousands of individuals whose life comes to depend on state aid or
individual generosity, and therefore on an economy of state-
managed redistribution or on an economy based on private giving.

We are therefore dealing with a society divided into groups whose
interests and status are not the same, and which are even to a large
extent opposed and contradictory. The division and opposition are
structural, but this is not incompatible with the fact that a certain
number of wage-earners can become capitalists and that a certain
number of capitalists can lose their capital and begin another life.
In sum, at the heart of capitalism there is undeniably a permanent
source of social inequalities, which means that, in this system, as in
all others, there are things to be repressed, things which "must" be
passed over in silence or disguised as being in the "common inter-
est."

But with this type of economy, at least in the West, goes a polit-
cal system based on the principle that all people are free and equal
before the law; free to do and think as they wish as long as their acts
do not infringe on the rights of others or endanger the general inter-
est, which it is the role of the state to represent and to defend.
People who are unequal because of their place in the economy thus
enjoy, on the political level in the framework of a democratic state,
equal status before the law.

Concerning that which stands beyond the market in a market society

What room is left for gift-giving and sacred objects in this type of
political and economic system? Clearly the possession of sacred
objects endowed with the presence and the powers of the gods or of
God does not give their owners access to political power. Religion
or religions have become a "private matter," and sacred objects
have no public power. They are kept and transmitted within the
individual communities corresponding to the various religious
denominations recognized and protected by the state.

But wealth, and money, which is the general form of wealth, do
not give direct access to political power or state governance either.
Of course political parties need money to conduct their campaigns
and to persuade the citizens to vote for their candidates. Of course
money can be used to "buy" votes, just as it can be used, in the form
of discreet gifts on the part of companies and interest groups, to buy
influence with the parties and individuals in power on both local
and national levels.

There are therefore juridical and constitutional limits on the uses
to which money can be put. In a society where almost everything
can be bought or sold, the individual, the person, may not be bought
or sold by a third party. Of course one may sell parts of oneself,
one's blood, labor, or skills. A woman can rent her uterus to a child-
less couple and become a surrogate mother. And this process of dis-
sociating and commercializing parts of the human being threatens to
gain ground. But an individual's body remains their own property;
this is guaranteed by law, and this property can never be turned into
a commodity. Not everything, then, is "negotiable" in our profit-
oriented society. Individuals, as persons, as corporeal and spiritual
singularities, cannot be put on the market as commodities, whereas
every day they deal in the market as economic agents. One can
deprive a person of their freedom by putting them in prison for debt,
but they cannot be sold in order to reimburse the same debt.

In ancient Greece, on the other hand, and in particular in Athens
at the time of Solon, a free man could be sold into slavery to pay his
debts and so become the property of another. Following Solon’s reforms, all Athenian slaves came from outside; they were sometimes Greek, but most often “barbarians” taken prisoner of war or sold by their clan or their chief to slave traders. In the eighteenth century, the slaves in the American South were Blacks bought in Africa or born in the South. But in Missouri as in Greece, it was the person of the slave that was bought as a whole and not the use of his or her labor. This purchase was in no way a contract between master and slave; it was an agreement between two owners, one with money who needed slaves, the other with slaves and needing money. Market relations in ancient Greece and Rome thus had a very different extension from those in today’s capitalist societies. Even if a lack of private income forces individuals to work for others, they retain their freedom with respect to their employer.

But if, in Western countries, the individual as a person cannot be transformed into a commodity or a gift-object, it is because the constitution in which the legal system is rooted does not belong to the sphere of market relations. It founds them, it limits them, but it is not a part of these relations. The constitution is the property of no one person as such; it is the common, inalienable property of all those who respect it because they have chosen it, “voted it in.” The constitution of a republic is a common, public good. It presupposes the existence of a collective body of citizens who have voted for it. But for this to have come about, they had to behave as citizens—and not as obedient subjects of an Eastern or a Western divine-right king.

