

Some Food We Could Not Eat

Gift Exchange and the Imagination

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Introduction by P. Solis (David Watson)

Poet and translator Lewis Hyde has accomplished several distinct things with this article. First of all, by way of traditional (that is, “pre-” or non-capitalist) folk and fairy tales, as well as anthropological observations, he has revealed the origins of many of the commonplaces associated with capitalist social relations—for example, things have always been as they are today (primitive and traditional peoples are just societies of small-scale capitalists each working in his own self interest), a penny saved is a penny earned, you can’t have your cake and eat it too, the idea of a “noble savage” is only a modern romantic prejudice, etc. By showing how people—including our ancestors—treat property in, a society in which it is not the ruling sign or the axis around which all social relations orbit (indeed, in which present notions of property and wealth do not even apply), he presents a contrast to modern capitalist society which critiques it from a position of affirmation. Whereas many of our discussions of capital have generally implied only a vague sense of the life we envision, his article reveals that many elements are already to be found in our cultural memory. “Folk tales are like the soul’s morality plays,” he writes, but they are also a key to culture. Hence, he has not only undertaken an “economy of the imagination,” but, in a sense, a “political economy” of culture.

It is this notion of an economy of culture which intrigued many of us when we discovered this article.

I am not speaking here of the reductionism which results from neatly dividing the social world into “economic base” and cultural “superstructure” which is itself an ideological reflection of the preponderance of capitalist market or business mentality in our own way of looking at social relations. In fact, it is its discussion of so-called economic activities on a non-economic, or cultural and ethical plane, which is so impressive. Hyde has managed to express some fundamental truths about the meaning of capitalist social relations without discussing them in what we understand as strictly economic (or for that matter, anthropological or sociological) terms. In a way which is understood by all, he has revealed what everyone has suspected all along, that capitalism is a voracious toad which devours the spirit and the body of culture, that commodities are dead things that consume us, that the hoarding of gifts and the transformation of nature’s fruits into property, that is, into stolen goods, reduces them to dust, just as capital’s mad thirst for domination and profit is turning the world into a non-renewable dead thing, dense and poisonous and unyielding. He has described a “property system” which is totally different from our own, and because a property system, as he observes, “expresses our own spirit,” his article does not take the form or the language which expresses the spirit of this society. Instead of being an arcane economic dissection of social relations, it takes the form and the spirit of the gift exchange society, the folk tale. The marvel of this article is that it makes clear which form has more power in indicting this society and in eliciting other possibilities beyond it. I couldn’t

help but think as I read it for the first time that instead of spending years reading economic texts in an attempt to understand capitalism, I should have been reading fairy tales!

I hope that it is clear that I am not seriously discounting the value of economic analysis, only noting that it has limitations which can be surpassed by uncovering the unconscious and popular forms of opposition to capital, to oppression, and to domination, forms which have resided in our traditions for millennia. Reading Lewis Hyde, I cannot help but sense that a break with the forms which capitalist social relations have created will come not from an intellectualized economic explication of the production and circulation of commodities, or certainly not from that alone, but ultimately, from the renewal of a spiritual sensibility which refuses to allow the gift to be reduced to the deadly dimensions of capital. It will be a sensibility which takes generosity as its starting point, which accepts the natural world with the gratitude with which an irreplaceable gift of love is taken, as we take/are taken by our lover, rather than with the exploitative and mechanistic spirit that characterizes modern industrial society everywhere. This is what we desire. Hyde has demonstrated that it is within our nature and our experience as human beings to accomplish this desire.

Some Food We Could Not Eat

Lewis Hyde

I would like to write an economy of the imagination. I assume any “property system” expresses our own spirit—or rather, one of our spirits, for there are many ways to be human and many economies. As we all know, capitalism brings to life and rewards—its own particular spirits (aggression, frugality, independence, and so on). My question is, what would be the form of an economy that took the imagination as its model, that was an emanation of the creative spirit?

The approach I have taken to this question might best be introduced by telling how I came to it in the first place. Some years ago I sat in a coffeehouse listening to someone read an exceptionally boring poem. In trying to imagine how or why the poem had come into existence, the phrase “commodity poem” came to mind as if I had heard the language equivalent of a new Chevrolet. Even at that early point I meant “commodity” as opposed to “gift,” for my own experience of poetry (both of reading and writing) had been in the nature of a gift: something had come to me unbidden, had altered my life, and left me with a sense of gratitude—a form of “exchange,” if you will, clearly unlike what happens to most of us in the marketplace.

I am obviously speaking of gifts in a spiritual sense at this point, but I do not mean to exclude material gifts. For spirits take on bodies and it is in that mixture that we find human liveliness and attraction. Both economic and erotic life bring with them a mixture of excitement, frustration, fascination, and confusion because they must occur where body and spirit mingle, and it is in that union we discover the fullness of the world, or find it missing.

