

From
The World of the Gift¹

by Jacques T. Godbout
in collaboration with Alain Caillé
translated by Donald Winkler
McGill-Queen's University Press ©1998

Introduction
Does the Gift (Still) Exist?

“The times are hard but modern”

“The times are hard but modern,” goes an Italian proverb quoted by Sloterdijk (1983). The modern individual will plead guilty to many things, but not to being naïve. Anything but that. He knows perfectly well what is hidden behind the gods, the myths, the great and wonderful tales that have come down to us from all lands and all ages. The modern individual is a realist, and therefore knows what is hidden behind the gift. Having had the sad but modern privilege of looking reality in the eye and not being duped by appearances, she knows that what motivates production and the exchange of goods is not altruism or generosity but material interest; that politics is not a matter of ideals but of power and violence; and that affections are not ruled by feelings but first and foremost by sex. More generally, the modern sophisticate answers only to the reality principle, and that principle proclaims that only matter and the body really exist. The rest is a figment of the imagination! And so we may dream about the gift, this offshoot or simulation

¹ An earlier version of this introduction was published in the *Revue du MAUSS* (no. II, 1991, 11-32).

of the ineffable, in the intimacy or darkness of a movie theatre or on a solitary walk. But using it as an instrument to analyse hard reality is out of the question.

We have understood everything when we've understood that. And if we are so bold as to affirm something else, it can only mean that we are incapable of penetrating the veil. For the modern sophisticate, in the aftermath of Freud, Marx, Lévi-Strauss, or Bourdieu, innocence is no longer possible unless leavened with irony. Unless, as Umberto Eco has made clear, it is “un-innocent.” “Man thinks, God laughs,” adds Kundera. Of course it is tempting, praiseworthy, and appealing to seek a new key to the understanding of the world, a new way of reading modernity. Utilitarianism, Marxism, structuralism are all sad and disillusioning. Perhaps we've all been conned by modernity, but that's the way it is. Innocence has been lost forever. Might as well make the best of it and not give in to nostalgia for the past, for we must all be brave little moderns. And to assume our modernity (or post-modernity) is first and foremost to accept the non-existence or the insubstantiality of the gift: “Thou shalt believe only in hard reality, thou shalt resist the temptation to surrender to the gift.” This might be the first commandment of a catechism designed expressly for moderns.

THE GIFT DOES NOT EXIST/THE GIFT
IS EVERYWHERE

All this helps explain the astonishing inconsistency and diversity in reactions to the very idea of writing a book on the gift. On the one hand the gift does not exist, because only the body and self-interest are real, while on the other hand the gift is all too present. Let us look at these initial responses before embarking on any hypotheses of our

own. Taking our cue from the modern ethos itself, we will refuse to simply take it at its word and will extend our skepticism to skepticism itself, asking ourselves what is hidden behind this compulsion to deny the existence of the gift.

The Gift Does Not Exist (Any More)

“You can’t be serious, you want to write about the gift? You want to study charity, good deeds? Or generosity? Now that’s a topic! Unfortunately, it’s just about ceased to exist.” Or perhaps fortunately, in the opinion of most. One may deplore the fact that the gift has given way to cold calculation and mercantile exchange, mourning or longing for a world more welcoming, human, and fraternal. But no one complains that law has taken the place of charity and that the right to social assistance, guaranteed by the welfare state, has supplanted the giving of alms. Where these are concerned, if the gift no longer exists, so much the better.

Generosity has disappeared as well, replaced, it is said, by egoistic calculation. The key word that crops up when people react spontaneously is egoism. “People are so egoistic!” And after gifts to charity and religion, what comes to mind is “the gift of oneself”—and that seems so quaint and old-fashioned.

“A book on the gift? Give me an example.” After a bit of thought, this: “I’ve just offered you an aperitif. You say, ‘Okay, but then I’ll pay for the wine.’ Why this quid pro quo? That’s the sort of question we’ll be dealing with.” Such an example usually makes people feel uncomfortable, which will not surprise those familiar with the theoretical literature on the gift, as one of its main conclusions is that, unlike the world of the market, the world of the gift is one where the implicit and the unsaid

reign supreme. The magic of the gift can only operate as long as the underlying rules are not formulated. As soon as they become explicit, the carriage turns into a pumpkin, the king turns out to be naked, and the gift is reduced to reciprocity. And so after a few moments of silence and reflection, our questioner gathers his forces and returns to the attack: “But that’s just it, since I’m paying for the wine, there’s no gift.” To which we respond: “But is it really the same thing as our agreeing to split the tab for the aperitif and the wine, even supposing it makes no difference, monetarily? And if it does amount to the same thing, why not just do it that way and avoid complicating our lives?”

