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Donating is a market (of debt)

Anthropological analysis based on *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss

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B- Donating is a market (of debt)

Anthropological analysis based on

The Gift by Marcel Mauss

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Abstract. Starting out from a rereading of Marcel Mauss’s groundbreaking study “The Gift” (1924) and its successive reworkings by Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu, and drawing on fieldwork from Africa, this paper proposes another interpretation of the phenomenon of gift-giving as a central modality for the circulation of goods and wealth in community-based societies. Hitherto, most explanations have retained a theoretical core according to which any “generous” exchange—being subject to the obligation to give, to receive and ultimately to reciprocate the gift—could only be governed by a non-economic logic (or, at least, one that negates its utilitarian dimension): a logic that symbolizes and reproduces social bonds, signs of power and prestige, and the relationship between men and their gods.

Here, the analysis picks up the problem by taking a simple observation: community-based societies are mutual funds. The exchange of gift and deferred counter-gift are the functional equivalent of modern systems of insurance, social security and mutual credit schemes. They are thus subject to a logic of debt, which derives its strength from its economic utility and from the constraining power of the moral obligation of reciprocity that binds together creditors and debtors (all of whom are keenly aware of their personal interests!). The community is therefore a debt market, regulated by the constant flow of their transactions.

Today, however, rising inequalities are causing that market to dry up. The time has come for the predatory state and its oligarchies to pay their debts toward the poor, whose community-based systems of solidarity can no longer provide them with effective protection.

Keywords. Gift, Marcel Mauss, debt.

1 “The generous exchange”

The classic distinction between gifts (central in pre-capitalistic “traditional” societies) and the market (hegemonic in “modern” capitalistic societies) refers to the opposition between two apparently antinomic ideal types: the freeness of the gift which expects nothing in return except the altruistic feeling of having accomplished a duty of solidarity and having pleased another, is opposed to the utilitarianism of merchant exchange aimed at the sole satisfaction of material needs and the selfish search for profits. The moral relationship between the generous donor and the grateful receiver is opposed to the functional indifference between buyers and sellers, who, once the transaction is completed, do not owe each other anything and can return to their own business and no longer worry about the other.

And indeed, without ignoring the need for economic exchanges (bartering, local markets, long-distance trading, etc.) which periodically brings together producers of complementary goods with codified equivalences, acts of gift-giving made without any apparent concern for economic calculation

is central in traditional societies. This can be seen in everyday life endlessly interspersed with unreturned gifts and sharing (of services, food) each one taking turns at giving and receiving, and in ceremonial gatherings with displays of generosity in lavish spending by the host, the sacrificial offerings, banquets and libations or even squandering.

In his famous text, *The Gift* (1924), Mauss also referred to these circulations of gifts without any immediate consideration as “generous exchanges”, an expression which we hasten to stress, assumes an essential requisite for that “generosity”. Meaning that it is beneficial for all parties, which implies the fair (not necessarily equivalent) contribution of all. In other words, the generous exchange must necessarily fit into social interactions built on trust, mutual control of conducts and the correlative concern for one’s reputation: one’s “name”, one’s honour, one’s credit (sic). All characteristic traits of “community” type societies and social networks, in other words based on mutual knowledge (direct, face to face, within local groups and by degrees—hence the importance of the “name”—within clan networks and tribal or inter-ethnic networks of alliances). In short, contrary to

the modern individualistic society where “lonely crowd”, “serialisation” and anonymity of social relations prevail, community-based sociality, by banning cheating “freeloaders” guarantee the cyclical nature, and consequently the sustainability of the “generous exchange”.