Just as individuals, as persons, are inalienable, present at once inside and outside the sphere of market relations, so the constitution is a social reality, a common good which, by its essence, cannot be the product of commercial exchange. The constituent “body” that underpins the French constitution is made up of all citizens, dead and alive, who have ever lived on the territory of France since the “people” first resolved themselves into the sovereign body, the source of the laws. This body emerged at the time of the French Revolution, with the first Constituent Assembly, and since then, in a certain manner, has never ceased to exist. Over the past two centuries, the constitution has changed, the state has adopted a number of forms—constitutional monarchy or republic—before settling into the republican form. But behind these changes, the same body persists. The constituent body is therefore a collective, indivisible reality, both immaterial and material, caught up in time and timeless, which would disappear only if democracy were to be lastingly abolished. This is no longer the body of Pharaoh, the body of a god; it is the body of a sovereign people, provisionally represented and embodied by the president of the republic; elected by a majority of the French citizenry—of those who cast their vote—the president becomes the president of all the French. For the space of a few years he is the custodian of the constitution, the symbol of the republic. His function places him above political parties and factional divisions. For a time he embodies the unity and identity of a whole, the nation, of which the state is merely an instrument and not the embodiment. He becomes the fixed point.

The code of law which founds the rights of individuals is therefore collective in its essence. It is the common property of all those who live under one constitution and recognize it as theirs, their inalienable property which lies beyond the sphere of commercial relations. It is a gift which free men and women bestow upon themselves and which founds, not their intimate, private relations, but their public social relationships. Here we see how, in our societies, the political sphere has taken the place of religion, and how the constitutions with which peoples endow themselves are, in a certain manner, equivalents of the sacred objects men believed they had received from the gods as means of helping them to live together and to live well. However, if the political has taken the place once occupied by religion, it has—henceforth and continually—runs the risk of becoming sacralized.

The return of the gift and the displacement of the enigma

So what room is there left for gift-giving in our Western societies? It obviously cannot play the role it still fulfills in many parts of the world, and not only in Melanesia. In our societies, is no longer necessary to exchange gifts in order to produce and reproduce the basic social structures. For instance, a man does not have to “give” his sister, a woman does not have to “give” her brother in order to marry. Nor does one have to compete in exchanges of gifts and wealth in order to gain access to political power. Gift-exchange exists, but it is now free from the burden of having to produce and reproduce the fundamental social relationships common to all members of society.

The giving of gifts has become above all a subjective, personal and individual matter. It is the expression and the instrument of personal relationships located beyond the spheres of the market and the state. In France it of course continues to be practiced as it has for centuries, in relations between kin and between friends. Between close friends and close relatives, it is still an obligation. It testifies to this
But however efficient capitalism may be, it still accumulates exclusions — of individuals and nations — and exacerbates social fractures and gulfs between nations. The state is supposed to represent all sections of society; it has a mandate to govern society in such a way that the conflicts of interests and the contradictions which develop between certain parts do not prevent it reproducing itself as a whole, still less expel any one part from the whole. Yet today the state has taken upon itself to withdraw not only from the economic sphere, but also from health care and from education, or it is ever more eager to do so. It is in this fin-de-siècle context that generous giving, the "unreturned" gift is once again solicited: but this time the mission is to help resolve problems of society. The number of charitable organizations is on the rise, whereas, at the beginning of the century Mauss saw charity as "still wounding for him who has accepted it."12 But today's charity makes use of today's means. It utilizes the media, it has spawned a bureaucracy and, in the West, it feeds on the televised images of the misfortunes and ills, conjunctural or permanent, that beset the four corners of the earth.

Gift-giving, in the Western world, has thus once again begun to spread beyond the sphere of private life and personal relationships to which it had been progressively relegated as the market tightened its grip on production and exchange, and the state took an ever greater hand in managing inequalities. Before the magnitude of society's problems and the manifest incapacity of the market and the state to find solutions, gift-giving looks as though it may once again become an objective and socially necessary condition for the reproduction of society. This time round, however, it will not be the reciprocal giving of equivalent things. Nor will it be potlatch-giving, since the recipients would be hard put to "reciprocate," and even harder put to give more in turn.

The institution of charitable giving thus looks set for a comeback. But charity is not the Promised Land. It can give the recipient time to turn around. But it cannot give him everything, for only the gods give everything or have given everything, but that was because they were not men.13 Gifts will buy time, but time for what?

We live in a society which, by the very way it functions, separates individuals from each other, isolates them within their own family, and affords them advancement only by opposing them to one another. We live in a society which liberates, as no other has ever done, all of the forces, all of the potentials slumbering within the individual, but which also encourages people to make their own way by using others. Our society lives and prospers only at the cost of a permanent deficit of solidarity. The only new solidarities it can
imagine are in the form of negotiated contracts. But not everything can be negotiated: there remains all that goes into the bonds between individuals, all that comprises their relationships—public and private, social and intimate—all that means that human beings live in society but that they must also produce society in order to live.

