The gift theory of Marcel Mauss and the potlatch ritual
A triad of hospitality

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Hospitality triad

Nobody can be as agreeable as an uninvited guest.

(Kim Hubbard)

‘The Gift’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]) presents a notion on the theory of gift giving as a common denominator of human exercise involving three obligations: to give, to receive and to reciprocate. In symbolic articulation, the author reveals that ‘in Scandinavian and many other civilizations, the exchange of goods and contracts is performed in the form of gifts, which are voluntary in theory, but in reality are mandatorily given and reciprocated’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 55). By describing the phenomena of the exchange of goods and contracts in primitive societies, in their forms of prestations and reciprocities, a system of total prestations is created. The triad obligation theory provides Mauss with a satisfactory fundamental explanation for the contract forms between primitive Polynesian tribes. These institutions ‘uniquely express a fact, a social regime, mentality defined as: everything – food, women, children, land, labour, services, priestly positions and classes – it is the material used for transfer and delivery’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 71).

Indeed, the influence of exchanging does nothing more than translate the way social groups are constantly overlapping each other. In this chapter, we presume that the theory of gift giving represents hospitality, in the sense of being an act of human welcoming, and as such is a theoretical-methodological support for the epistemological understanding of this field of knowledge, while also contributing to the interdisciplinary construction of current scientific data which a priori appears to be opposite or distinct.
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The word ‘gift’ comes from the Latin word *dativa* and etymologically is incomplete and should be combined with the word ‘debt’, which describes the condition where one depends on the other. ‘However, no gift can eliminate the debt with the other, since it increases every time I give more. The gift, the debt, do not therefore expire’ (cited in Noguero, 2013: 171).

Meanwhile, in his introduction to Mauss’ *Essay on the Gift*, Lévi-Strauss states that ‘the exchange is the common denominator for a great number of social activities, apparently heterogeneous among themselves’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 34). He also comments that Mauss’ total social factor presents itself as a tri-dimensional character and needs to be matched with the proper sociological dimension of multiple synchronous aspects: the historical or diachronic dimension, and finally, the physio-psychological dimension.

Upon analysing the work of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss considers its importance for anthropological research:

But such is that for the first time in the history of ethnological thought, there was made an effort to transcend empirical observation and attain deeper realities. For the first time, the social aspect ceases to depend on the domain of pure quality: episode, curiosity, material for moralizing description or scholarly comparison, and transforms itself into a system whose parts we can therefore use to discover connections, equivalence and solidarity.

(Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 30)

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss sought to overcome Marxism and functionalism, and therefore criticised the Mauss method by saying that that the author had allowed himself to be mystified by the indigenous theory, forgetting the scientific spirit. For Lévi-Strauss, the symbol was more real than what reality signified and Mauss failed because he was too empiricist and became a victim of the same beliefs he intended to theorise. From this perspective, the indigenous representations and practices of the gift would be fundamental for unconscious mental structure and collective thinking (Godelier, 2001).

However, the *total social phenomena*, as Mauss (2008 [1925]: 70) proposes to call them, include all types of institutions – religious, legal and moral – and these are political, economic and family at the same time. ‘The total provision does not only imply the obligation of reciprocating the presents received, it presupposes two others that are equally important: the obligation to give gifts, on one side, and the obligation to receive them, on the other’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 70). Therefore, on an analytical basis, the gift does not presuppose a counter-position between the social and economic characters that we sometimes find in other epistemological lines of human thinking and the social dichotomous mode.

This system that Mauss (2008 [1925]) also terms the *total prestation system* from tribe to tribe is a system by which individuals and groups execute their exchanges – in such a manner that this constitutes the oldest system for economics and law that it has been possible to observe and design. In this manner, the giver establishes the morality of the gift – exchange, and this is then seen as a social obligation within the society. Upon studying the dark side of social life, Mauss (2008 [1925]) wished to illuminate the path to be taken by nations, morally as well as economically.

**The potlatch ritual as per Marcel Mauss: a gift exchanging system**

The methodology employed by Marcel Mauss (2008 [1925]) was one of comparison, and the areas he chose to study were Polynesia, Melanesia and north-western America. His study focused on their systems, which were described one after another in their entirety in a collective sense, demonstrating that there was a mutual obligation of exchange and contract. What these peoples
exchanged were not exclusively goods and riches, but amiabilities, rituals and ceremonials. These acts are designated by Mauss as gifts and reciprocity, preferably voluntary, but understood to be mandatory as a social obligation. The name *potlatch* is indicated for such total prestations in the sense that the tribe utilises this system of rules and ideas to ensure a type of hierarchy among themselves when executing real contracts. The *potlatch* itself, so typical as *fact* and at the same time so characteristic of these tribes, is nothing more than a system of gift exchanging’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 108).