2 Paradoxes of the gift: The three obligations, give, receive, reciprocate.

Mauss bases his thinking primarily on Polynesian, Melanesian and Amerindian cases when he emphasizes the social constraint underlying the circulation of gifts. The same applies to the potlatch of the Indians of British Columbia observed by ethnologist Frantz Boas at the end of the 19th century. At these large inter-tribal gatherings (during initiation rites, marriages, funerals, enthronement, peace, reparation for murder, inauguration of an alliance or religious celebration), at the same time as the “prosaic” exchanges of “economically useful” goods, tribes, family groups and chiefs make a parade of the ceremonial movement of valuables (bracelets, necklaces, embroidered blankets, weapons, shields, etc.) in “the form of a present, a generously offered gift”(147).

But this conceals a paradox: “the apparently free and no-strings-attached (...), and yet mandatory and self-seeking nature of these demonstrations (147). In fact, they follow “three obligations: give, receive, reciprocate”(205).

The obligation to give is the ransom of power. The chief displays his wealth when he organizes a potlatch, he honours his name and his clan and in “agonistic” potlatches, challenges his rivals to be as generous as he is. “The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch. A chief (...) only maintains his rank (...) if he proves that he is haunted and favoured by the spirits and by fortune (...); and he can only prove this fortune by spending, distributing and humiliating others, by putting them “in the shadow of his name” (205-206).

The reverse side of the gift is the obligation to receive. Refusing would mean that “we are afraid of having to reciprocate”, “losing the weight of our name”(210). And “in principle, every gift is always accepted and even praised”(211). Indeed, “it’s not like at the market where objectively, we pick one thing for one price”: what matters, are the “ties created by the goods transmitted between giving and receiving parties” (250). Refusing, we stress again, would be an affront: a refusal to engage in a relationship.

The other side of receiving is the obligation to reciprocate which demonstrates the universal contractual dimension of the gift. “Thus we compete with our Christmas boxes, feasts, weddings, in our simple invitations and we still feel obliged to revanchieren, as the Germans say”(153). The gift is in fact a provocation that must be returned as shown by the analogy of the “contract sacrifice” (169) for which the Latin expression is *do ut des* (I give so that you should give): “sacrificial destruction is precisely aimed at making a donation that is necessarily reciprocated” since we “believe (...) that the gods are capable of reciprocating the price of things”(167). For instance, with the Kwakiutl Indians, when we accept the gift, “we know that we are making a commitment. We receive a gift “on the back”; it involves much more than benefiting from a thing or a feast,

we have accepted a challenge; and we were able to accept because we are sure that we can reciprocate (...)”(211).

3 Cultural ambiguities: the Maori “theory” taken literally

And yet this universal function of the gift (establishing and maintaining social ties) does not fully reflect its contractual dimension which guarantees its cyclical reproduction. We still need to ask ourselves “what is the rule of law and interest which (...) stipulates that the present received must necessarily be reciprocated?”(148). Yet, Mauss, referring to a Maori “theory” according to which things given must be returned in one form or other to their initial owner, because they are endowed with a “virtue”, the *hau*, “the spirit of things”, “the soul and the power of things” (158,n.4), proposes a curiously non sociological hypothesis: “What power lies in the thing that makes the giver return it?”(148).

No doubt, eschewing his usual concern for comparative anthropology, Mauss yields here to “culturalistic” temptation (specific to ethnology that conserves the exotic nature of objects) seeing in it “the key to the problem”: “what creates an obligation in the received, exchanged gift is the fact that the thing received is not inert. Even abandoned by the donor, it still retains something of that donor. The giver maintains a hold over the beneficiary through the gift (...)” (158).

Lévi-Strauss later underlines this straying away: according to him, Mauss represents in this instance “one of those cases [...] where the ethnologist allows himself to be mystified by the native”. In reality, this “virtue” which, in things, supposedly forces them to circulate, is nothing else than the very need for exchange, the principle and engine of any social life: “it’s the exchange that constitutes the primitive phenomenon”; “the *hau* is not the reason behind the exchange: it’s the conscious form under which men (...) have apprehended an unconscious need, the reason for which lies elsewhere”.