I should add that on a more mundane level my topic has found a source of energy in the situation of my own life. For some years now I have tried to make my way as a poet and a sort of “scholar without institution.” Inevitably the money question comes up. You have to pay the rent. All artists, once they have passed their thirtieth birthday, begin to wonder how it is that a man or woman who wishes to live by his gifts is to survive in a land where everything is bought or sold.

These beginnings—the money question for myself and a sense of art as an “exchange” different from the market—became focused for me only after some friends had introduced me to the work that has been done in anthropology on gift exchange as a form of property. In many tribal groups a large proportion of the material wealth circulates as gift and, not surprisingly, such exchange is attended by certain “fruits”: people live differently who treat a portion of their wealth as gift. As I read through the ethnography I realized that in describing gift exchange as an economy I might be able to develop the language I needed in order to address the situation of the artist living in a land where market value is the value. At about the same time I began to read all the fairy tales I could find with gifts in them, because the image of what a gift is and does is the same in these tales as it is in the ethnography, but fairy tales tell of gifts in a manner closer to my final concern, the fate of the imagination.

Some Characteristics of the Gift Not Addressed Here

I will not be able to fully describe what I mean by “gift” in the space of one essay. I want, therefore, to remark on two or three characteristics of a gift which shall not be addressed here.

One is that gifts mark or act as agents of individual transformation. Gift exchange institutions cluster around times of change: birth, puberty, marriage, sickness, parting, arrival, and death. Sometimes the gift itself actually brings about the change, as if it could pass through a person’s body and leave it altered. The best examples are true teachings—times when some person changes our life either directly or through the power of example. Such teachings are not like the schoolbook lessons; they move the soul and we feel gratitude. I think of gratitude as a labor the soul undertakes to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. We work, sometimes for years, until the gift has truly ripened inside us and can be passed along. (Note that gratitude is not the “obligation” we feel when we accept a gift we don’t really want.)

Second, when you give someone a gift, a feeling-bond is set up between the two of you. The sale of commodities leaves no necessary link. Walking into a hardware store and buying a pound of nails doesn’t connect you to the clerk in any way—you don’t even need to talk to him if you don’t want to (which is why commodities are associated with both freedom and alienation). But a gift makes a connection. With many gift exchange situations, the bond is clearly the point—with marriage gifts and with gifts used as peace overtures, for example.

Finally, it must be said that gift exchange has its negative aspects. Given their bonding power, “poisonous” gifts and gifts from evil people must be refused. In a fairy tale, the hero is in trouble if he eats the meal given to him by a witch. More generally, anyone who is supposed to stay “detached” (a judge, for example) shouldn’t accept gifts. It is also true that the bonds set up by gift exchange limit our freedom of motion. If a young person wants to leave his or her parents, it’s best to stop accepting their gifts because they will only maintain the parent-child connection. As gifts are associated with being connected to a community, so commodities are associated with both freedom and rootlessness.

In part because of these restrictions, I do not feel that gift exchange is, in the end, the exclusive “economy of the imagination.” But it is a necessary part of that economy; the imagination will never come to its full power until we are at home with the gifts of both the inner and the outer world. An elaboration of the nature of gift exchange must, therefore, precede any more qualifying remarks, and it is this elaboration which I begin here.

I

When the Puritans first landed in Massachusetts they discovered an Indian custom so curious they felt called upon to find a name for it. When Thomas Hutchinson wrote his history of the colony, the term was already an old saying: “Indian gift,” he told his readers, “is a proverbial expression signifying a present for which an equivalent return is expected.” We still use this, of course, and in an even broader sense. If I am so uncivilized as to ask for the return of a gift I have given, they call me an “Indian giver.”

Imagine a scene. The Englishman comes into the Indian lodge. He falls to admiring a clay pipe with feathers tied to the stem. The tribe passes this pipe around for awhile, but sooner or later it is always given away again. So the Indian, as is only polite among his people, responds to the white man’s interest by saying, “That’s just some stuff we don’t need. Please take it. It’s a gift.” The Englishman is tickled pink. What a nice thing to send back to the British Museum! He takes the pipe home and sets it on the mantelpiece. The next day another Indian happens to visit him and sees the gift which was due to come into his lodge soon. He too is delighted. “Ah!” he says, “the Gift!” and he sticks it in his pouch. In consternation the Englishman invents the phrase “Indian giver” to describe these people with such a low sense of private property. The opposite of this term would be something like “white-man-keeper,” or, as we say nowadays, “capitalist,” that is, a person whose first reaction to property is to take it out of circulation, to put it in a warehouse or museum, or—more to the point for capitalism—to lay it aside to be used for production.