Mauss (2008 [1925]) termed his system of study ethnographic, by which he used comparison to measure how much societies diverged in their approaches from the societies designated as primitive. In this way, Mauss identified his research as follows: ‘what rule of the law and of interest in backward or primitive societies, determines that the gift received must be mandatorily reciprocated? What force exists in the thing that is given that causes the receiver to reciprocate?’ (2008 [1925]: 56).

Thus, Mauss visualises how it would be possible to study total human behaviour with all its social life, and even more, understands that not only could this type of concrete study be conducted for the science of customs, a partial social science, but it could even provide conclusions on morals. Mauss (2008 [1925]) believed that studies of this kind could also effectively perceive, measure and weigh the various aesthetic, moral, religious, economic and material factors, as well as demographic reasons, that together create a society and constitute a life in common.

In the regions researched by Mauss (2008 [1925]: 195), potlatch is therefore a system of observed exchanges that was divided into essential elements: honour, prestige, the *mana* that gives wealth, and the obligation to reciprocate these gifts on pain of losing this *mana*, this authority, this talisman, this source of wealth that is its own authority. ‘The unreciprocated gift makes the one who accepted it without the spirit of reciprocity, inferior’, observed Mauss (2008 [1925]: 42).

It is important to state that potlatch is an English word originating from Native Americans and refers to a gift of sacred nature, constituting for the one who receives it a challenge to give an equivalent gift. In this chapter, we analyse this ritual in primitive societies with regard to their epistemological character through social significance, as did Marcel Mauss via his spatial and temporal limitations. However, we understand that this theoretical and methodological debate could also be performed using other social groups during their respective epochs in regard to their relationships with exchange, such as occurs in their welcoming practices and the exchange of primitive and modern hospitalities.

In the ancient societies described by Mauss (2008 [1925]), there exist four forms of potlatch that are synonymous of the gift: the obligation to give, the obligation to invite, the obligation to receive and, finally, the obligation to reciprocate. The individual that does not reciprocate his loan or his potlatch loses his social status or even his liberty. Taxes, talismans, copper and spirits of the chiefs are of the same nature and of the same function as the circulation of goods, of men, women, children, rituals, ceremonies and dances, these being the only other forms of currency that preceded our market societies.

Other symbolic instruments of these primitive societies are the *oloa*, which in brief refers to objects and movable instruments belonging to the husband, and the *tonga*, where the goods are feminine. Such gifts can be mandatory and are hoarded like treasures, talismans, cults and magic rituals. The *hau* involves the spirit of things and, above all, the form of power that animates or pursues whoever is the owner. This reveals that the gift received and exchanged is not inert, since through this we have the domain of the beneficiary. This seems to be the master idea that Mauss said presides in Samoa and New Zealand; in other words, the mandatory circulation of wealth, tributes and gifts. ‘Actually, there are mixtures. Souls are mixed with things and things are mixed with souls. Lives are mixed with each other and just as people and the mixed things leave each of their domains, they mix: that is precisely the contract and exchange’ (Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 90).
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In this way, to accept anything from someone is to accept it from someone’s essential spirit, contributing, as such, to the general theory that this mandatory exchange turns into something beyond the material object – that is, it is a spiritual tribute (hau). There is a series of rights and obligations for the consumer and the giver, corresponding to the rights and obligations of the givers and receivers. The complete theory of these three obligations supplied Mauss (2008 [1925]) with a fundamental explanation of the forms of contract between the primitive Polynesian tribes. All this passes as if there had been a constant exchange of matter involving spiritual things and men, between tribes and individuals, shared among classes, sexes and generations. Mauss saw this as proof that this interpretation is valid for other groups of societies, even though he limited his research to primitive societies.

As such, and from an epistemological point of view, material life, morality and exchange function in a form that is voluntary and mandatory at the same time. For Mauss, this obligation is expressed in a mythical way, imaginary or, if you like, symbolic and collective, assuming an aspect of interest connected to exchanged things: ‘these are never completely disconnected from their exchange agents; the communion and alliance that they establish are relatively indissoluble’ (2008 [1925]: 106). He also distinguishes two categories of objects: 1) those which are due and can be given or exchanged, the alienable; and 2) those which should not be given or exchanged, inalienable.

If we give things and are reciprocated, it is because respect is being given and reciprocated – which we consider even more delicate. But we also give of ourselves when we give to others, and if we give of ourselves, it is because we owe something of ourselves – ourselves and our well-being – to others.