That may be so. But if we follow out the Lévi-Strauss concept of reciprocity, are we not referring more exactly to the need of which the *hau* would indeed be the “conscious form”? With the *hau*, are the Maoris not saying consciously that reciprocity is the required condition for any exchange: for it to exist and last, all parties must then have a reciprocal interest.

4 Delayed reciprocity: Bourdieu’s dilemma and the lucidity of the Kabyle people. A gift conceals a debt.

For Bourdieu, what “is missing” in Mauss and Lévi-Strauss’s analyses, is “the decisive role of the time interval between the gift and the counter-gift”. This interval would serve as a “screen between the gift and the future counter-gift” by masking the reality of “give and take”. Admittedly an “open secret”(183) but “taboo” because this fiction is used to cast a veil of “selflessness” over collusions of interests between equals and on relationships of domination and exploitation.

And yet the Kabyle people “of” Bourdieu state the reality quite bluntly: “I collected in Kabylia numerous proverbs which say roughly that the gift is a curse because ultimately, it has to be returned. (...) In any case, the initial act is a

A. Marie: Donating is a market (of debt)

violation of the freedom of the person who receives. It is filled with menace: it forces you to reciprocate (...); in addition, it creates obligations, it is a way of having a hold, having people who owe you”(180). But, despite this Kabyle lucidity (which he objects to his own), Bourdieu also yields to the “culturalistic” syndrome of anti-banalisation of his object when he sticks to his thesis of “collective ignorance”. He insists that without it, the exchange of gifts would only be an ordinary transaction of more or less long-term lending. “This is a very thorny issue: although sociology sticks to its objectivist description [the Kabyle one], it reduces gift exchange to give and take and can no longer find a culturalistic difference between an exchange of gifts and an act of credit”(180).

5 The logic of debt

And yet the credit act (the delayed give and take) is indeed the key to the problem: the gift is a social placement, a more or less long-term investment in the sense that it creates a relationship of creditor to debtor with its different variants. Hierarchical relationships between donor and receiver, benefactors and obligees, generous chiefs and tributary subjects, lords and vassals, patrimonial State and citizens reduced to submission through favours, redistributions, prebends and favouritism, (political) bosses and clients, raising/educating parents and children bound by “gratitude”, parents-in-law givers of wives and sons-in-law for whom “the dowry never ends”. But also reversible relationships between commensals, in turn creditors and debtors, who create mutual obligations for themselves through self-seeking friendships, covenants of convenience, mutual services between accomplices, mafia type alliances, political scheming pacts, etc.

In short, the same “logic of debt” lies behind all these avatars: the donation makes the receiver an indebted person bound by “gratitude”, which is first a “recognition of debt” and in community type societies or networks, this moral obligation is reinforced by an arsenal of social sanctions: shame, dishonour, ostracism, banishment, spells, anger of the ancestors and gods, bad luck, settling of scores, magical killing etc.

Seen from this angle, “the time interval between the gift and the counter-gift” is far from a mere devout lie. This is simply because the exchange of gifts is a long term process, given that the needs and resources of people do not coincide at the same time; furthermore, someone’s debtor may be the creditor of another, the creditor may become in turn the debtor of his initial debtor and vice versa. This endless dynamic explains, parallel to all prosaic exchanges, the permanent to-and-fro of gifts and counter-gifts which may mystify the ethnologist, while the “native” actors themselves, know very well where they stand: they free themselves from certain debts and contract others, pay off a debt to one and become indebted to another, invest in the indebtedness of new obligees or on the contrary (for example to cope with unexpected events) appeal to new creditors.

6 The gift conceals the market of debts

In short, the apparently generous gift is a deal. But it is a specific deal, implicit in a certain way, because it is driven

by a logic of debt which is self evident in a community-based sociality regime where it unites partners who are still-already bound by ties of debt in a long-term relationship (and who contract further more debt). Therefore the relationship’s sustainability depends on the necessarily delayed nature of the exchange (the time interval between the credit and its reimbursement, between the placement and its yield, between the investment and the return on investment) and on the fact that, by definition, any feeling of being indebted is a moral obligation.