The Indian giver (the original ones, at any rate) understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we are given should be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, the momentum transferred. You

may hold on to a Christmas gift, but it will cease to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. When it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned, but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move. There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark the place or hold back water, but the gift keeps going. Like a bird that rests on the rising air near cliffs, or water at the lip of the falls, standing still is its restlessness and the ease of the gift is in its motion.

Two Forms of Tribal Property: Gifts and Capital

Tribal peoples usually distinguish between two sorts of property, gifts and capital. Commonly they have a law which repeats the sensibility implicit in the idea of an Indian Gift. "One man's gift," they say, "must not be another man's capital." Wendy James, a British social anthropologist, tells us that among the Uduk in northeast Africa, "any wealth transferred from one subclan to another, whether animals, grain or money, is in the nature of a gift, and should be consumed, and not invested for growth. If such transferred wealth is added to the subclan's capital (cattle in this case) and kept for growth and investment, the subclan is regarded as being in an immoral relation of debt to the donors of the original gift." If a pair of goats received as a gift from another subclan is kept to breed or to buy cattle, "there will be general complaint that the so-and-so's are getting rich at someone else's expense, behaving immorally by hoarding and investing gifts, and therefore being in a state of severe debt. It will be expected that they will soon suffer storm damage..."

The goats in this example move from one clan to another just as the pipe moved from person to person in my fantasy. And what happens then? If the object is a gift, it keeps moving, which, in this case, means that the man who received the goats throws a big party and everyone gets fed. The goats needn't be given back but they surely can't be set aside to produce milk or more goats. And a new note has been added: the feeling that if a gift were not treated as such, if one form of property were to be converted to another, something horrible might happen. In folk tales the person who tries to hold on to a gift usually dies; in this anecdote the risk is "storm damage." (What happens in fact to most tribal groups is worse than storm damage—whenever foreigners show up and convert gift to capital, universally the tribal group is destroyed as a group.)

If we turn now to a folk tale we will be able to see all of this from a different angle. Folk tales are like the soul's morality plays—they address the gift as an image in the psyche. They are told at the boundary between our inner feelings about property and the ways in which we handle it in fact. The first tale I have chosen comes from Scotland. It may seem a bit long so early in our discourse, but almost everything in it will be of use. The tale is called "The Girl and the Dead Man." I have put a few obscurities into modern speech, but other than that, this is how the story was told by a Scottish woman in the mid-nineteenth century:

There was before now a poor woman, and she had a leash of daughters. Said the eldest one of them to her mother, "I had better go and seek for fortune." "I had better," said the mother, "bake a loaf of bread for thee." When the bread was done, her mother said to her, "Which wouldst thou like best, a little bit and my blessing or the big bit and my curse?" "I would rather," said she, "the big bit and thy curse."

She went on her way and when the night was wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat the bread. There gathered the ground quail and her twelve puppies, and the little birds of the air about her, for a part of the bread. "Wilt thou give us a part of the bread?" said they. "I won't give it, you ugly brutes; I have not much for myself." "My curse will be thine, and the curse of my twelve birds; and thy mother's curse is the worst of all." She rose and went away, and the bit of bread had not been half enough.

She saw a little house a long way from her; and if a long way from her, she was not long reaching it. She knocked at the door.

"Who's there?"

"A good maid seeking a master."

"We want that," said they, and they let her in.

Her task was to stay awake at night and watch a dead man, the brother of the housewife, whose corpse was restless. She was to have a peck of gold and a peck of silver. Besides this she had of nuts as she broke, of needles as

she lost, of thimbles as she pierced, of thread as she used, of candles as she burned, a bed of green silk over her, a bed of green silk under her, sleeping by day and watching by night.

The first night, when she was watching she fell asleep; the mistress came in, struck her with a magic club and she fell down dead. She threw her out back in the garbage heap.

Said the middle daughter to her mother, "I had better go seek fortune and follow my sister." Her mother baked her a loaf of bread; and she chose the big half and her mother's curse, as her elder sister did, and it happened to her as it happened to her sister.

Said the youngest daughter to her mother, "I had better go myself and seek fortune too, and follow my sisters."

"I had better bake a loaf of bread," - said her mother. "Which wouldst thou rather, a little bit and my blessing or the big bit and my curse?"

"I would rather have the little bit and your blessing."

She went on her way and when the night was wreathing round her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat the bread. There gathered the ground quail and her twelve puppies, and the little birds of the air about her.

"Will thou give us some of that?"

"I will give you pretty creatures, if you will keep me company." She gave them some of the bread; they ate and they had plenty, and she had enough. They clapped their wings about her till she was snug with the warmth.

She went, she saw a little house a long way from her...[here the task and the wages are repeated].

