



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The Gift in the Age of TTIP: the form and sense of exchange in an archaic civilization

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May 4, 2016

TTIP

The saga of the negotiations to create a free trade zone unifying the USA and the EU dates back several years. It follows earlier Washington initiatives for the Americas and the Pacific and is driven by the failure of the World Trade Organization. Most experts agree that, along with Japan, both the USA and Western Europe have been in the doldrums for decades – a deep-seated decline of which the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing woes of the Eurozone are but particular manifestations. TTIP has more serious geopolitical implications than its predecessors because it will reinforce the east-west cleavage in Europe in a climate in which relations to Russia have been poisoned and Cold War antagonisms revived. The political and military dimensions are not, however, the main reasons why millions of Europeans have protested against trade accords which, according to proponents such as President Obama and Chancellor Merkel, will lead to significantly enhanced economic performance on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather, citizens have taken to the streets to complain about the extreme secrecy of the negotiations, fuelling suspicions that consumer protection standards will be weakened, and that transnational corporations will acquire more regulatory power than the legal institutions of nation-states and the EU itself. Meanwhile the activists of movements such as Greenpeace are persuading ever more people that, even if such measures to stimulate the movement of goods were to bring an additional stimulus to GDP, such growth comes at a high price, namely planetary sustainability.

The Gift

The idea that our collective futures can be safeguarded through *more market* would seem unlikely in view of what has happened since the heyday of neoliberalism at the end of the last century. Yet this is where we stand today, and so it is instructive to recall classical critiques of market society and of the liberal utilitarian philosophy that is associated with it. Economic anthropologists have long taken their inspiration from Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi. Reeling

and traumatized by the First World War, both were attracted to “guild” varieties of socialism in the 1920s. Both paid close attention to the economic chaos of that age, and in particular to financial markets. They never met. While Polanyi made his living as an economic journalist in Vienna, Mauss remained primarily a scholar in Paris. His seminal work, the *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, published in 1925, embeds its critique of homo oeconomicus in a memorial volume of *L'Année Sociologique* that opens with tributes to all his deceased colleagues in the Durkheimian movement. By translating these opening pages, together with a selection of the book reviews that Mauss published in the same issue, Jane Guyer's new edition marks an advance on previous English translations.

Whereas the first translator opted to convert Mauss's footnotes into endnotes, specifically in order to make life easier for the reader, Guyer restores the footnotes. In general she is no revolutionary. Perhaps her most radical lexical change is to translate “*raison*” in Mauss's subtitle as “sense” (the previous translators both opted for “reason”). Mauss's erudition is remarkable, but there is much that will continue to strike contemporary readers as pedantic or scholastic. This is armchair anthropology at a high level. The way in which the author hops around the globe and across the centuries in four short chapters is more redolent of James Frazer than of the fieldwork-based monographs of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas. Mauss does discuss these and other contemporary ethnographers, which I suppose is justification enough for Hau Books (mission statement “to situate ethnography as the prime heuristic of anthropology”) to sponsor this new translation. Yet there is general agreement nowadays that Mauss's representations of these ethnographers are seriously deficient. Given the numerous errors and the archaic style (difficult enough in the original, even for native speakers), the mythical status of the *Essai* is odd. Economic anthropologists still require their students to read it, usually at undergraduate level, though even among the cognoscenti there is widespread disagreement as to what Mauss really wanted to say. Even the key Maori notion of *hau*, the spirit that binds the object to its donors, remains mysterious and contentious. Most readers (in my experience) come away with the idea that there is something about the exchange of gifts that is fundamentally opposed to the exchange of commodities; and that we modern humans need, for reasons of *morale*, to cherish and resuscitate lingering remnants of an older ethos of noble generosity in giving, an impulse that can still be found in the interstices of contemporary social life.





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A London book launch

To celebrate Guyer's translation (which I review more carefully in a forthcoming essay for the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*), on 30 April 2016 Hau Books organized a symposium at the newly established Centre for Ethnographic Theory at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. Following a presentation of the project by Jane Guyer herself, nine anthropologists gave short lectures. I cannot mention them all in this post. The sequence was opened respectfully by Marilyn Strathern and Marshall Sahlins. The latter had delivered the inaugural Hocart Lecture the previous evening. Sahlins saw no need to amend the analysis of Mauss that he had first formulated 47 years before. Now he wished to place even greater emphasis on the animistic mixing of persons and things. By taking most of his examples from non-agricultural societies, Sahlins implicitly pushed Mauss's evolutionary narrative further back into human prehistory. For Mauss, gift exchange is a phenomenon of "the great Neolithic civilization" (2016: 185), but Sahlins' extension is consistent with the master's theory of long-term survivals.