The boundaries of social negotiation are nevertheless clear. Can one imagine a child making a contract with its parents to be born? The idea is absurd. And its absurdity shows that the first bond between humans, that of birth, is not negotiated between the parties involved. And yet it is just such inescapable facts that our society tends to pass over in silence.

Bibliography


Notes

Introduction


2 The Gift, p. 75.

3 The Gift, p. 3.


Chapter 1 The Legacy of Mauss


2 The Gift, p. 7.

3 The Gift. pp. 11–13. The emphasis is ours. Elsdon Best spells the name of his Maori informant “Tamati Ranapiri,” while Mauss always writes “Ranapiri.” I have kept Mauss’ spelling because it appears in so many of the quotations.

4 The Gift, p. 43.

5 The Gift, p. 45.

6 The Gift, p. 45.


8 Introduction, pp. 48–9.

9 Introduction, p. 47.

10 Introduction, p. 55.

11 Introduction, pp. 63 and 64.

12 Introduction, p. 64.

13 “In certain essential domains, such as that of kinship, the analogy with language, so strongly asserted by Mauss, could enable us to discover the precise rules by which, in any type of society, cycles of reciprocity are formed whose automatic laws are hencethrough known, enabling the use of deductive reasoning in a domain which seemed subject to the most total arbitrariness” (Lévi-Strauss, Introduction, p. 43).


16 Introduction, p. 47.

17 Vincent Descombes had already demonstrated this in “L’Équivoque du symbolique,” Confrontations, 3 (1980), p. 93:

By replacing the sacred, an admittedly unsettling notion, by the symbolic, a concept apparently cleansed of all mystery, French sociology thought it had moved a step closer to understanding its object. But it then asks this symbolism to perform services it is not equipped to render. It is supposed, at the same time, to partake of algebra, in other words of the manipulation of symbols, and of “symbolic efficacy,” as Lévi-Strauss says, that is, of a sacrament. Sacrifices and sacraments have the effect of producing the social body, which spawns algebraists: and one catches oneself dreaming of a self-producing algebra which would make it possible to manipulate the social body. The theory of the symbolic always has a foot in both camps, then: it is half algebraic algebra and half religious algebra. It is therefore indispensable to forgo the “symbolic,” however prestigious, in order to move beyond structuralism and once again envisage the enigmatic reality of the sacred.

I personally do not think that we either need to or can “forgo the symbolic.” The problem is to establish its true place in the production of society, of our social being, and to determine whether this place dominates or is subordinate to the other components of reality.


19 Introduction, pp. 57–8.

20 Karl Marx: “It is in reality much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual given relations of life their corresponding heavenly

value is here the independently acting agent of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. ... By virtue of being a value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs. (ibid., p. 255)

It is the "personification of things and reification of the relations of production, this religion of everyday life" (ibid., vol. 3, transl. by David Fernbach, 1981, p. 969). Cf. Maurice Godelier, "Économie marchande, féodalisme, magie et science selon Marx dans Le Capital," La Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse, special issue "Objets du féodalisme," 2 (Autumn 1970), pp. 197-213. It was one of Hegel's fundamental ideas that logic (knowledge of the essence) should be the basis of phenomenology (knowledge of appearances).

22 Introduction, p. 56.
23 Introduction, p. 53.
24 Introduction, p. 36.
25 Introduction, p. 35.
26 Introduction, pp. 55-6.
27 Introduction, p. 64.
28 Introduction, p. 63.
30 Introduction, p. 21.
31 Introduction, pp. 59-61.
32 Introduction, p. 37.
33 "Mauss still thinks it possible to develop a sociological theory of symbolism, whereas it is obvious that what we need to look for is a symbolic origin of society." (Lévi-Strauss, Introduction, p. 21; translation modified).
34 Jacques Lacan, Ecrits (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1960), p. 810. Lacan, in his constant effort to "emphasize the autonomy of the symbolic," which Freud, as he rightly remarks, "never formulated," is much less circumspect than Lévi-Strauss when the latter posits a big-bang theory of the emergence of language. For Lacan, the symbolic order is "absolutely irreducible to what is commonly called human experience" (p. 368), "nor can it be deduced from any historical or psychic process of origination," somewhat like Descartes' idea of God which cannot be a product of the human mind because human intelligence is finite and, since the idea of God supposes the infinite, only God himself could have put the idea into people's heads. Furthermore, Lacan also, as Jean-Joseph Goux stresses, "multiples the historical and anthropological references pointing to certain socially and historically privileged moments in which this symbolic order emerges... the exchange of women, hieroglyphics, algebra, the name of the father, sacred writings, law codes, machines" ("Les Médiateurs de l'échange," contribution to the seminar Psychanalyse et sciences sociales, Paris, 1994).