Yet Mauss himself keeps on tiptoeing around this logic of debt while recognizing its universal validity. Although, he highlights the notion of “credit”, he does not seem to notice that it is the right side of the “debt”. He for example wrote, among other remarks, that: “in every possible society, it is in the nature of the gift to ultimately oblige (...) [so much so that] “time” is required to perform any counter-service”; “the gift necessarily generates the notion of credit”(199); “the credit known by all the archaic societies that continue to exist around us” is a “simple and realistic way of solving the problem of two “moments of time” which the contract unifies” (200). And hadn’t he already perceived, in the exchange of gifts, “the market before the institution of merchants and before their principal invention, the currency itself” (148)?

In the final analysis, Mauss and Bourdieu are quite close to the essence. The gift is indeed an “act of credit”, which in itself, necessarily implies an ultimate “return”, therefore a delayed give and take, a universal logic of debt which establishes a long-term bond between “creditors” and “debtors”.

7 Last unasked question: why the debt?

Answer: the community is a mutual society

There is still the question forgotten by our authors: why is this logic of debt so pervasive in certain societies? Simple question, straightforward answer: whether they are “traditional” societies, objects of study for ethnologists, or “traditional” sectors stuck in “modern” societies where the State assumes practically no welfare State function and where dire poverty prevents the bulk of the population from gaining access to the merchant systems of social protection, health and credit, there is no other form of solidarity accessible other than the solidarity from the social entourage.

In short, in both cases, one’s native community fulfils all the functions which, in other social systems, are performed by the public power, private companies or charity institutions. The native community is then a mutual assistance society, insurance society, pension fund and mutual credit fund all rolled in one, in a nutshell, the community is a mutual society. Yet in the absence of other forms of guarantees and sanctions (rules of law, courts, police, mortgage loans, bank loans collateralized on income, etc.), the only guarantee of this community solidarity obviously hinges on the fact that is regulated by an intangible and sacred principle, the principle of reciprocity, in the name of which the gift sooner or later obliges the receiver to be “grateful” as they say in West Africa. The fundamental law, is therefore the Law of Debt and whoever violates it faces the most serious of punishments.

There is therefore neither “mystery” nor bad faith in the “time interval” between gift and counter-gift, but simply the universal and banal logic of credit and debt that exists in any system of protections and mutual insurances, be they community-based, state-based or merchant-based. Giving (contributing) and getting are disjoined, not strictly equivalent, they imply multiple partners allowing the balancing of revenues and expenditures and positions can always be reversed in the operation of this type of system: one is in turn donor or receiver, creditor or debtor, contributor or beneficiary, or one can hold both positions simultaneously (while I’m the creditor of others I could be indebted to others and vice versa).

But the specificity of community-based societies is that the force of the contract binding creditors and debtors hinge on the fact that there is no alternative solution to the reciprocity guaranteed by the public face to face relationship between creditor and debtor and all parties are backed by the tribunal of public opinion. That is why, any gift, a fortiori if given at large ceremonial gatherings, but also during more ordinary situations (on the village square, for example) is surrounded by a certain ostentation which calls on the third parties present to serve as witnesses.

8 Contemporary Lessons I: the gift as a moment of the debt

In the late sixties, a few days after he settled in the territory of the Dan people, in a small Ivorian “Far West” forest village, the young ethnologist was notified one morning of an impending visit. Soon afterwards, a procession comprising the old chief from one of the lineages of the village, followed by his two wives and some of their relatives stopped in front of his hut. One wife carried a live chicken, the other wife a great calabash full of rice, other villagers (notified of the initiative? drawn by one of those trivial events that break the monotony of quiet village days?) gathered around to watch. Then, in front of the small assembly, the old chief delivered his welcome speech to the young ethnologist: “you are now the Whiteman of our village, I’ve come to wish you welcome amongst us and I would like to be your friend. I’m giving you this chicken and rice as a token of my friendship”. And then the “village Whiteman” was ceremoniously offered the two gifts which he received with many customary expressions of thanks. Refusing the gifts would have obviously been an unbearable public humiliation for the giver. However, somewhat confused, he surprisingly found himself, as a true westerner, instinctively reaching for his pocket wallet to “pay” or at least generously “compensate” his host whom he knew to be dirt poor.