In a way, this is the crux of the problem. If the gift and the counter-gift are unequal, then there’s a winner and a loser, and possibly exploitation and trickery. If, on the other hand, they are the same, then there’s apparently no difference between the gift and a rational, self-interested mercantile exchange. In short, either the gift results from uncharitable motives and is therefore illegitimate or it is non-existent, illusory. This is the modern point of view as formulated by our discussant. Any attempt to depart from the law of the account book is seen as suspect or, at best, laughable. But we should ask ourselves whether the creation of social ties does not obey elusive rules whose connections with economic logic are often strange and paradoxical. How long would Robinson and Friday have survived on their island if their only relations had been commercial ones, excluding any other bond? Perhaps the wine is worth the same as the aperitif, but if the two diners had not had other than monetary motives in mind, they would probably not have met and the question of equivalence would never have come up.

So the initial reaction to our idea of doing a book on the gift is one of denial. The gift does not exist. Or if it

does, it's just a way of putting on airs and playing at disinterestedness and generosity, when what's really at work, as elsewhere, is self-interest and tit-for-tat.

The second spontaneous reaction is one of embarrassment or defiance, as though some stranger at a party were to start quizzing you about your sex life, or how much, exactly, you earn. "What business is it of his?" you're inclined to say. You might try to defuse the question with some sort of joke, but you'd still be uncomfortable. The same defensive reflexes are triggered by the subject of the gift. This is not surprising. In the past, what was "hidden" was money and sex. The social sciences concluded that because it was unacceptable to discuss these things openly, they must constitute what is deeply real, must embody some basic truth. By a strange reversal, the gift, once required subject matter for edifying discourses, has become more obscene than obscenity itself. It's now almost de rigueur to expatiate on one's sexual or financial conquests. The gift, on the other hand, has become taboo, unmentionable. At most it's a private matter, like religion, and if we continue to probe it must be because we suspect that, since the idea of the gift makes one blush, there may be something hidden.

The Gift Is Everywhere

However, once we've explained ourselves, initial reactions usually give way to a growing interest. Often "confession" takes over from indifference and uneasiness and the gift, which was nowhere to be found, is suddenly everywhere. Someone who had asserted "that the basis for everything in the modern world is egoism" turns out, according to his friends, to be particularly generous: "I'm amazed that Robert reacted that way. He's so generous; he gives of himself a lot. He even offered to pay for my daughter's

schooling because he knows I'm going through a difficult period financially." Or the same people who had initially denied the existence or the importance of the gift tell us stories like the following:

- A retired civil servant, an atheist and rationalist, totally secular, does volunteer work with a religious order that cares for the poor. "You know, I receive more than I give," he is quick to say, as though to justify his giving way to such behaviour before the court of utilitarian reason. "Often I don't say a thing, it's the person I visit who does all the talking." The message is clear: as long as he receives more than he gives, everything's all right—he's not violating the code of modern freedom. (Note in passing a surprising detail: to speak is construed as a gift. Perhaps the first gift.)
- A university professor with a cynical cast of mind does volunteer work with AIDs patients. A friend comments, "He has such a big heart, and yet he's always distant with his best friends. But he works with those who have AIDs. No one knows about it."
- A friend does volunteer work with a telephone help service. Even before she started, she claimed to have benefited greatly from the training she'd been given. "I want," she said, "to give back a little of what I've been allotted in life. I've received a great deal."
- The wife of a friend "had her life literally saved by Alcoholics Anonymous," a group based entirely on the principle of the gift. "She's another person since she's been going to AA."

In some respects, these examples are almost too good to be true, portraying the gift as an exceedingly pure and serene phenomenon. This is not to say that there is any reason to

cast doubt on the sincerity of these gestures. The most sarcastic moderns will still admit that “good people” exist, even if there’s something vaguely condescending in the way they refer to them. What bothers us in these accounts is their excessive simplicity. They represent too symmetrical a response to the modern denial of the gift. “The gift does not exist, all is egoism,” murmurs the spirit of the times. “The gift is alive and well, and altruism too,” declare these case histories—and the many more that could be found to back them up. Such altruism can always be interpreted by the modern spirit as one more avenue to pleasure for the individual. But, at the very least, egoism that finds its pleasures in altruism is very different from the crude, primary egoism whose universality the modern ethos takes for granted.

And so the debate appears to be circular and endless. The modern realist refuses to believe in the existence of the gift because the gift is seen as diametrically opposed to material, egoistic self-interest. A “true” gift can only be disinterested, freely given. And, as such a thing is impossible (“there’s no free lunch”), the gift, the genuine gift, is equally impossible, with the result that those who do behave generously insist that their seemingly altruistic actions are really to their advantage. On the one hand, as we have said, such denial allows them to conform to the egoistic morality of the times. But, on a deeper level, by denying that their motivations are disinterested, they attest to the reality of their gift. For, as Mary Douglas has shown (1989), the free gift does not exist—except insofar as it is a sign of asocial behaviour—for the gift serves above all to establish relations, and a relationship with no hope of return (from the individual receiving the gift or his substitute), a one-way relationship, disinterested and motiveless, would be no relationship at all. Beyond the abstract ideas of egoism and altruism and the rigid

antithesis between a supposedly real moment of calculated material interest and a supposedly ideal but unattainable moment of radical disinterest, we must think of the gift not as part of a series of unilateral and discontinuous acts but as an element in a relationship. Even more than Marx’s capital, the gift is not a thing but a social connection. It is perhaps the social connection *par excellence*, all the more formidable in that it is coveted. To say on the one hand that the gift always has selfish origins, and on the other that it ought always to be disinterested, gives us only an antiseptic notion of what the gift is and stands in the way of our perceiving that if the gift is shunned and disclaimed by modernity, it is because it’s dangerous.