(Mauss, 2008 [1925]: 121)

In our view, the triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating is a socio-anthropological reality upon which primitive societies were built, of which some facets are also found in modern society, such as given relationships between parents and children, among men and animals, and gift giving to strangers (blood donation, for example). The aspect of this obligation, which is at the same time free and mandatory, builds the epistemological foundation of what may be called the gift or donation.

The gift can be sociologically defined as: all services or goods effected without assurance of reciprocity, with the intent of creating, maintaining or reconstructing a social bond. In this instance, the gift of a relationship is more important than the goods. In a general definition, the gift is all service or goods effected without obligation, guarantee or assurance of reciprocity. The gift paradigm emphasizes the importance of the positive, normative, sociological, economic, political and philosophical ethics of this type of prestation.

(Caillé, 2002: 142)

As for Marcel Mauss himself, in the absence of an official biography, it is known that the author was born in 1872, in Épinal, France, almost 400 km from Paris, the same city in which fourteen years earlier his uncle Émile Durkheim had been born. Émile had a great influence on the management of Marcel’s carrier. Mauss had a teaching degree in philosophy and dedicated his studies principally to the History of the Religions of Uncivilised Peoples, the title of his thesis, although he himself did not believe that there was such a thing as uncivilised people, but only people with different civilisations. Mauss defended the idea of a free market, lamented the imposition of a desire for violence and criticised Bolshevism because it did not
support basic morals. Although a socialistic base opposes the class war, Mauss dreamt that power would be exercised by the workers provided they had sufficient political maturity. In 1925, Mauss founded the Institut d’Ethnologie de l’université de Paris and after the death of his uncle edited the journal *L’Année Sociologique*. Being of Jewish descent, he feared detention during the Second World War, and his health declined, together with his intellectual capacity, until his death in 1950 in Paris. Although *Essay on the Gift* was the highlight of Mauss’ own work, in partnership with Henri Hubert he produced works of greater importance (Oliveira, 1979).

Mauss’ uncle Émile Durkheim is considered to be the founder of modern sociology through his study of religion with Mauss and a group of colleagues. However, this group was separated during the First World War and many of the members were lost in the trenches or died a few years later. Only Mauss was left to continue the work they had begun, but he was never taken seriously in this presumptive role of heir. However, almost single-handedly, he founded French anthropology and gave it a complete ramification for sociological theory. Even though Mauss is considered to be a revolutionary socialist, he was not really a Marxist, since he rejected the communistic belief that society should be transformed by the actions of the state. In his opinion, the role of the state preferably consisted in providing a legal framework for socialism that should, above all, emerge from the base through the creation of alternative institutions (Caillé and Graeber, 2002).

Godelier (2001) reveals to us that Marcel Mauss was a socialist who ended up losing half of his friends in the First World War. He went against Bolshevism when he affirmed that it is necessary to preserve the market, and also against liberal capitalism when he claimed that the state should intervene, wanting the rich to re-encounter the ancient generosity of the Celtic or German chiefs in a social-democratic programme that combines a market economy with a socialistic state. In my view, Mauss did not worry about the relationships that men established in the production of things, but only that which they maintained among themselves, the virtue of their circulation.

Mauss (2008 [1925]) produced descriptive social studies with the use of ethnography, in which the Melanesian populations had, more so than the Polynesians, conserved or developed the potlatch, by means of the *kula*, which consisted in giving on the part of some, and receiving on the part of others, people being the receivers one day, and the givers the next, in a regular circular movement that seemed to encompass the totality of the economic and civil life of the Trobriand Islands. This system was observed and described directly by Malinowski (1978 [1922]), an author who influenced Mauss in his analyses of the role of the gift in primitive tribes.

### The gift, its rites and legends: the soul of things

Once the facts have been defined, it is necessary to enter into contact with them – that is, to observe them, as Mauss put it, who even questioned: ‘How to link a fact to a means, if not by demonstrating how the means reacted to this fact?’ (1909: 128). The word ‘ethnography’ serves to describe the empirical and descriptive results of the science of mankind; the word ‘ethnology’ serves to refer one to the speculative and comparative theories such that anthropology should not escape from the study of that most intimate part of a human being, one’s instinctive and emotional life. This line of thinking was also utilised by Malinowski who described his field work in the Trobriand Islands as follows:

Living in a village without any responsibilities except to observe the native life, the ethnographer sees the customs, ceremonies, transactions, etc. … There is a series of important phenomena that in no way can be registered except with the assistance of questionnaires or
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statistical documents, but should be observed in their complete reality. These phenomena can be given the name of the imponderables of real life.