She sat to watch the dead man, and she was sewing; in the middle of the night he rose up and screwed up a grin. "If thou dost not lie down properly, I will give thee the one leathering with a stick." He lay down. After a while he rose on one elbow and screwed up a grin; and a third time he rose up and screwed up a grin.

When he rose the third time she walloped him with the stick. The stick stuck to the dead man and her hand stuck to the stick and off they went! They went forward till they were going through a wood; when it was low for her it was high for him; and when it was high for him it was low for her. The nuts were knocking their eyes out and the wild plums taking her ears off, till they got through the wood. Then they returned home.

She got a peck of gold and a peck of silver and the vessel of cordial. She rubbed the vessel of cordial on her two sisters and brought them alive. They left me sitting here, and if they were well, 'tis well; and if they were not, let them be.

There are at least four gifts in this story. The first, of course, is the bread which the mother gives to her daughters as a going away present. This becomes the second gift when the youngest daughter shares her bread with the birds. She keeps the gift in motion, the moral point of the tale. Several things, in addition to her survival, come to her as a result of treating the gift correctly. These are the fruits of the gift. First, she and the birds are relieved of their hunger. Second, the birds befriend her. And third, she's able to stay awake all night and get the job done. (As we shall see by the end of the essay, these are not accidental results, they are typical fruits of the gift)

In the morning the third gift appears, the vessel of cordial. It is a healing liquid, not unlike the "water of life" that appears in folk tales from all over the world. It has power: with it she is able to bring her sisters back to life. This liquid is thrown in as a gift for her successful completion of the task. It's a bonus, nowhere mentioned in the wonderful litany of wages offered to each daughter. We will leave for later the question of where it comes from; for now we are looking at what happens to the gift after it is given, and again we find that this girl is no dummy—she moves it right along, giving it to her sisters to bring them back to life. That is the fourth and last gift in the tale. [1]

What Happens if the Gift is Not Allowed to Move On

This story also gives us a chance to see what happens if the gift is not allowed to move on. Just as milk will sour in the jug, a gift that is kept still will lose its gift properties. The traditional belief in Wales is that when the fairies give gifts of bread to the poor, the loaves must be eaten that same day or they will turn into toadstools. Some things go rotten when they are no longer treated as a gift.

We may think of the gift as a river and the girl in the tale who treats it correctly does so by allowing herself to be a channel for its current. If we try to dam up the river, one of two things will happen: it will either fill us until we burst or it will seek out another path and stop flowing through us. In this folk tale it is not just the mother's curse that gets the first two girls. The night birds give them a second chance and one imagines they would not have

repeated the curse had they met with generosity. But instead the girls try to dam up the flow, thinking that what counts is ownership and size. The effect is clear: by keeping the gift they get no more. They are no longer vehicles for the stream and they no longer enjoy its fruits, one of which seems to be their own lives, for they end up dead. Their mother's bread has turned to toadstools inside of them.

Another way to describe the motion of the gift is to say that a gift must always be used up, consumed, eaten. The gift is property that perishes. Food is one of the most common images for the gift because it is so clear that it is consumed. Even when the gift is not food, when it is something we would think of as durable goods, it is often referred to as a thing to be eaten. Shell necklaces and armbands are the ritual gifts in the Trobriand Islands and, when they are passed from one group to the next, protocol demands that the man who gives them away toss them on the ground and say, "Here, some food we could not eat." Or, again, a man in a different tribe that Wendy James has studied speaks of the money he was given at the marriage of his daughter, saying that he will pass it on rather than spend it on himself. Only he puts it this way: "... If I receive money for the children God has given me, I cannot eat it. I must give it to others."

To say that the gift is used up, consumed, and eaten sometimes means that it is truly destroyed as with food, but more simply and accurately it means that the gift perishes for the person who gives it away. In gift exchange the transaction itself consumes the object. This is why durable goods are given in a manner that emphasizes their loss (the Trobriand Islander throws the shells on the ground). A perishable good is a special case and a surer gift because it is sure to be lost.

Now it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange it wouldn't be a gift. If the girl in our story had offered to sell the bread to the birds the whole tone would have been different. Instead, she sacrifices it—her mother's gift is dead and gone when it leaves her hand. She no longer controls it, nor has she any contract about repayment. For her, the gift has perished. This then is how I use "consume" to speak of a gift—a gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its motion. A market exchange has an equilibrium, or stasis: you pay in order to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum and weight shifts from body to body.