DANGERS OF THE GIFT, AND ITS REFUSAL

“I refused the gift my employer offered me,” says a secretary. “He doesn’t deserve my accepting his presents. It would imply a kind of relationship I don’t want.” We know that the Greeks are to be feared when they bring gifts: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*. Marcel Mauss has noted that the word used for “gift” in Germanic languages signifies both gift and poison. Just a coincidence? Not likely, as we find the same double meaning in the Greek “dosis,” from which we derive our “dose,” as in “a lethal dose.” Whatever the linguistic background, it’s clear that presents are especially poisonous when the way they are given or those who proffer them are in one way or another noxious. “A friend offered me, and others, a book he had published at his own expense. No one read it, everyone refused. He was very put out. It was awful. But his book was unreadable; you had to refer to the dictionary ten times every page, it was a truly poisoned gift. When you come down to it, we felt that his book was really an expression of need on his part, a need for recognition in every way: we were to acknowledge his worth and show

our respect by working very hard to read his book, to accept his gift and show that we loved him.” This gift was, in fact, indirectly an appeal for a counter-gift. That transgresses the rules of giving, and the friends resented a present that was so demanding and “obligational.”

For his birthday, Nadine offered homemade jam to Jerome, from whom she had recently separated. She was miffed by his reaction: “He didn’t say anything. Finally I asked him if he was pleased. He just said I’d struck a sensitive chord. Not even a word of thanks!” In this case the recipient was just emerging from a difficult relationship with the giver, a relationship that had posed a threat to his self-image. He was afraid the gift might be a harbinger of renewed conquest, and so he was unable to say thank you. To say it would have meant “I accept, once again, being at your beck and call.” This is apparent in his explanation that she had struck a sensitive “chord,” the “cord” by which he had been bound. This is a perfect illustration of the expressive power of ordinary language, however banal it may appear at first glance. Any analysis indicates that words such as “thank you” and “please,” which have been rendered formal and superficial as society evolved, have been neutralized only in appearance and still retain the expressive force they had at first use. For instance, the word “thank you”—in French *merci*—may be seen as an indirect way of saying that the very fact of receiving a gift can make one in some sense dependent, can put one at the “mercy” (*merci* in French) of the giver. The word’s historical movement towards its current status as a polite formula, superficially superficial, has not really drained it of its strength, and that strength resurges in certain circumstances. This example also shows that a present is an object that is linked to social ties. There is no question here of the quality of the gift—of the jam not being delicious. In fact it’s because it is delicious and

offered by the maker herself—thereby embodying something of her—that the offering may contribute to the creation of a bond. Because its quality is so high, it carries the bond within it, harbours it, and so is dangerous for the recipient, strikes his “sensitive chord.” And he cannot say “thank you.” The words “stick in his throat.”

At first glance, there may seem to be nothing mysterious about these three accounts. In every case the gift is refused, or is not acknowledged to be a gift, because to accept it would be to tacitly endorse an unwanted relationship. But saying that explains nothing, because it takes for granted what is, in fact, the problem. It assumes that the gift is a symbol for, and in some sense a manifestation of, personal relationships—that it is a catalyst and an outward sign of elective affinities. Above all, it assumes that the gift imposes obligations, which include the fact that it must be reciprocated. From a rational point of view, these examples are confusing. Why not just accept the poisoned book and say that you like the author but not that kind of writing? Why not take the jam and say that it’s good, but what’s over is over? In the examples given, one might choose not to do this because of fear of emotional retaliation. In the two examples that follow, however, the strength of the obligation to respond in kind is astonishing, even though no sanction of any sort seems likely, not even that the recipient might become involved in a tedious or uninteresting relationship.

Back from Haiti, Albert says he’s struck by the feeling that in Quebec one should not owe anything to anyone, while in Haiti, the situation is exactly the opposite (which, of course, presents other problems). He gives the following illustration: “My daughter had just received a good report card. To reward her, my wife and I went to buy her some candies at the corner store. There we met one of her schoolmates, to whom we offered some candies

as well. Ten minutes later she turned up at our house with a dollar that her father had given her to reimburse me.”

And, further: “A man knocked at my door. His car had broken down in front of my house and he wanted to use the phone. He also asked me for some water. When he left he took 20 dollars out of his pocket and offered it to me. I refused the money. So he gave me his card, saying: ‘I hope I’ll be able to return the favour some day—the sooner the better.’” The utilitarian cast of mind so much in favour today ought to have led the driver to say to himself, “one for my side.” But instead he acted as though a debt, even a paltry one, were inherently dangerous and impossible to bear. (Unless, more simply, there was a certain pleasure to be derived from giving something in return.) Faced with the dangers inherent in any gift, money and a recourse to mercantile thinking are the antidotes of choice, providing both counter-gifts and antitoxins.