(1978 [1922]: 29)

The tribes that live in the commercial and social environment of the *kula*, in the far east of the New Guinea mainland within the Trobriand Islands, are matrilineally related; in other words, as regards descent and inheritance issues, the maternal line is followed, whereby the women exercise functions of great influence with a friendly familiarity in the village. The *kula*, however, is essentially a masculine activity. Malinowski states that ‘the native man works for reasons of social nature and highly complex traditions; his objectives certainly do not refer to the simple provision of the basic needs or utilitarian purposes’ (1978 [1922]: 56).

When comparing the studies of Mauss and Malinowski, Weiner stated that the first was strongly influenced by the second in his theory about social exchanges, although he committed an error in his overall conception of reciprocity:

Marcel Mauss, drawing heavily on Malinowski’s Trobriand ethnography, introduced the concept of exchange as ‘total social phenomenon’ containing elements at once social, economic, legal, moral, aesthetic, and so on. Mauss analyzed exchange by separating it into the acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. In order to expose the structure of exchange, reciprocity as a total concept was fragmented into discrete categories. Mauss’s reciprocity was a major step toward a general theory of exchange, but the segmentation of reciprocity was a major conceptual error.

(1989: 219)

In spite of this, in the studies of Malinowski (1978 [1922]), the *kula* is a form of exchange and has an ample inter-tribal character, being practised by communities localised in an extensive closed cycle of islands. Each of the *kula* participants periodically (but not regularly) receives one or several *mwali* (seashell bracelets) or a *soulava* (a neckless of red seashell discs) that should be given to one of their partners, who reciprocates by exchanging another gift. As such, nobody keeps an article to himself for very long. This fact differentiates this type of primitive society from a modern one that is linked to the idea of permanent possession. However, a *kula* native, as any other human being, develops a passion for what is owned, but the social code of laws that regulate the giving and receiving overcome his natural acquisitive tendency.

Malinowski utilised the gift logic, although without conceptualising it as Mauss did, to study the sociological issues of the Trobriand Islands, when he wrote the following passage: ‘for the ceremonial aspect of tribal life, we constantly came across this “give and receive”, a permutation of gifts and payments … the love to “give and receive” within themselves; the pleasure of possessing wealth expressed through their donations’ (1978 [1922]: 136). I conclude that in the primitive societies studied by Mauss (2008 [1925]) and Malinowski (1978 [1922]), the relationships based purely on the exchange of material do not explain the actual society. The symbolism attached to magic, by means of rituals and enchantments, played an influential role in providing explanations of events and of the social structure and the key roles within it.

As for magic powers, Mauss questions:

do dreams really exist or is the individual in a state of ecstasy? What is there that is real, what is there that is fiction, the mythical tradition and the individual conscience? Is the individual really a victim of an illusion of his sentiments, and are his illusions imposed by tradition?

(1909: 76)
Mauss says that everything passes over a malleable territory in which the myth and the ritual, as feelings and acts, the inspirations, the illusions and the hallucinations mix to form a traditional image of magic, which is increased among tribe members, linking to their spirit a firm belief and a relatively little-simulated semi-sincerity. ‘But these spirits, these powers, only exist because of social consensus, the public opinion of the tribe. It is this that the magic follows, and it is at the same time, explorer and slave’ (Mauss, 1909: 101). Such analysis demonstrates that in Mauss’ theory, there is no dichotomous relationship between the protagonist social agents, since they attain, in a dynamic sense, the dominating character and the dominated character at the same time. Would this not be a complex form of being, representing members of society acting as a shared culture?

Along these lines, the concept of *mana*, discovered in a small primitive Melanesian community by Mauss and Hubert (2005 [1898]), also figures widely in the beliefs and magic practices of the lives of all the natives. It was this principal that was criticised by Lévi-Strauss, in his Introduction to the work of Mauss, when he stated that the author became contaminated by the tribe’s logic of magic and spirituality. However, the gift theory presupposes that spirituality is connected to things and vice versa.

The basic principal upon which the rules of transactions in these communities is based is the fact that the *kula* consists of a donation of a ceremonial gift in exchange for which, after a certain space of time, an equivalent present should be received. The exchange, however, can never be discussed, evaluated or bargained. Malinowski highlights:

> important, however, is that for the natives of the *kula*, to have is to give – and in this aspect, they are notably different from us … The wealth is, then the principal indicator of power – and generosity, the sign of wealth. Indeed, avarice is the most despised addiction.

(1978 [1922]: 81)

Furthermore, Malinowski (1978 [1922]) states that the *kula* is a gift that is reciprocated, after a certain period of time, by means of a counter gift and not a barter, and it is up to the donor to establish the equivalence of the reciprocated gift, that cannot be imposed, haggled or returned – the fundament of all transactions. For Malinowski, this moral injunction and the subsequent act of generosity, superficially observed and poorly interpreted, are responsible for the primitive idea of communism of the islanders.