I must add one more word on what it is to "consume" because the Western industrial world is known for its "consumer goods" and they are not at all what I mean. Again, the difference is in the form of the exchange, a thing we can feel most concretely in the form of the goods themselves. I remember the time I went to my first rare book fair and saw how the first edition of Thoreau and Whitman and Crane had been carefully packaged in heat-shrunk plastic with the price tags on the inside. Somehow the simple addition of airtight plastic sacs had transformed the books from vehicles of liveliness into commodities, like bread made with chemicals to keep it from perishing. In commodity exchange it's as if the buyer and the seller are both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of a gift exchange. There is neither motion nor emotion because the whole point is to keep the balance, to make sure the exchange itself doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. "Consumer goods" are a privatized consuming, not a banquet.

The desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry for something that can only be carried inside of bodies. We need it. We want it. But "consumer goods" just bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. They can never, as the gift can, raise lust into a kind of love, an emotional discourse. Love may always grow from lust, but not in the stillness of commodity exchange. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption with neither satiation nor fire. Like a guest seduced into feeding on the drippings of someone else's capital without benefit of its inner nourishment, he is always hungry at the end of the meal, depressed and weary as we all feel when lust has dragged us from the house and led us to nothing.

Gift exchange has many fruits and to the degree that the fruits of the gift can satisfy our needs there will always be pressure for property to be treated as a gift. This pressure, in a sense, is what keeps the gift in motion. When the Udak warn that a storm will ruin the crops if someone tries to stop the gift from moving, it is really their desire for its motion that will bring the storm. A restless hunger springs up when the gift is not being eaten. The Grimm brothers found a short tale they called "The Ungrateful Son."

Once a man and his wife were sitting outside the front door with a roast chicken before them which they were going to eat between them. Then the man saw his old father coming along and quickly took the chicken and hid it, for he begrudged him any of it. The old man came, had a drink, and went away.

Now, the son was about to put the roast chicken back on the table, but when he reached for it, it had turned into a big toad that jumped up in his face and stayed there and didn't go away again.

And if anybody tried to take it away, it would give them a poisonous look, as if about to jump in their faces, so that no one dared touch it. And the ungrateful son had to feed the toad every day, otherwise it would eat part of his face.

And thus he went ceaselessly hither and yon about in the world.

This toad is the hunger that appears when the gift stops moving, whenever one man's gift becomes another man's capital. To the degree that we desire the fruits of the gift, teeth will appear when it is hidden away. When property is hoarded, thieves and beggars begin to be born to rich men's wives. A story like this says that there is a force seeking to keep the gift in motion. Some property must perish, its preservation is beyond us. We have no choice, or rather, our choice is whether to keep the gift moving or to be eaten by it. We choose between the toad's dumb-lust and that other, graceful perishing in which the gift is eaten with a passion not unlike love.

II

The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot fail...

—Walt Whitman *A Song of the Rolling Earth*

A bit of a mystery still remains in the Scottish tale "The Girl and the Dead Man": Where did the "vessel of cordial" come from? My guess is that it comes from the mother, or from her spirit, at least. The gift not only moves, it moves in a circle. In this tale it circles through the mother and her daughter. The mother gives the bread and the girl gives it in return to the birds whom I place in the realm of the mother, not only because it is a mother bird who addresses her but also because there is a verbal link (the mother has a "leash of daughters," the mother bird has her "puppies"). The vessel of cordial is in the realm of the mother as well (the original Gaelic word means "teat of ichor" or "teat of health": it is a fluid that comes from the breast). The level changes, to be sure—it is a different sort of mother whose breasts hold the blood of the gods—but it is still in the maternal sphere. Structurally, then, the gift moves mother-daughter—mother-daughter. In circling twice in this way the gift itself increases from bread to the water of life, from carnal food to a spiritual food. At that point the circle expands as the girl gives the gift to her sisters to bring them back to life.

The figure of the circle in which the gift moves can be seen more clearly if we turn to a story from ethnography. Gift institutions seem to have been universal among tribal peoples; the few we know the most about are the ones that Western ethnographers [studied] around the turn of the century. One of these is the Kula, the ceremonial gift exchange [of] the Massim tribes, peoples who occupy the South Sea Islands off the eastern tip of New Guinea.

There are a dozen or more groups of islands in the Kula archipelago. They are quite far apart—a circle enclosing the whole group would have a diameter of almost 300 miles. The Kula is (or was 60 years ago) a highly developed gift system conducted throughout the islands. At its heart lies the exchange of two ceremonial gifts, armshells and necklaces. These are passed from household to household, staying with each for a time. So long as one of the gifts is residing in a man's house, Bronislaw Malinowski tells us, the man is able "to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit this article, to tell how he obtained it, and to plan to whom he is going to give it. And all this forms one of the favorite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip..." Armshells and necklaces are talked about, touched, and used to ward off disease. Like heirlooms, they are pools where feeling and power and history have collected. They are brought out and palavered over just as we might do if we had, say, some fine old carpenter's tools that had been used by our own grandfather, or a pocket watch brought from the old country.