Françoise recounts: “Recently I had serious problems with a present. Someone gave me a lovely gift for my birthday. Then came his birthday, and ordinarily I would have offered him something comparable. But I really didn’t want to, I couldn’t do it, I just blocked, because we don’t have that kind of relationship. It wasn’t right. I was torn between the fact that in one sense I owed him the same sort of present, but on the other hand such a gift would have implied something that wasn’t true. In choosing the present, I couldn’t not take into consideration the sort of relationship we had; the two things were linked. Finally I offered him something rather expensive but neutral, something anyone could have given him; it wasn’t personal.” This person found a solution to her problem by playing on two different value systems: the market, where things are valued only in relation to each other, and the gift, where things take on the value of the relationship and nourish it. Françoise didn’t want the goods to reinforce the

bond. Therefore she chose an object whose market value was equivalent to that of the present she’d received, but which, as a gift, was neutral. In our society, this is a frequent ploy. It’s possible, for instance, to take a quasi-mercantile approach in order to interrupt a chain of gifts. For example, a couple invited to dinner bring such an extravagant gift (two bottles of very good wine) that the hosts interpret it as a sign that the couple don’t want to return the invitation—which later turns out to be true.

By tracing the order in which people respond to the subject of the gift, we have, curiously, followed the trajectory taken by the gift when it accomplishes its task. In the beginning, nothing exists but isolated individuals who, as such, are concerned only with their own interests. Then the gift appears on the scene, whether too good to be true or modest and insidious. But it creates a sense of obligation. If the obligation to respond in kind is accepted, then a network of personal relationships is established, at the heart of which are goods reinforcing ties. If the obligation is warded off by an immediate monetary counter-gift, then we are back at square one, with this crucial difference: the original isolating environment, made up of calculating and egoistic individuals, that once seemed perfectly natural and primary is now revealed as what it is—the product of a refusal to forge a relationship, an end as well as a beginning, as much an effect and a consequence as a first cause.

We have now seen enough of how omnipresent the gift is in modern society, how seductive and dangerous it can be, to risk a first generalization and a few hypotheses.

WHEN THE GIFT FORMS A SYSTEM

In looking at initial reactions to the idea of a book on the gift, our impressions were not all that different from those of Marcel Mauss when he assembled the data, derived

from ethnography and religious history, for his renowned work *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, probably the greatest book in modern anthropology. “In a good number of [archaic civilizations],” he writes at the very beginning of the essay, “exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.” (1990, 3)

The Lasting Power of the Gift in Modern Society

Despite the cautious nature of his initial statement, and his reluctance, given his limited data, to apply his findings to all archaic societies, what Mauss discovered, over and above a multitude of accounts and examples, was nothing less than the universality of the gift in ancient societies. The idea of universality must be understood in two ways. First, the gift concerns all societies and, second, it concerns each society in its entirety. Where specialists before him had been able to cite only particular examples, Mauss began to delineate the contours of an overall pattern, and to see how pervasive its influence was. In the same way, once we got beyond their initial denials, those we spoke to left the impression that still today, despite all the reasons to believe in its final and irrevocable disappearance, the gift is everywhere. If that is true, and if we want to begin to describe and reflect upon this ubiquity, we must overcome Mauss’s reflex of scientific caution. Despite his hope of reviving the spirit of the gift and making it the pedestal on which an interdependent society midway between the violence of bureaucratic socialism and the egoism of asocial liberalism might be erected, Mauss seems to have found it hard to acknowledge that the gift persists today. He could only see it in birthday or Christmas presents, where it was a

marginal vestige of what it had once been. In much the same way Claude Levi-Strauss (1967, 68 ff.), to illustrate the concept of reciprocity, refers to the practice of exchanging bottles of wine in small restaurants in the south of France. True, the example is appealing and telling. But if the gift only manifested itself today in such minor and marginal ways, there would not be much point in paying attention to it, except out of nostalgia or a predilection for folkloric studies.

We have, however, gradually come to believe that the gift is just as typical of modern and contemporary societies as it is typical of archaic ones; that it does not affect only isolated and discontinuous incidents in social life but social life in its entirety. Today, still, nothing can be initiated or undertaken, can thrive or function, if it is not nourished by the gift. This, to begin at the beginning, is true of life itself, which, at least for the moment, is neither bought nor obtained by force but is purely and simply given, for the most part in the context of a family, traditional or unconventional. Everything leads us to believe, whatever sociologists may say about self-interest and power, that families would disintegrate instantly if, disavowing the demands of gift and counter-gift, they came to constitute no more than a commercial venture or a battlefield. And the same holds true for friendship, comradeship, and neighbourliness, which cannot be bought or imposed by force or decree but presuppose a certain reciprocity and mutual confidence. The list could go on, but for the moment it is sufficient to point out that businesses, government, and the nation itself would rapidly founder if their employees did not give more than their salary required, if bureaucrats did not show some sense of public service, and if an adequate number of citizens were not ready to die for their country.