It must be taken into consideration that although Malinowski (1978 [1922]) has described the *kula* in the Trobriand Islands in great detail, he did not understand, or poorly understood, the institutions which he analysed, an area in which Mauss became a specialist. Even though Lévi-Strauss has criticised Mauss for not positioning his discovery within the scope of modern structural analysis, it was the thinking of Mauss that gave to ethnology the sociological explanation of what people believe and think, that could reveal the common strands in all societies including the simplest hunter-gatherer groupings. Mauss, in contrast to a structuralist theory that deflates the reality lived by the agents, elaborates a very rich interpretation, going beyond the native interpretation, but without suppressing it (Oliveira, 1979).

It can be verified that almost all categories of gifts, including those in the modern world, have as a base some type of sociological relationship, but not necessarily all in the perspective of the gift. Annette Weiner (1989), in her studies on the Trobriand Islands, subsequent to Malinowski, suggested that care should be taken when generalising the gift concept in primitive societies. For Weiner, many of the things exchanged have an objective that goes beyond the gift, since the maintenance of the family’s economic cycle between life and death represents much more, in apparent irrational contradiction of a vision of a world of those that are outside of the native
system. In this specific case, Weiner (1989) tells us that there are women who have predominance in the social organisation of the tribe and in the articulation of cosmic and transcendent phenomena; they thus maintain a type of power different to that of the men.

In this sense, Weiner disagrees with Mauss on the logic of interest in the exchanges in which the anthropologist transformed the idea of the gift into a myth:

The Trobriand informants who say they exchange for ‘love’ or ‘generosity’ are following a myth that serves in their society to hide a reality of self-interest. The anthropologist who then insists on labelling this act as a ‘gift’ seems to be perpetuating the Trobriand natives’ myth. But this is probably only incidental to what she or he is doing. In weaving the ‘gift’ myth, is not the anthropologist hiding a reality that concerns his or her role in his or her society? Is he or she not perpetuating and creating an image of ‘the primitive’ as a person, or ‘primitive society’ as a way of life, that has survived on some fundamental principle other than self-interest?

(1989: 221)

Therefore, still in the Introduction of his unfinished thesis, Mauss emphasises that ‘on one side, the myth has little reality when not connected to a determined usage in a cult; and, on the other side, a ritual has little value if not it does not represent the employment of certain beliefs’ (1909: 103). It is said that rituals become collective activities of the soul, more than attitudes of the body and enrichment of mental elements, of sentiments and ideas, differently from the thinking of Weiner (1989).

The use of courtesy and those courtesies of moral life possess forms as fixed as the more characteristic religious rituals. As such, a simple ‘good day’ is a true wish, clearly formulated but with only a conventional significance. In this manner, the rituals are ‘effective traditional acts that relate with things considered sacred. For example, if I do not greet you, I offend someone, I expose myself to a censure of opinion; and if I greet you, I avoid all of this annoyance … The rituals have, for sure, truly effective material’, affirms Mauss (1909: 138). These make a link between material and the spirit of social logic.

In my opinion, the only problem with Mauss’ theory is how to make it penetrate the historical method and the logic of time – in other words, how to interpret the rituals of a primitive society in the face of modern society in a dialogic sense? Sahlins (1990) helps us to understand this culture with different historicity, and also based on the action of the symbolic system that consists in the empiricism of a cyclical structure with a diachronic temporal character. With this reasoning, Sahlins points out that the difficulty is to explode the concept of history with the anthropologic experience of culture. In addition, he utilises the concept of the historicity of performative structures to admit varying cultural practices, known as ‘Historical Structural Anthropology’.

While relating anthropology to history, Sahlins (1990: 63) congratulates the ‘new history that finally learned the anthropologic lessons’ and understands that society is constructed as an individual sum of its individual practices. The dialogue between these fields is also true for the way the author studies the mystical activity, sometimes as a practical activity, sometimes as a truly mystical one. In this case, the myth transforms into an event and vice versa, such as in his analysis of Capitan Cook. Thus, historians cannot ignore the exotic past simply for not being remotely cultural and for not having in-depth registers, since it is exactly because of this that the history of the islands of the South Seas and other civilisations merits special attention. Cultural and anthropological studies provide concepts that enable the understanding of a society’s social and economic events through time.

Therefore, given the above, Mauss’ theory raises questions of human social order that overlap the economic order or link to the same with interference from its logic of power. It is my understanding that primitive society held its exchanges through symbolic rituals that served as
much for maintenance and power interests as for disinterested practices linked to the emotional aspects of honour and generosity. Nevertheless, there have been other studies that can be related to this perspective, although sometimes the economic analysis tends to prevail at the expense of the complexity of society.