While Sahlins conceded the persistence of a few "head-scratchers" even in this new translation, and identified a "lack of precision" in French anthropology more generally, David Graeber was more forthright in his criticisms. For him, Mauss subsumes too many very different kinds of exchange under the label gift. Within this category, Mauss's bias to heroic forms makes the *Essai* unhelpful as a general model (whereas in other works he set out the vision of "baseline communism" later taken up by Graeber himself). The critical voices grew louder as the afternoon proceeded. Maurice Bloch knew Mauss personally in the 1940s and faulted his uncle for not having a remotely plausible theoretical framework as he pursued his ethnographic treasure hunt. According to Bloch, the *Essai* owes its fame in the English-speaking world to the fact that it appealed to the anti-scientific bias of Evans-Pritchard and his contemporaries in Oxford, who commissioned the first translation. Only Lévi-Strauss was able to retrieve something of lasting importance from this work, some inspiration in the search for human universals, and this had nothing to do with obscure Maori notions of *hau*. Johnny Parry's critique proceeded along different lines but ended up equally damning: he highlighted morally obnoxious aspects of gift-giving and found Mauss of no help whatsoever in pursuing a

sociology of interests and inequalities. It was left to Keith Hart to defend Mauss against these “scurrilous attacks” by his LSE Emeriti colleagues. According to Hart, the *Essai* is to be read as an extension of Durkheim’s analysis of “the non-contractual element in the contract”. A more advanced division of labour makes for stronger societies *and* stronger individuals; altruism and self-interest are not opposed, nor are the gift economy and the commodity economy. Hart reaffirmed Mauss’s credentials as a revolutionary socialist in search of new ways to draw everything together.



At the book launch, from the right: Maurice Bloch, Jonathan Parry, Keith Hart and Chris Hann.
(Photo: Giovanni da Col)

Mauss, Polanyi, TTIP and Eurasian civilizations

Clearly there is rather a lot going on in Mauss’s short essay. The Hau Books edition is welcome, but it is not going to make undergraduates’ lives any easier. To be fair, the seminal texts of Karl Polanyi a generation later are not easy either. Both men reacted to the disasters of their age, above all the Great War, and both understood that unbridled capitalist markets were threatening the future of humanity. Both were attracted to guild socialism. But there were also significant differences. Polanyi’s socialism grew harder as he aged. He ended up as an apologist for the Soviet Union: distasteful though it was, it offered the only prospect of escape from our “obsolete market mentality” (Polanyi 1947). Mauss, by contrast, considers markets to be a necessity (few of us with experience of fieldwork in socialist societies would disagree on this point). More importantly, his ethical priorities differ. In Chapter 4 of the *Essai* he makes it plain that he is repelled not just by the Bolsheviks but by the very idea of a welfare state: social inclusion is something to be organized on a local level, by particular factories or branches of industry, not by the state. He also emphasizes the importance of work: we can be fairly sure that he would not join the crowds who take to the streets in contemporary Paris to protest against the labour market reforms introduced by a socialist government. I think Hart is correct in cautioning us against reading into Mauss a binary of “gift versus commodity”, since actually existing human economies always combine the two impulses; but it is stretching the imagination to view Mauss as a socialist revolutionary.

The entire treasure-hunt of *The Gift* consists in a nostalgic Frazerian longing to recapture a glorious past of human sociality constituted by the agonistic giving of hospitable heroes, known primarily through myths and epics, supplemented (sketchily and erroneously) with ethnography. Indo-European societies have preserved some of the essentials of the spirit of the gift in their legal systems, which do not distinguish between persons and things as we moderns do (2016: 145-76). It is the same in other civilizations all over the world. At one point (2016: 85n) Mauss even refers to an "Atlantic civilization". Actually Mauss wrote "Pacific civilization" - this is one of very few mistakes I noticed in Guyer's translation. But today we can describe a new Atlantic civilization and give it a name: TTIP. This new civilization has emerged as a malignant offshoot of millennia of Eurasian history. These millennia brought forth radically new forms of political economy that cannot be grasped through an antiquarian analysis that focuses on philological analysis of juridical texts. Whereas Marcel Mauss (with Marshall Sahlins in his wake) focuses on what has been lost since the animist cosmologies of prehistory (including the "Indo-European potlatch", 2016: 85n), a more progressive comparative anthropology would pay some serious attention to the *gains*. For example, instead of polemicizing against the welfare state on the grounds that "charity is still wounding for the person who accepts it" (2016: 177), it would then be possible to see the social democracy of the 20th century as the culmination of a moral economy that has its roots in new forms of polity and cosmology that developed contemporaneously across the Eurasian landmass in the first millennium BCE. From this perspective, TTIP is a reactionary threat. The best way to counter this Atlantic civilization, which is archaic in the sense that it is the civilization of a capitalism that is now in decline, based on a mentality correctly diagnosed by Polanyi 70 years ago as "obsolete", is to build new forms of democratic polity and society with dynamic partners elsewhere in Eurasia. Alas, instead of seeking conversations with China and other civilizational centres of Eurasia with the aim of retaining substantive moral economies and promoting more real freedom and equality in the world, the EU is currently complicit in market-led global degradation which has the political effect of pushing Eurasian neighbours into deeper spirals of repression.

References

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Polanyi, Karl 1947 Our obsolete market mentality. Civilization must find a new thought pattern. *Commentary* 3 (2): 109-17.