What must now seem perfectly plausible is that the gift, far from being dead or moribund, is very much alive. But we can go far beyond that simple observation to suggest that this longevity is not only—negatively—the result of our need to supplement the well-grounded logic of mercantile interest and state power with some fodder for the soul but also testifies to the fact that the gift, like the market and the state, constitutes a system.

The best way to see this is to reflect briefly on the status and function of speech. To illustrate the importance of the gift, we have given examples of the exchange of goods and services. But it is words first and foremost, sentences and arguments, that humans produce and exchange with others. Certainly, more and more, we speak only to pass on information or to give orders. But before providing information or seeing that others conform to our wishes, we must first use words to establish a relationship. Like precious objects in archaic societies, words are only effective if, between one person and another, or between groups, a relationship has been established that sanctions use of the word—that allows one to be on “speaking terms” and to be nurtured by this. So it is that one “gives” the floor to someone, or, if someone refuses to give it to you, you “take” it. And you may then take it again, although not without having said “excuse me,” “thank you,” “*gracias*,” “*grazie*,” “*pardon*,” or “*merci*,” since you must thank the other for the gift she is giving in talking to you, just as you must show that in speaking you put yourself at the “mercy” of the other. In this way you show that you can both “oblige her” and be “obliged to her,” “*muito obrigado*.” To be able to exchange goods and services, you must establish a minimum of confidence in and with the other, which generally implies that you “give your word” and that you cannot “take it back” without very good reason. Conversation thus gives everyone a

chance to speak. It affords each individual the pleasure of giving, at no apparent cost, what is nevertheless most precious: words, simple words, witty words, rude words, rare ideas, well-crafted phrases that may just find a home in the minds of listeners.

It appears that in the modern world conversation serves the same purpose as the *kula*, the ceremonial exchange of the Trobriand Islanders, described at length by B. Malinowski (1922). Like the *vaygu'a*, the precious goods of the Trobriand people, the primary purpose of circulating words is not utilitarian. Shared discussion of whether the weather is good or bad isn't done to provide information. The primary function of the word is to be given and returned, to come and go. Just as it would be shaming, as Malinowski explains, to say of an Islander that he has confused a ceremonial exchange with one of trade, so it would be unseemly to reduce conversation to a simple exchange of useful information. And even on the most utilitarian territory of all, that of business, more is accomplished talking of other matters over lunch than in meetings of experts where only raw information is exchanged.

Which raises a question that may seem strange at first: do the gift of life, the art of conversation, familial or patriotic love, the appreciation of a job well done, team spirit, the donation of blood, and business lunches all have something in common?

*Behind the Market and the State,
the Unseen System of the Gift*

It might seem that our assessment of initial reactions to the subject of the gift could be overturned by the empirical observation that follows. (Fortunately, however, it turns out to have little validity.) It goes as follows: it is true that

there still are occasions set aside for the exchanging of gifts, and opportunities remain to show charity, offer rounds in bars, feel indebted, be “outdone,” or, on the other hand, to free oneself of onerous, symbolic debts through recourse to money and merchandise. But these occasions are few and far between, isolated islands in a sea of utilitarian calculation. This hypothesis of the bare survival, occasional and discontinuous, of the gift, is, however contradicted by our most recent observations. These suggest that we must see the gift as the basis for a system, a system that is nothing less than the social system as a whole. The gift is the embodiment of that system of relationships that is strictly social, in that these relations cannot be reduced to factors of power or economic interest.

We are prevented from seeing this—although it is virtually self-evident—by the way contemporary thought processes associated with utilitarianism, on which we all depend, lead us to formulate questions. According to that way of thinking the gift does not exist, either because only a truly disinterested gift would be a genuine gift and it is impossible to be disinterested, or because the authentic gift requires real altruism, which is unattainable since the altruist must have some egoistic reason for being an altruist. It is important to recognize that these tautological dichotomies, which force us to think only in terms of the opposition of two terms, create a smoke screen which prevents us from seeing the truth. A *Time* magazine journalist, recently returned from Moscow, stated: “The thing about communism is that it doesn’t work. It’s a noble concept, but people are selfish. Because they are not saints, they often do as little as possible to get by.” (*Time*, 31 July 1989). In general, that is how we look at the current failure of communism, as if there were only two options—sanctity and egoism—whose societal equivalents

are working for the state or working for the market. But after having written his article, the journalist, driving home, hears a love song that moves him deeply. On his arrival he embraces his wife and children, for whom he reserves the largest part of his earnings, once taxes have been deducted for the population at large. In other words, the journalist’s life belies what he writes. He works very little only for himself but a great deal for others: for his wife and children, for his parents, so they will be proud of him, and even for the state! Despite this, he will continue to write in good faith about Eastern Europe as if it could only be understood in terms of the opposition between state and market. The fragmentation of community life has brought in its wake this inability to understand the way in which, in any society, the individual and the collective meet and merge. We don’t see that it is only in response to an unwanted solidarity, a solidarity imposed from outside, that the individual, inevitably, becomes egoistic and relates only to the market. Between a forced collectivization of human relations and the market, between an authority external to *personal* ties to the “community” and the market, the individual will always choose the market. But outside the market or the state he continues to live, suffer, and love, to work for his friends and children. He continues to inhabit a society, community, and social network that represent a mix of egoism and altruism.