Godelier (2001), for example, studied the Baruya, a tribe living in a provincial village in two mountain valleys of New Guinea. It is a society supposedly without potlatch, but where sacred objects exist the tribe must save and share their benefits with others, alienating themselves from their beneficial powers by putting them at the service of society. In this tribe, besides being signs and symbols, these objects possess a spirit and therefore powers of imaginary social origin. In the Hagen region, at the heart of the highlands of New Guinea, Godelier also found the moka: a vast system of ceremonial exchanges practised by a large number of tribes in which the domain of the donation largely exceeds the material, and is constituted by all that it is possible to share, creating other obligations and debts.

The studies of Godelier (2001: 255) indicate that the precious objects circulating in the exchange of gifts are symbolic ‘double substitutes’; substitutes of sacred objects and substitutes of human beings. Godlier suggests three features are required to consider an object precious: uselessness of a routine function, abstractness incorporated into its material form, and beauty as defined by the cultural and symbolic universe as perceived by the society concerned. However, ‘it is not the objects that sacralise all or part of the relationships between them and with the universe that surrounds them, it is the inverse’ (Godelier, 2002: 74). This reminds us of Mauss when he identifies that ‘it is the nature of society to symbolically express its customs and their institutions’ (2008 [1925]: 14).

Mauss has said that rituals are ‘effective traditional acts that relate to things held sacred’ and that ‘an ancient practice is only understood thanks to a new dogma’ (1909: 142). In another study, Mauss (1926) stated that the family relationships within the Polynesian tribes are sacred, on the one hand, and on the other, profane. The reason for these opposite and entirely different behaviours can be found in each degree of the relationship and its function. Some relatives are protected by social etiquette; others are objects of shame and injustices.

Therefore, examples of primitive gifts can be seen in the following rituals: the potlatch, practised by indigenous tribes in north-west America, and referring to a notion of credit and honour; the kula, practised by the Trobriand Islanders, in which precious goods are defined and circulated by gender and according to their symbolic and utilitarian value. ‘In a phenomenological perspective, it could be said that primary sociability constitutes a concrete intersubjective space and as such, that the gift is this concrete and specific mobility’ (Godbout, 1992: 198). In lieu of this, it is a fact that the primitive society worried infinitely more about its reproduction than the production of things. However, a distinct magnetism between the object and the subject puts an end to archaic interchangeability.

The gift theory and its scientific and modern (counter) positions

We have in mind that primitive gift societies have something more to offer us, as if Mauss wished that something of the kula would come to irrigate modernity. However, the economy of modern society is constructed on what supposedly is the opposite of the gift: the individual, the merchandise, the currency and the market. Still, Christianity approaches such precepts of the gift, and aims to be an economy of grace. The example of Jesus eminently illustrates the aspect emphasised by Mauss: in the logic of the gift, to give is to give of yourself (Tarot, 2002). Therefore, many of the elements of primitive societies are present in other forms in our modern society.

In epistemological discussion about the gift, Godbout (1992) questions why sociologists and economists debate the interests of power or culture, or inherited traditions, but yet not in terms
of gifts? This is due to a unilateral explanation of the gift; if there is an exchange it is not a gift from a utilitarian perspective. The idea that I defend and incorporate in this chapter is that the cycle of gift giving, receiving and reciprocating is important for understanding the human species not only in the giving, transmitting and reciprocating acts in which compassion and generosity can act, but also in a conception of self-appropriation or self-conservation, such as jealousy and egotism. According to our point of view, the gift constitutes a system of proper social relationships regarding intricate practices and relationships of economic interest or power.

We assume that research has only one objective: reflecting the social logic of human thought. Metaphysical freedom can be the privileged prerogative of man and is everywhere in statistical numbers to determine whether or not to exist. As Mauss said: ‘I will say willingly that in sociology there is a need for more Anthropology and History. I would even say that a complete Anthropology could replace Philosophy, because it would include within it the very history of the human spirit that Philosophy assumes’ (1923: 161).

Although the understanding of Mauss has set the boundaries of research in given primitive societies, we part from the presumption that the gift is as modern and contemporary as that characterised in primitive societies, since it refers not only to isolated and discontinuous moments of social existence, but to its totality. Jacques Godbout (1992) states that if modernity refuses to believe in the existence of the gift, it is because it represents an opposite image of a material egotistical interest. In his view, the ‘true’ gift could only be free and without any expectation of reciprocity. However, above all, the gift serves to establish relationships and a relationship without hope of reciprocation in the same manner, free and without motive, would not be a social relationship. The gift, as such, constitutes a system of proper social relationships, as irreducible forms are relationships of economic interest or power. For Godbout, the only hypothesis is that there exists in modern society, as well as in primitive society, a mode for circulation of goods that intrinsically differs from the mode analysed by economists, such as that found in Marcel Mauss.