35 "I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths think themselves in men's minds without their being aware of the fact. And

... it would perhaps be better to go still further and, disregarding the thinking subject completely, proceed as if the myths were thinking among themselves or thinking each other" (the italics are Lévi-Strauss') (Lévi-Strauss, Le Cru et le cuit, Paris, Plon, 1964). Quoted from the English translation, The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology, transl. by John and Doreen Weightman (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986; translation modified), p. 12.
36 Freud: "If, assimilating as is customary, activity and masculinity, we want to call [the libido] male, we should nevertheless not forget that it also represents aspirations to passive goals... the expression 'female libido' is totally unjustified." (Nouvelles Conférences d'introduction à la psychanalyse, transl. Rose-Marie Zeitlin, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 176; translated from the French version).
40 This dogma is already found in the mid-nineteenth century and does not disappear until the early twentieth.
41 Marx, Capital, vol. 1, pp. 189-90: "Since the expression of the value of commodities is purely an ideal act, we may use purely imaginary or ideal gold to perform this operation."
43 The Gift, p. 15.
44 Mauss compares to offerings and sacrifices the practice of giving alms, which resembles gift-giving to the extent that the latter contributes to the redistribution of wealth and that the wealthy are always in danger of displaying an excess of wealth intolerable to others. But alms are also a portion of the sacrifice that the gods willingly leave for humans. Mauss traces back to the Hebrew term zedaqa and the Arabic sadaka the origin of the doctrine of charity and alms, "which, with Christianity and Islam, spread around the world" (The Gift, p. 18).
45 The Gift, p. 16. Mauss also writes:

Contract sacrifice supposes institutions of the kind we have described [potlatch, kula, etc.] and, conversely, contract sacrifice realizes them to the full, because those gods who give and return gifts are there to give a considerable thing in the place of a small one. It is perhaps not a result of pure chance that the two solemn formulas of the contract -- in Latin do ut des, in Sanskrit, daqami se, dehi me -- also have been preserved in religious texts. (The Gift, p. 17.)

46 The Gift, p. 16.
48 The Gift, pp. 16-17.
49 The Gift, pp. 43-4.
50 The Gift, p. 134, n. 245.
51 "It would seem that among the Kwakuitl there were two kinds of copper objects: the more important ones that do not go out of the family ... and certain others that circulate intact, that are of less value, and that seem to serve as satellites for the first kind" (The Gift, p. 134, n. 245). And
concerning the Trobrianders' valuables: "the two kinds of vayug'a, those of the kula and those that Malinowski for the first time calls 'permanent vayug'a', those which do not enter into obligatory exchanges" (The Gift, pp. 16-17).


57 The Gift, p. 6.

58 The Gift, p. 36.

59 Manuel d'ethnographie (Paris, Payot, 1947), p. 185. W. D. Halls has translated prestation as "service." However the French term covers much more, not only the exchange of services, but of material wealth, women, rituals, spells, etc. We have therefore adopted the French term.

60 The Gift, pp. 4-5.

61 The Gift, p. 6.

62 Manuel, p. 188.

63 Manuel, p. 185.

64 The Gift, p. 5.

65 The Gift, p. 5.

66 The Gift, p. 5.

67 The Gift, pp. 6.

68 The Gift, p. 7.

69 The Gift, p. 8.

70 Christopher Gregory, Gifts and Commodities (London and New York, Academic Press, 1982).

71 The Gift, p. 3.

72 The Gift, p. 54.

73 The Gift, p. 134, n. 245.


76 Marcel Mauss, Manuel, p. 177.

77 Manuel, p. 177.

78 Manuel, p. 179; our emphasis.


80 Firth, Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori, p. 420.

highlighted the effort Mauss put into decentering and recentering his theory with respect to political economic concepts. A Marxist himself, Lojkine considers Meillassoux's criticism of Mauss to be unfounded and out of place (p. 143).

138 *The Gift*, p. 72; our emphasis. Mauss is referring to Malinowski's article entitled *The Primitive Economy of the Trobriand Islanders*, *Economic Journal*, 31, 121 (March 1921), pp. 1–16.

139 *The Gift*, p. 72.

140 *The Gift*, pp. 72–3; our emphasis.

141 *The Gift*, p. 33; our emphasis.

142 *The Gift*, p. 76; our emphasis. For the idea of total social phenomena, see also pp. 30, 35, and 46.

143 *The Gift*, p. 79.