The social sciences have accustomed us to interpreting history and social interaction as the products of strategies employed by rational individuals who try to maximize the satisfaction of their material interests. This is the dominant vision, “utilitarian” and optimistic. It is counterbalanced, but only slightly, by the darker, complementary vision, Machiavellian and Nietzschean, that attributes everything to a quest for power. The combination of these two streams of thought leads us to the conclusion that there are

two, and only two, major systems of social action: the market system, where individual interests clash and are reconciled, and the political system, organized around the monopolization of legitimate power (Max Weber).² Now, it is very clear that no one lives first and foremost for the market and the state, in the market or in the state. Market and state represent focal points for what one might term *secondary sociality*, a sociality that relies on status and roles that are defined, for the most part, institutionally. To say that political and market sociality are secondary in no way implies that, constituting as they do a kind of superstructure, they are non-essential. It is simply a reminder that before human beings are understood in terms of any economic, political, or administrative functions they fulfill, they must be understood as persons: not just a conglomerate collection of particular roles or functions but autonomous units endowed with at least a measure of coherence all their own. The transformation of biological individuals into social persons does not occur first in the relatively abstract sphere of the market and the state, even if they make a certain contribution, but in the world of *primary sociality*, where, within the family, in relations with neighbours, in comradeship and friendship, person-to-person relationships are forged.

Two non-conformist economists, François Perroux (1963) and Serge Christophe Kolm (1984), have identified three complementary economic systems: the market, ruled by self-interest; government planning, ruled by constraint; and that of the gift. The limitation of this approach, which

² To these two systems we could add a third, that of “social representations,” or “the imaginary,” or “the symbolic” (depending on the author). But the lack of consistency in these terms is a sign that overall, and fundamentally, this third system is not deemed to be truly efficacious, or to possess any real, innate coherence. Short of lapsing into a not very satisfying culturalist functionalism.

not even Mauss successfully transcended, is that it continues to make the gift an *economic* system. It is insufficiently clear that the system of the gift is not first and foremost an economic system but the social system concerned with personal relationships. It is not simply a complement to the market or the state for it is even more fundamental and primary than these other systems, as we can see in countries that are in chaos. In the East or in the Third World, where the market and the state are in shambles, there still remains, as the last resort, that network of interpersonal relations consolidated by the gift and mutual aid, which alone enables one to survive in a mad world. The gift? It is perhaps what is there when all has been forgotten and before anything has been learned.

On Some Reasons for the Invisibility of the Gift

If these assertions are not too far off the mark and if, even in modern societies, which appear to be individualist and materialist, the gift is the embodiment of a system that ties together interpersonal social relationships, then why is such a widespread and important phenomenon not more visible and better recognized? Why do sociologists and economists think only in terms of self-interest and power, or culture, or inherited traditions, but never in terms of the gift? Why do men and women not versed in the social sciences often think of themselves as discrete individuals and rarely as givers and receivers? There are three principal reasons for the reality of the gift being so obscured.

The first has already been dealt with, but it is so important that it merits another quick look. It is, in fact, what makes any proposal to examine the gift seem incomprehensible today. “You’re embarking on something impossible, too ambitious, too difficult to deal with. It’s

too delicate,” according to some. “Leave that to the poets, the artists, the singers, all those who talk of love all day long, who write about the feelings behind the gift.” If you reply that the gift is not love but a form of exchange, they exclaim: “But then you’re denying the existence of generosity, disinterestedness. If there’s an exchange, then there’s no gift. A gift must be unilateral, with no hope of recompense.” We have already noted that this image of the gift, which spontaneously springs to everyone’s mind, arises both because of and as a complement to the dominant and sanctioned utilitarian vision. The gift is burdened with the impossible task of embodying absent hope and the lost soul in a hopeless, soulless world, a world from which, since the Reformation, grace has been banished, relegated to the outer limits of transcendence. Only God can truly, graciously, bestow His grace, only He can be gracious and generous. And so the gift is not of this world. This is where the utilitarian notion of the gift joins forces with the religious interpretation, at least that interpretation which has prevailed since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Humans must make an effort to follow in the footsteps of Christ, of course, but it’s clear that they have no hope of keeping up. To truly understand the gift, we have to evolve a more realistic conception of what it is and avoid both its exile to some other world or its reduction to profane, too profane, self-interest. This is possible if it is thought of as a system of social exchange rather than a series of unilateral and discontinuous acts.