Malinowski calls the Kula articles "ceremonial gifts" because their social use far exceeds their practical use. A friend of mine tells me that the gang he ran with in college continually passed around a deflated basketball. The joke was to get it mysteriously deposited in someone else's room. It seems that the clear uselessness of such objects makes it easier for them to be vehicles for the spirit of the group. My father says that when he was a boy his parents

and some good friends passed back and forth, again as a joke, a huge open-ended wrench that had apparently been custom cast to repair a steam shovel. The two families found it one day on a picnic and for years thereafter it showed up in first one house and then the other, under the Christmas tree or in the umbrella stand, appearing one year fully bronzed and gift wrapped. If you have not yourself been a part of such an exchange you will easily turn up a story like this by asking around, for these spontaneous exchanges of “useless” gifts are fairly common, though hardly ever developed to the depth and elegance that Malinowski found among the Massim.

The Gift Moves in a Circle

The Kula gifts, the armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the archipelago. Each travels in a circle, the red shell necklaces moving clockwise and the armshells moving counterclockwise.

A man who participates in the Kula has gift partners in neighboring tribes. If we imagine him facing the center of the circle with partners on his left and right, he will always be receiving armshells from his partner to the left and giving them to the man on his right. The necklaces flow the other way. Of course these things are not actually passed hand over hand; they are carried by canoe from island to island in journeys that require great preparation and cover hundreds of miles.

The two Kula gifts are exchanged for each other. If a man brings me a necklace, I will give him in return some armshells of equivalent value. I may do this right away or I may wait as long as a year (though if I wait that long I will give him a few smaller gifts in the interim to show my good faith). When I have received a gift, I can keep it for a time before I pass it on and initiate a new exchange. As a rule it takes between two and ten years for each article in the Kula to make a full round of the islands.

Because these gifts are exchanged for each other it seems we have already broken the rule against equilibrium that I set out in the first section. But let us look more closely. We should first note that the Kula articles are kept in motion, though this does not necessarily mean there is no equilibrium. Each gift stays with a man for awhile, but if he keeps it too long he will begin to have a reputation for being “slow” and “hard” in the—Kula. The gifts “never stop,” writes Malinowski. “It seems almost incredible at first;...but it is the fact, nevertheless, that no one ever keeps any of the Kula valuables for any length of time... ‘Ownership,’ therefore, in Kula, is quite a special economic relation. A man who is in the Kula never keeps any article for longer than, say, a year or two.” The Trobriand Islanders know what it is to own property, but their sense of possession is wholly different from the European. The “social code...lays down that to possess is to be great, and that wealth is the indispensable appendage of social rank and attribute of personal virtue. But the important point is that with them to possess is to give [my emphasis]—and here the natives differ from us notably. A man who owns a thing is naturally expected to share it, to distribute it, to be its trustee and dispenser.”

The motion of the Kula gifts does not by itself assure that there will be no equilibrium, for, as we have seen, they move but they are also exchanged. Two ethics, however, govern this exchange and both of them insure that, while there may be a macroscopic equilibrium, at the level of each man there will be the sense of imbalance, of shifting weight, that always marks a gift exchange. The first of these ethics prohibits discussion: “...the Kula,” writes Malinowski, “consists in the bestowing of a ceremonial gift, which has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time...But [and this is the point], it can never be exchanged from hand to hand, with the equivalence between the two objects discussed, bargained about and computed.” A man may wonder what will come in return for his gift, but he is not supposed to bring it up. In barter you talk and talk until you strike a bargain, but the gift is given in silence.

A second important ethic, Malinowski goes on, “is that the equivalence of the counter-gift is left to the giver, and it cannot be enforced by any kind of coercion” If a man gives some crummy necklace in return for a fine set of armshells, people may talk, but there’s nothing you can do about it. When we barter we make deals and when someone defaults we go after him, but the gift must be a gift. It is as if you give a part of your substance to your gift partner and then wait in silence until he gives you a part of his. You put your self in his hands. These rules—and they are typical of gift institutions—preserve the sense of motion despite the exchange involved. There is trade, but these are not commodities.

We commonly think of gifts as being exchanged between two people and of gratitude as being directed back to the actual donor. “Reciprocity,” the standard social science term for the return gift, has this sense of going to and fro between people (the roots are *re* and *pro*, back and forth, like a reciprocating engine). The gift in the Scottish tale is given reciprocally, going back and forth between the mother and her daughter (until the very end).

Reciprocal giving is a form of gift exchange, but it is the simplest. The gift moves in a circle and two people don’t make much of a circle. Two points establish a line but a circle has to be drawn on a plane and needs at least three points. This is why most stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people. I have introduced the Kula circuit here because it is such a fine example. For the Kula gifts to move, each man must have at least two gift partners. In this case the circle is larger than that, of course, but three is its lower limit.

Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. The most obvious is this: when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to. I continually give armshells to my partner to the west, but, unlike a two-person give and take, he never gives me armshells in return. The whole mood is different. The circle is the structural equivalent of the prohibition of discussion. When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere) it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude, as well. The smaller the circle is—and particularly if it is just two people—the more you can keep your eye on things and the more likely it is you’ll start to think like a salesman. But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners. When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith.

The Size of the Circle

What is the size of the circle? In addressing this question I have come to think of the circle, the container in which the gift moves, as its “body” or “ego.” Some psychologists speak of the ego as a “complex” like any other: the Mother, the Father, the Me—all of these are important places in the field of the psyche where images and energy cluster as we grow, like stars in a constellation. The ego complex takes on shape and size as the Me, that part of the psyche which takes everything personally, retains our private history, how others have treated us, how we look and feel and so on.

I find it useful to think of the ego complex as a thing which keeps expanding, not as something to be overcome or done away with. An ego has formed and hardened by the time most of us reach adolescence, but it is small, an ego-of-one. Then, if we fall in love, for example, the constellation of identity expands and the ego-of-one becomes an ego-of-two. The young lover, often to his own amazement, finds himself saying “we” instead of “me.” Each of us identifies with a wider and wider community as we mature. We come to think and act with a group-ego (or, in most of these gift stories, a tribal-ego), which speaks with the “we” of kings and wise old people. Of course the larger it becomes the less it feels like what we usually mean by ego. Not entirely, though: whether an adolescent is thinking of himself or a nation of itself, it still feels like egotism to anyone on the outside. There is still a boundary.

If the ego were to widen still farther, however, it really would change its nature and become something we would no longer call ego. There is a consciousness in which we act as part of things larger even than the race. When I picture this I always think of the end of “Song of Myself” where Whitman dissolves into the air:

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt and grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

Now the part that says “me” is scattered. There is no boundary to be outside of, unless the universe itself is bounded.

In all of this we could substitute “body” for “ego.” Aborigines commonly refer to their own clan as “my body,” just as our marriage ceremony speaks of becoming “one flesh.” Again, the body in this sense enlarges beyond our own skin and in its final expansion there is no body at all. We love to feel the body open outward when we are in the spirit of the gift. The ego’s firmness has its virtues, but in the end we seek the slow dilation, to use another of Whitman’s words, in which the self enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally lost in ripeness.

The gift can circulate at every level of the ego. In the ego-of-one we speak of self-gratification and, whether it's forced or chosen, a virtue or a vice, the mark of self-gratification is its isolation. Reciprocal giving, the ego-of-two, is a little more social. We think mostly of lovers. Each of these circles is exhilarating as it expands and the little gifts that pass between lovers touch us because each is stepping into a larger circuit. But when it goes on and on to the exclusion of others it stops expanding and goes stale. D.H. Lawrence spoke of the "egoisme a deux" of so many married couples, people who get just so far in the expansion of the self and then close down for a lifetime, opening up for neither children nor the gods. A folk tale from Kashmir tells of two Brahmin women who tried to dispense with their alms-giving duties by simply giving alms back and forth to each other. They didn't quite have the spirit of the thing. When they died they returned to the earth as two wells so poisoned that no one could take water from them. No one else can drink from the ego-of-two. It has its time in our maturation, but it is an infant form of the gift circle and does not endure.

In the Kula we have already seen a fine example of the larger circle. The Maori, the native tribes of New Zealand, provide another, similar in some ways to the Kula, but offering new detail and a hint of how gift exchange feels if the circle expands beyond the body of the tribe. The Maori have a word *hau* which translates as "spirit," particularly the spirit of the gift and the spirit of the forest which gives food. In these tribes when hunters return from the forest with birds they have killed they give a portion of the kill to the priests who, in turn, cook them at a sacred fire. The priests eat a few of the birds and then prepare a sort of talisman, the *mauri*, which is the physical embodiment of the forest *hau*. The *mauri* is a gift that the priests give back to the forest, where it causes the birds to be abundant so that they may again be slain and taken by the hunters.

There are three gifts in this hunting ritual; the forest gives to the hunters, the hunters to the priests, and the priests to the forest. At the end, the gift moves from the third party back to the first. The ceremony that the priests perform is called *whangai hau* which means "nourishing *hau*," that is, feeding the spirit. To give such a name to the priests' activity says that the addition of the third party keeps the gift in motion, keeps it lively. Put conversely, without the priests there is a danger that the motion of the gift will be lost. It seems to be too much to ask of the hunters to both kill the game and return the gift to the forest. As we said in speaking of the Kula, gift exchange is more likely to turn into barter when it falls into the ego-of-two. With a simple give-and-take, the hunters may begin to think of the forest as a place to turn a profit. But with the priests present, the gift must leave the hunters' sight before it returns to the woods. The priests take on or incarnate the position of the third thing to avoid the binary relation of hunters and forest which by itself would not be abundant. The priests, by their presence alone, feed the spirit.