144 *The Gift*, p. 80.


146 Unlike Marilyn Strathern (*The Gender of the Gift*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), I think that commercial relations have existed for centuries alongside gift-exchanges in the societies Mauss analyzed, and, conversely, that gift-exchange is still a widespread practice in market economies. I see no “essential” opposition between Melanesian societies and Western societies as “gift-based” societies and Western society as a “commodity-based” society.


148 Jean Lojkine (“Mauss et L’Essai sur le don”), pp. 153–4) is also one of the few to have emphasized that “non-commercial” reciprocity does not mean transparency, and that there is such a thing as “non-commercial fetishism,” of which the potlatch is a perfect example. Lojkine makes it clear that Marx did not see this when he wrote: “but every serf knows, without having to consult Adam Smith, that what he expends in the service of his lord is a specific quantity of his own personal labour-power. The tithe owed to the priest is more clearly apparent than his benediction.” And he goes on to ask how the force of religion is to be explained, or the sacred character of royal power.

149 In a certain manner, money is a substitute for sacred and for precious objects, which were themselves originally substitutes: the forer for gods, the latter for humans. The interplay of substitutes can be carried further still. A striking example is provided by the money the Chinese use for offerings; these are pieces of paper printed like money which are burned in ritual dishes in the home as an offering to the house gods. This money is divided into gold money (burned for the heavenly gods) and silver money (burned for the evil spirits and the shades that inhabit the nether world). These monies are used by the faithful on their own initiative. In addition there are “treasury monies” and “monies for resolving crises.” These require a specialist. These monies have been analyzed in a remarkable study by Hou Chin-Lang, *Monnaies d’offrande et la notion de trésorerie dans la religion chinoise* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France and Maisonneuve, 1975). Behind these practices lies the idea that there exists a capital of life and happiness; when an individual is born, he incurs a debt *vis-à-vis* the
treasury, a sort of bank with two accounting systems, one celestial, the other infernal, which manages the relations humans entertain with the spirits and the gods. I will come back to this theme at the close of this book, when I refer to the Rig Veda and to the notion of life-debt in India.

150 The Gift, p. 48.
151 The Gift, p. 47.
152 The Gift, p. 60.
153 The Gift, p. 55.
154 The Gift, p. 74.
155 “L’Essai sur le don”, p. 208, n. 3.
156 The Gift, p. 133, n. 243.
157 The Gift, p. 16.
159 E.g. Alain Testart, Les Chasseurs-cueilleurs ou l’origine des inégalités (Paris, Société d’Éthnographie, 1982).
160 The Gift, p. 81.
161 The Gift, p. 68; emphasis in Mauss.
162 The Gift, p. 75.
163 The Gift, p. 77.
164 The Gift, p. 69.
166 Indeed, Krichoff had already outlined a model of this type of social organization and had compared it to the kin groups found in the Polynesian kingdoms, the kainga. Marie Mauzé’s article, “Boas, Les Kwakiutl et le potlatch: éléments pour une réévaluation” (l’Homme, 26, 4, October–December 1986) gives a clear summary of what we know about their social organization.
169 The Gift, p. 133, n. 243. “Boas has studied closely the way in which each copper object increases in value with the series of potlatches; the value of the Lesaxalayo copper objects in about 1906–1910 was 50 boats, 6000 buttoned blankets, 260 silver bracelets, 60 gold bracelets, 70 gold earrings, 40 sewing machines, 23 gramophones, 50 masks.”
170 “Even after long contact with Europeans – since the eighteenth century with the Russians, and since the beginning of the nineteenth century, with French Canadian trappers – apparently none of the considerable transfers of wealth constantly taking place among them is carried out save in the solemn form of the potlatch” (The Gift, pp. 33 and 108, n. 119).
171 “At least in lands such as those of the Haida and the Tlingit, where prestige is still a strong feature, the exchange takes place among them is carried out save in the solemn form of the potlatch.” (The Gift, p. 42).
172 The Gift, p. 21.
173 The Gift, p. 21.
174 The Gift, p. 21.

