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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

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."[1] 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."[2] 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, professional 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?"[3]

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.[4] 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 knowledge 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 analyzed all this in *La Production des Grands Hommes*[5] 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 *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-Giving*.[6] I had read this author's earlier publications, but here she took her ideas much further. As a Trobriand specialist returning to the same phenomenon, 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 particular 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 religion? 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.