Second, to succeed in understanding the gift we must break with the explanations for human behaviour proposed by both utilitarianism—methodological individualism or rational choice theory—and by the various versions of Nietzscheism—those that see humans as natural egoists as well as those that see them, at least in their modern, Western guise, as interested only in power. Not that these

(largely tautological) theories are totally beside the point. It’s hard to believe that individuals would deliberately act in opposition to their interests or without “good reason.” But such theories, by virtue of the fact that they focus systematically on the acts of the isolated individual, of the “ego” (except where they ascribe such acts to the “power apparatus” of secondary sociality instead), cannot help but overlook the gift since, according to our hypothesis, the gift implies a relationship. And, we would even be tempted to say, it implies, *a priori*, a synthetic social relationship that it would be futile to try to reduce to the elements it holds together. We’re aware, however, of the dangers inherent in this last suggestion. It could leave us open to accusations of harbouring dubious holistic inclinations and having a disregard for the freedom and autonomy of individuals. This is not our intention. All this will, however, become clear only once we have dealt with the third reason for modernity’s amnesia on the subject of the gift.

That will take only a few words. Archaic and traditional societies thought of themselves in the language of the gift, a language that defined their being-in-the-world and their distinctiveness, particularly in terms of primary social bonds (bonds desired for themselves) and refusal to lapse into historicity. It was therefore within the imaginative and sometimes frankly ideological space of the gift that they experienced and understood not only the community of humans and individual equality but also authority, law, hierarchy, exploitation, domination, and power. As modernity defines itself first and foremost by its absolute refusal of tradition, it is not surprising that it thinks it can assert its freedom by ridding itself of a language that seems coextensive with tradition, the language of the gift—and that it reserves its harshest words and its most caustic sarcasm to discredit and keep in

its place anything that advocates generous or noble acts, such as Christian love.

We could discuss at length the historical causes for the development of the market economy and modern bureaucratic nation-states. But there is little doubt that they have much, if not everything, to do with the growing modern horror of closed communities bound together by obligatory gifts that confirm traditional hierarchies. In that sense, the market and the modern bureaucratic state, machines that destroy traditions and particularity, are above all anti-gift devices. There is not much point in debating whether this destruction is good or bad. It has been an integral part of the movement, described by Toqueville, that favoured equal conditions for all and gave rise to modern democracies. This movement is irreversible, if we are not to plunge into the abyss of totalitarianism. As modern individuals we do not question the liberating virtues of the market and the democratic state. At the very least we will always consider them preferable to a community organization we have not chosen, or whose gift-giving obligations are imposed on us. There is no nostalgia for the past in these pages, no discreet apologia for a supposedly idyllic world which, in any case, no longer exists.

However, it is important to recognize that no society can function on the basis of secondary sociality alone (with all social relations seen only as a means to an end), nor can it meld the system of the gift into those of the market and the state without lapsing into the despotism that Toqueville feared he saw peeping over the democratic horizon. Modernity is not in error in having individual autonomy and universalism as a goal. It would, however, be an error to believe that the system of the gift is linked exclusively to traditional and archaic societies and that we can get along without it. The gift is nothing less than the

embodiment of the system of interpersonal social relations. To do away with it would be to risk having societies that are radically desocialized and democracies that are meaningless at best. But this is to begin to deal with the ethical, philosophical, and political implications of our thoughts on the gift in modern societies, while what we need to do now is assemble and review our principal assumptions and hypotheses before continuing our journey.

GOODS IN THE SERVICE OF TIES

In a way, this book is simply an attempt to take Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* seriously. One might well ask why such an important book has had few real successors, despite its impressive reputation. Instead, there are only the many monographs or ethnological analyses of the gift as embodied in one or another population. In these studies Mauss's name is barely mentioned—which is to be expected, as Mauss offers no specific grid for empirical analysis. His contribution lies in the light he sheds on very disparate material and the questions he raises. And his work is taken up only by those whose aim is to establish a general theory of anthropology, for example Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille, Karl Polanyi, and Marshall Sahlins. It would be easy, of course, to demonstrate that each of these authors, in his own way, has contradicted many of the ideas in *The Gift*. But such an observation leaves open the question of why such contradiction was possible. And no doubt the answer, in large part, resides in the fact that Mauss himself was often hesitant and uncertain. He was all too timid in facing head-on two key issues which, if confronted directly, would have given *The Gift* the scope it deserved and enabled it to accomplish the task Mauss in fact had set for it, that of devising a

scientific and philosophical alternative to utilitarianism. Mauss had hoped to find not only a speculative but a practical solution to problems that have been disputed in moral and political philosophy for the last 2500 years and that concern that “bedrock,” that “eternal morality ... common to the most advanced societies, to those of the immediate future, and to the lowest imaginable forms of society” (1990, 70).