But, fortunately, he quickly checked himself: in his ethnological studies, the famous *The Gift* had been part of the syllabus, suddenly, he remembered the “obligation to receive” as if the gift were selfless. And isn’t it actually so, especially since nothing (neither payment nor immediate counter-gift) is not and must not be expected? It’s not an issue of barter or sale! But at the same time, the gift is not any less selfless in the sense that what is expected from this inaugural “freeness” is much more and better than the price of one chicken and a calabash of rice. It is the beginning of a relationship of

privileged friendship, all the more self-seeking as it publicly obliges a “Whiteman” (consequently a “boss” and “chief”), to become the obligee, the “debtor” of this obviously exhausted and impoverished old man (his outfit shows that he’s not rich, even by local standards). The “Whiteman” therefore has no choice but to accept the “deal” (the contract) in the name of which, as the Amerindian Tlingit say, “a gift has been placed on his back”. He knows that in exchange for that gift, one day or other, after the inevitable “decent” interval has passed, he will have to honour that contract, either by offering a counter-gift in return, or yielding to a request from his creditor (request for financial help, transportation in the Land Rover, nursing care, interceding with regional administrative authorities, etc.).

Much later, the same villagers will give him a proverb which concisely summarises this law of the debt: “when your host slaughters a chicken in his house to receive you, he slaughters a chicken in your house” (one day, you will have to pay this debt contracted today with this offered meal which you cannot refuse).

Abidjan, the nineties, years of economic crisis (and structural adjustment imposed by the IMF), years with an upsurge in violent, multifaceted crimes hold-ups of banks and rich homes; armed robberies in restaurants; attacks in the compounds of poor neighbourhoods; night ambushes by “road blockers” and also “carjacking” at gunpoint. This is the context in which the anthropologist receives a small lesson from the taxi driver who ferries him around the big city: It’s broad daylight, the highway runs through the middle of dense traffic and the roadside is a busy hive of numerous pedestrian activities, one can therefore stop at the red light of one of the rare junctions (it’s not advisable to stop at night...). At this junction, on the far side of the pavement, down on all fours on his atrophied and deformed members, a young poliomyelitic cripple chants his request for alms, hand raised towards the drivers who look away with the usual indifference of people jaded by the spectacle of misery which has become so common. And yet, the taxi driver gets out of his car, dashes around it, swiftly drops a bill in the outstretched hand and returns quickly to restart the car when the light changes to green.

Intrigued by this unexpected scene (he knows how the lucky ones who still have some kind of regular income are constantly solicited by their community entourage—where they have “debts” and also create “obligees” for themselves—and therefore reserve their limited financial aid capacity to that group, are usually indifferent to the miseries of others), the anthropologist asks: why this alms giving to a stranger in these difficult times? And the driver: “I made a sacrifice”. Then he explains: “nowadays, many of my colleagues have been victims of carjackers and their taxis or revenues have been stolen by bandits. Luckily for me, God has always protected me until now. So I’m making a sacrifice so that he continues to protect me from bandits”.

So our driver was implementing “the theory of sacrifice” on which Mauss notes that it is “enlightened” insofar as we are aware of “the relationships of these contracts and exchanges between men and the contracts and exchanges between men and gods” (166): “the spirits of the dead and the gods (...) are the true owners of the things and valuables of

A. Marie: Donating is a market (of debt)

this world. It is with them that there is the greatest need for exchanging and the most dangerous if we refuse to exchange. The sacrificial destruction is actually intended as a donation that has to be returned”(167). By giving alms to the beggar, our Moslem driver was renewing the terms of the contract that he had with his God who orders sadaqa as one of the five commandments of the believer: in “exchange” he could hope for lasting divine protection against gangsters...