176 The Gift, p. 105, n. 63. Mauss pays the same tribute to Turnwald, who studied the Banaro in New Guinea and the Buin in the Solomon Islands.
177 The Gift, p. 72.
179 The Gift, p. 21.
180 The Gift, p. 21.
181 The Gift, p. 22.
182 The Gift, p. 22.
183 The Gift, p. 27.
184 The Gift, p. 22.
185 The Gift, p. 23.
186 At least so it seemed in Malinowski’s day; today the directions are reversed, without it being clear when and why this switch took place.
188 The Gift, p. 26. Mauss also cites Malinowski, who refers to Dobuan comments on the kula, comparing armshells and necklaces to dogs “playfully nuzzling one another” (The Gift, p. 25).
190 The Gift, p. 24.
191 The Gift, p. 102, n. 32.
192 The Gift, p. 28.
193 The Gift, p. 28.
194 The Gift, p. 23.
197 The Gift, pp. 30–1.
198 The Gift, p. 32.
199 To sum up, the whole area of the islands, and probably all of the world of Southern Asia that is related to it, possess the same (?) legal and economic system. The conception one should have regarding these Melanesian tribes, even richer and more committed to trade than the Polynesians, is that it is very different from usual. These people possess an extra domestic economy and a very developed system of exchange that throbs with life more intensely and more precipitantly perhaps than the one that our peasants or the fishing villages along our coasts were familiar with maybe not even a hundred years ago. They have an extensive economic life, going beyond the confines of their islands and their dialects, which represents a considerable trade. With their gifts made and reciprocated, they have a rigorous system which takes the place of the system of buying and selling. (The Gift, p. 32)

It is interesting to see how Mauss advances the idea that gift-exchanges in these societies have greater economic importance and are more dynamic than commercial relations, which also exist.
200 The Gift, p. 32.
201 The Gift, p. 32.
202 The Gift, p. 16.
203 The Gift, pp. 16–17. Mauss is referring to Malinowski’s article published in 1917 in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, no. 45: “Baloma, the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands.”
204 The Gift, p. 100, n. 22.
205. Mauss cites a kula spell from the island of Sinaketa, which emphasizes this rivalry: “I am going to rob my kula, I am going to pillage my kula. I am going to kula until my boat sinks... My fame is a clap of thunder. My tread, an earthquake.” (The Gift, p. 104, n. 48). And he adds: “The conclusion of the formula is also interesting, but again, only from the viewpoint of the potlatch... The concluding line is strangely American in its outward form” (ibid.).

206. Mauss highlights Malinowski’s famous passage on which Lévi-Strauss also comments: “The whole of tribal life is nothing more than a constant ‘giving and receiving’; every ceremony, every legal or customary act is carried out only with a material gift and a gift in return accompanying them. Wealth given and received is one of the principal instruments of social organization, of the chief’s power, of the bonds of kinship through blood or marriage” (Argonauts of the Western Pacific, London, Routledge, 1922, p. 167; Mauss, The Gift, p. 106, n. 85).

207. “To possess one is ‘exhilarating, strengthening, and calming in itself’... Their owners fondle and look at them for hours. Mere contact with them passes on their virtues... Yagwa’a are placed on the forehead, on the chest of a dying person... They are his supreme comfort” (The Gift, p. 24).

208. The Gift, pp. 100–2, n. 29.

209. Maubriands mentions, but does not dwell on the existence of paid labor in the Trobriand Islands, where the Europeans hired pearl-fishers. But these laborers still had to fulfill their obligations to their tribes and to take part in fishing in order to exchange their catch for agricultural goods produced by inland groups. Malinowski notes: “The obligation still holds good today, in spite of the disadvantages and losses that the pearl fishermen suffer, obliged to carry on fishing and to lose considerable sums in wages to fulfill a purely social obligation” (The Gift, p. 106, n. 87).


211. For an overview, see Jerry and Edmund Leach (eds), The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

212. As women cannot take to sea for several weeks on end, they usually entrust their kula to their brothers.

213. Mapula is the gift that Malinowski, in the Argonauts, had listed under “pure gifts,” a notion he later abandoned in Crime and Custom in Savage Society, explaining that he had not looked closely enough at the context of these gifts and that they were also part of a long chain of interested transactions between affines. Upon reading the Argonauts, Mauss immediately took exception to Malinowski’s expression “pure gift” (The Gift, p. 32), saying that it “was really inapplicable”; likewise Firth, in Elements of Social Organization (London, Watts and Co., 1951). Nevertheless, Sahlin’s was to return to the notion under another label, that of “generalized reciprocity.” Cf. Marshall Sahlin, Stone Age Economics, ch. 5.


Chapter 2 Substitute Objects for Humans and for the Gods


2. The notion of the fire lighted by Father-Sun and the sexual organs pierced at one go by the bursting flint stones strongly resembles Lévi-Strauss’ big-bang theory of language or Lacan’s theory of symbolic order. Before, nothing was possible, afterwards everything was.