In order to move towards the realization of such a project, one must first overcome Mauss’s initial timidity and, as we have suggested, show that the gift is relevant not only to archaic societies but, though transformed in ways we have yet to analyse, to modern society as well. In other words, the gift should be of as much, if not more, interest to sociologists as to ethnologists or specialists in ancient history. If the logic of the gift is an enduring one, it should shed light not only on the past but also on the present and future. Mauss’s further timidity, which we must also transcend, concerns the theory of the gift and human endeavour. There again Mauss has done the groundwork, when he notes, for example, that The Trobriand Islanders “still have a complex notion [of the gift] that inspires all the economic acts we have described. Yet this notion is neither that of the free, purely gratuitous rendering of total services, nor that of production and exchange purely interested in what is useful. It is a sort of hybrid” (73). Or when he says that “Self-interest and disinterestedness likewise explain this form of ... circulation” (74). We must, of course, examine all the implications of such an assertion. If the gift is seen as a cycle and not just an isolated act—a cycle that may be broken down into three movements: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate—then the error in scientific utilitarianism becomes clear. Utilitarianism isolates the act of receiving and portrays individuals as beings who are

interested only in receiving, making both the gift and its reciprocation, both its initiation and that part of its nature that implies obligation and indebtedness, meaningless.

The idea at the core of this book is a simple one: it is that the drive to give is as important to an understanding of humanity as the desire to receive—that giving, transmitting, reciprocating, and compassion and generosity are as essential as taking, appropriating, keeping, and appetite or egoism. “The lure of the gift” is at least as powerful as the lure of profit and it is therefore just as important, if one wants to understand modern society, to know its rules as to be familiar with the laws of the market or state. Society is made up of groups of individuals who are constantly trying to establish their position within the group by breaking and renewing ties with others. To tame, to domesticate “is to establish ties,” says the fox to the Little Prince. It is to identify someone as a unique individual. Of course, nothing could be more obvious. But such ties are becoming increasingly rare, because time is short and forging ties takes time. That is why people tend to declare their uniqueness through purchases of mass-produced items—emblems of domestication that are themselves domesticated—and bury their quest for a “unique solution” in the solidarity to be found in numbers, in the welfare state—or in psychoanalysis.

This book is an essay that asks whether it is possible for an adult to take *The Little Prince* seriously, and that asks the sociologist to give priority to social ties in creating explanatory systems. We will try to understand why our society, which, more than any other, insists that each individual is unique, systematically tends to dismiss those primary social ties that enable people to affirm and shape their uniqueness and promotes those abstract and secondary ties that, at least in theory, make people interchangeable and anonymous, only to later create an

ersatz personalization through identification with work or the state. Principally we will try to show how people react to this agenda by maintaining and keeping alive networks governed by gift-giving, which infiltrate gaps in the “official” secondary systems favoured by the market and the state. Only the gift can actually—not just in the imagination or ideologically—transcend the opposition between the individual and the collectivity, making individuals part of a larger, concrete entity.

The only hypothesis one has to accept at this point is that in contemporary society, just as in archaic or traditional societies, there exists a form of circulation of goods that is fundamentally different from the form analysed by economists. “At the house of some friends I found the present I’d given François for his birthday when we were together. He’d actually sold it to them. It’s disgusting!” said one woman we interviewed. To understand her disgust, we need only recognize that, where the gift is concerned, goods circulate in the service of ties. Any exchange of goods or services with no guarantee of recompense in order to create, nourish, or recreate social bonds between people is a gift. We intend to show how the gift, as a form of circulation of goods that promotes social bonding, represents a key element in any society.

In Part One we familiarize the reader with the many guises the gift assumes in the different spheres of modern liberal society. We then discuss the role of the gift in archaic societies, which raises the question of the curious requirement that a true gift must be spontaneous. There follow some thoughts on the consequences of market organization in Western society. Part Three is devoted to reflections of a general nature, sparked in particular by the idea of disinterestedness. The paradox of freedom and obligation is also discussed, and the following question posed: how can we arrive at a theory that will account for

a phenomenon which, by definition, eludes all formalization? Must we, where the gift is concerned, content ourselves with metaphors such as the allegory of the Three Graces, which since antiquity³ has embodied for the Western world the three phases of the gift: to give, to receive, to reciprocate?

References:

- Kolm, Serge-Christophe. 1984. *La Bonne économie. La réciprocité général.* Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1967. *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté.* Paris: Mouton.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Reprinted 1961, New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1950. “Essai sur le don, forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques,” In *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 145-279. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- 1990. *The Gift: Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies.* New York: Routledge.
- Perroux, François. 1963. *Économie et société. Contrainte, échange, don.* Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 1987. *Critique de la raison cynique.* Paris: Christian Bourgois.

³ As Vidal (1991) has so well demonstrated.

"The Gift" is the ninth episode of Season 4 of The Amazing World of Gumball. It is the 125th episode overall. After they receive an extravagant invitation to Masami's birthday party, Gumball and Darwin are anxious to find just the right gift for her. The episode starts with Richard and the kids at home watching TV. The doorbell rings, so Anais opens the door to find Larry dressed in fancy garb playing a bugle. Anais remarks that her special prince had finally arrived (after having kissed several frogs)