The temporal issue of the gift was the first sign of hesitance shown by Marcel Mauss because he formulated the hypothesis that a modern gift does not correspond directly with that of primitive societies – thus avoiding extending his results beyond those cultures he had studied. However, the gift goes beyond the ideology of the imaginary and the opposition between the individual and the collective, considering people as members of a more ample concrete group in which goods circulate at the service of the social ties created, sustaining and re-establishing by means of services rendered without assurance of reciprocation (Godbout, 1992). It is my understanding that in an epistemic and methodological manner, the gift serves various fields of knowledge, supplying us with an understanding of the many facets of our society with its dynamic character.

In addition to this delimitation of the gift within primitive societies, there are a number of reasons why Marcel Mauss was a seriously underrated author. Mauss did not think to give up the pleasures of life, friendship and sport, and wrote only under compulsion, for passion and for pleasure, without taking into account that he had always wanted to be the militant of a civic cause and a socialist at the same time. Finally, his disciples became more famous than him, either by dissecting the complexity of his thinking or giving it unilateral emphasis.

Caillé (2002) works with the modern concept of the gift paradigm: the term paradigm to designate the gift, no matter how anti-systematic it seems to be, is necessary to fix it within some systematic modalities of concrete thinking, even concatenating them in an anti-paradigmatic manner. For Caillé, the first paradigm is the individual action known for a utilitarian approach to which Maussian sociology is opposed because it does not seek to impute in the action anything but its own positive and normative inherent determinants. The second paradigm refers to the holistic character of functionalism or structuralism, within which its members, Durkheim...
and Lévi-Strauss, explain all actions, individual or collective, analysing them as so many manifestations of domination exercised by social totality over individuals and the need to reproduce them. The third paradigm defined by Caillé represents something beyond the ‘holism as quickly self-assured and satisfied to play with its individualistic rival a game of simple and misleading mirrors. The gift paradigm overcomes the equally limited viewpoints of individuals and holism’ (2002: 18). Therefore, is it possible to think of the gift as a paradoxical logic of the market?

Individualists aim to abandon the free market game for the organisation of a greater proportion of social existence, while holistics, on the contrary, demonstrate a preference for a state that has an important role in the social game. Such an established opposition between liberals and socialists is reinserted in the Maussian proposal in a social and political order that synthesises with common sense in opposition to reductionism and unilateral theorising. And this derives from the fact that before having economic interests, it is necessary that people, individually or collectively, exist and are constituted as such (Caillé, 2002).

In the Maussian gift system, there are a large number of authors who write about the gift and its rejection of gratuity, since the relationship of the gift is primarily one of reciprocity. Godbout stresses that there are several reciprocities for the gift: gratitude, recognition and even the immediate reciprocation of energy to the giver: ‘He who calculates tends to be excluded from the gift system’ (1992: 137). A clear example of this is when a couple enters the realm of telling of their donations to the system; it is a sign of a deterioration of the relationship, not a sign that a gift system has floundered, since the gift abhors equality and seeks alternate inequality.

In the study by Mauss (2008 [1925]), the ‘thing given’ is not an inert thing: the total prestation not only requires reciprocation of the gifts received, but also assumes the obligations of giving, on the one hand, and receiving, on the other. Hence, there arises the importance that human beings give to their relationships with others by the representation of being generous, helpful and important. Thus, feelings of gratitude emerge even if unconsciously. Therefore, the gift exchanging in the studied civilisations results in a definition of wealth as the abundance of voluntary and mandatory exchanges of gifts.

The act of exchange for these civilisations has much more importance than the object that was being replaced. In the case of potlatch, there was a reciprocity of gifts under the penalty of losing the mana, such as the authority and the talisman, which consisted in the power of its own authority and source of wealth. Another symbolic act analysed by Mauss in the primitive societies was the donation, since, it could be seen, on the one hand, as the fruit of the social moral of gift giving while, on the other hand, as a notion of sacrifice: ‘The donation is the fruit of the social moral of gift giving and fortune on one hand, and the notion of sacrifice on the other’ (2008 [1925]: 76). Therefore, we can conclude that there is no gift without some type of sacrifice.