Of course in this type of “contract” with the gods, the ancestors and the spirits, the debt relationship is asymmetrical (as it is in relationships between eminent chiefs and their subjects or between political bosses and their clients): inferiors still remain debtors and they never pay off their debt, because the value of what they have received and hope to receive is immeasurable compared to the value of what they themselves give “in return”: animal sacrifices, offerings of food, libations, prayers and invocations owed to the gods and to ancestors, tributes, chores and rites of submission owed to people in Power, electoral support, unconditional vote, public acts of allegiance, parallel police services and other various services including financial for the richest, owed to political bosses in exchange for their favours and their prebends, etc. Nevertheless, the prevailing rationale remains the same, in all these cases, a logic of debt, because these are the gifts of obligees, specifically of constant debtors, who manage and nurture in return the good graces and favours which supernatural or terrestrial powers deign to give them. The counter-gift of the debtor does not oblige this type of creditor to continue giving: it represents a gift of propitiation and sometimes conjuration or pardon, when soothsayers assign, for example a specific misfortune to the anger of a god or an ancestral spirit who has long been forgotten from sacrifices and other invocations. The lightning of the surreal powers that rule the world is then a call to order for the contract which binds the debtors but does not bind these type of creditors. As for creditors of the secular world, they have other concrete coercive means of forcing their debtors to show grateful submission!

9 Contemporary Lessons II: depletion of the debt, social crisis, political struggles

Today the logic of community debt is in crisis. The widespread poverty and mass unemployment has dried up its resources. When you can no longer “indebt” another because you have been “trimmed” (victim of staff trimming); when you can no longer count on your own debtors because they are part of those who “have never worked”; when you bitterly regret that you used to have “fifteen people on the back” at the time of your relative wealth as a stable wage earner and that all these “debtors” who then benefited from your help, now that you have “fallen into unemployment”, “never come to see you” (carefully avoid you) and they make you bitterly realise that your previous (social) investment prevented you from “investing” (in the economic sense) in a small business which would have allowed you to survive today; when the unemployed graduate, knowing very well the magnitude of his huge debt (a whole line of relatives may have “subscribed

“ in order to invest in his studies) and that in this respect he has betrayed the mission that was given to him, ends up by never “daring to visit his parents in the village” out of fear of becoming a victim of their magical punishments and now only thinks of embarking “on an adventure” (emigrating far-away since he has become “a stranger in his own country”); when defaulting husbands desert their marital homes, and soon stop “sending anything back home”, abandon their children to single mothers without any other support than other single mothers; when finally, last but not least, the residents of poor neighbourhoods recount the miserable “scams” where the poor are victims of other poor people doomed to the expedient sacrilege of a perverse use of the morale of mutual assistance (they come begging for a gift, credit, then slip away or disappear) even inside the same family, then it means that the much touted solidarity treasures (just as their ingenious resourcefulness and their attractive playful sociability) which we love to credit the poor with when we observe them from afar and from above, in short, it actually means that these exotic traits which some have dared call an “economy of affection”, and which, I, based on texts by Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu and on testimonies collected from among the poorest and the new poor of Abidjan and Bamako, have analysed as a “logic of debt” and even as a “deal of debt”, then it means that the carefully woven fabric is unravelling today. It means that the entrenched structure of the economy of gifts, seemingly generous, but self-seeking, seemingly free, but binding, is currently running out within community-based worlds.

Therefore there is nothing surprising about the fact that civic hopes for freedom and social justice is emerging from deep within these communities. They are manifested in revolts against predatory and tyrannical States at the exclusive service of the political mafias in Power and the oligarchies in business. There is nothing surprising about the increasing clamour for democratic States, the equitable redistribution of the wealth that is collectively produced by all citizens, including the poorest and the most underprivileged. In a nutshell, in favour of States capable of recognising their debts and settling them.