The ‘obligation to invite’ is completely evident in the potlatch tribes and clans, since it demonstrates authority and fortune. The ‘obligation to receive’ is no less awkward: not to have the right to refuse a gift, since, in that primitive society, to react as such is to manifest that one is afraid to reciprocate and indicates humiliation. The ‘obligation to reciprocate’ in essence is, many times, one of destruction, sacrificial and of benefit to the spirits. This ritual implies that the sanction for mandatory reciprocation is slavery, since the virtues permuted by potlatch oblige the gifts to circulate, to be given and to be reciprocated. As seen from that society, a considerable part of our morals and of our own life remains always in the gift environment, mandatory and at the same time free. Therefore, it is possible to employ this order to economics, since the notion of value is impregnated in these same symbolic elements. All of the phenomena of gift giving are simultaneously economic, religious, judicial, aesthetical, morphological and so on. This is also evident in more advanced societies with the law of hospitality, stated Mauss (2008 [1925]) when referring specifically to the field of hospitality.
Furthermore, states Godelier ‘for an Eastern observer, this giving and receiving of the same thing seems to be devoid of sense, since, if the thing is returned as soon as it is given, it seems to have been exchanged for nothing. And then the gift transforms into an “enigma”’ (2001: 69).

It is important to emphasise that, for Godelier, the processes of exchange in potlatch are nothing exceptional, since this occurs in our capitalistic and mercantile societies with production being followed by the sale and purchase of all types of merchandise. Be these items material or immaterial, of consumption or destruction, they only have importance when their use is supported by an exchange value and this value transforms into capital. For Godelier, the fetishism of the objects used for gifts corresponds to fetishism of the merchandise or sacred objects. What marked, and continues to mark, the exchange of gifts between those that are close to us is not the lack of obligation, but the lack of calculation regarding its sacrifice.

Mauss (1926) concludes that the facts known as potlatch assign an agonistic factor by rival generosity, the force and nobility of combat, by challenges in the case of injustices and by sentiments of hospitality. Along these lines, the primitive and contemporaneous practices of hospitality are situated in the centre of social and anthropological observations. The current problematic in debate is, whether some type of sacrifice exists in the practice of hospitality in societies of the market type?

Jacques Godbout explains the prerogatives of philosophical and sociological studies of the gift in the following manner: ‘as soon as the issue appears, strange in principal, one needs to know if there exists a relationship between the gift of life, the art of conservation, loyal or patriotic love, the quest for a work well-done, the team spirit, the donation of blood, and business lunches’ (1992: 22). It is necessary to conceive the gift forming of a system as reflecting the social context in which it takes place. Godbout reflects this approach when he relates that the only impediment to this type of study is the tradition of utilitarianism when he posted that the gift does not exist because the only disinterested gift would be the authentic gift, where being disinterested is impossible. According to Godbout, this unilateral vision of the gift does not express it as a system of social exchange or as an integrating formula for modern and primitive societies.

The triple acts of giving, receiving and reciprocating constitute a universal anthropology upon which primitive and traditional societies were constructed (Caillé, 2002). Mauss himself said that studies of this genre permit us, with effect, to see, measure, and ponder the various aesthetic, moral, religious, economic motives, as well as the various material factors and demography, which together found a society and constitute a life in common.

(2008 [1925]: 217)

Therefore, even without all of the responses to the scientific problematics about the paradoxical issues of modern man, the gift theory brings to light the possibility of reaching beyond the postulated dichotomies between material and immaterial, the economic and social, the oppressed and the oppressor, the market and the human being which generate apologies and ideologies that many times aim to attend to their own interest of intellectual representation.

Conclusions

Why then has a term so marked throughout history by the stigma of nostalgia and ingenuity been transformed today into a relevant scientific and philosophical discussion? Such questioning by Camargo (2004) implies that it places us face to face with inherent social problems such as the ills of globalisation, since human migration (including that which emerges from tourism) continues to exist and furthermore, there is a preoccupation with the progressive homogenisation of habits
and customs. Because of this, the gift system involving the triple act of giving, receiving and reciprocation should permit a better understanding of the correlated phenomena, such as human association, leadership and solidarity, and their exchange regimes. I conclude that the triad, give-receive-reciprocate, postulated by Mauss, consists of an epistemological and methodological base for hospitality.

The phenomenon of the gift is giving rise to increased academic interest to the extent of its concern to explain the constitution of the social link, without succumbing to the perplexities of the traditional methodologies – individualistic and holistic. In my view, due to its complexity and fragility, the gift allows us to once again encounter the idea of the inter-subjectivity of the social link in its classifying, identifying and circulatory functions. The gift appears to be a necessary step in establishing the identity of people and stakeholders in the hospitality field and can contribute to ways of thinking within various schools.

Therefore, we are not able to think of a society with utopian sentiments that are pure and absent of interest, much less one with deterministic opposition between dominants and oppressed, because in the paradoxes of exchange relationships there coexists both: interest and disinterest. The sociological and anthropologic character of the gift has provided us with the intellectual ability to rethink the human being (and the market) with a complexity whereby it acts in all institutions, be they family, work or public related.

References