Every gift calls for a return gift, and so, by placing the gift back in the forest, the priests treat the birds as a gift of nature. We now understand that this is ecological. Ecology as a science began toward the end of the nineteenth century, an offshoot of all the interest in evolution. It was originally the study of how animals live in their environments and one of its first lessons was that, beneath all the change in nature, there are steady states characterized by cycles. Every participant in the cycle literally lives off of the others with only the energy source, the sun, being transcendent. Widening this study to include man meant to look at ourselves as a part of nature again, not its Lord. When we see that we are actors in natural cycles then we understand that what nature gives to us is influenced by what we give to nature. So the circle is a sign of ecological wisdom as much as of gift. We come to feel ourselves as one part of a large self-regulating system. The return gift, the "nourishing *hau*," is literally feedback, as they say in cybernetics. Without it, that is to say, with any greed or arrogance of will, the whole cycle gets out of whack. We all know that it isn't "really" the *mauri* placed in the forest that "causes" the birds to be abundant, and yet now we see that on a different level it is: the circle of gifts that replicates and harmonizes with the cycles of nature and in so doing manages not to interrupt them and not to put man on the outside. The forest's abundance is in fact a consequence of our treating its wealth as a gift. We shall see as we go along that there is always this link between gift and abundance, as there is always a link between commodities and scarcity. [2]

The Circle Includes Nature and the Gods

The Maori hunting ritual enlarges the circle within which the gift moves in two ways. First, it includes nature. Second and more importantly, it includes the gods. The priests act out a gift relationship with the deities, giving

thanks and sacrificing gifts to them in return for what they give the tribe. A story from the Old Testament shows us the same thing in a tradition with which we are more familiar. The structure is identical.

In the Pentateuch the first fruits always belong to the Lord. In Exodus the Lord tells Moses: "Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine." The Lord gives the tribe its wealth and the germ of that wealth is then, given back to the Lord. Fertility is a gift from God, and in order for it to continue its first fruits must be returned to Him as gift. In pagan times this had included sacrificing the first-born son. The Israelites had early been allowed to substitute an animal for the first-born son, as in the story of Abraham and Issac. Likewise a lamb was substituted for the first-born of any unclean animal. The Lord says to Moses:

All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. An the first-born of your sons you shall redeem.

In a different chapter the Lord explains to Aaron what is to be done with the first-borns. Aaron and his sons are responsible for the priesthood and they minister at the altar. The lambs, calves, and kids are to be sacrificed; "You shall sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shall burn their fat as an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord; but their flesh shall be yours..." As in the Maori story, the priests eat a portion of the gift. But its essence is burned and returned to the Lord in smoke.

This gift cycle has three stations and more—the flocks, the tribe, the priests, and the Lord. The inclusion of the Lord in the circle—and this is the point I began to make above—changes the ego in which the gift moves in a way unlike any other addition. It is enlarged beyond the tribal ego and beyond nature. Now, as I said when I first introduced the image, we would no longer call it "ego" at all. The gift leaves all boundary and circles into mystery.

The passage into mystery always refreshes. We lie on the grass and stare at the stars in their blackness and our heaviness falls away. If, when we work, we can look on the face of mystery just once a day, then all our labor satisfies, and if we cannot we become willful and top-heavy. We are lightened when our gifts rise from pools we cannot fathom. Then they are not all ego and then they are inexhaustible. Anything that is contained contains as well its own exhaustion. The most perfectly balanced gyroscope slowly wears down. But we are enlivened when the gift passes into the heart of light or of darkness and then returns. This is as true of property as it is of those gifts we cannot touch. It is when the world of objects burns a bit in our peripheral vision that it gives us jubilation and not depression. We stand before a bonfire or even a burning house and feel the odd release it brings. It is as if the trees were able to give the sun return for what enters them through the leaf. Objects pull us down into their bones unless their fat is singed occasionally. When all property is held still then the Pharaoh himself is plagued with hungry toads. When we cannot be moved to move the gift then a sword appears to seek out the first-born sons. But the Pharaoh was dead long before his first-born was taken, for we are only alive to the degree that we can feel the call for motion. In the living body that call is no stranger, it is a part of the soul. When the gift circles into mystery then the liveliness stays and the mood is the same as in those lines of Whitman. It is "a pleasing odor to the Lord" when the first fruits are effused in eddies and drifted in lacy jags above the flame.

We described the motion of the gift earlier in this essay by saying that gifts are always used, consumed, or eaten. Now that we have seen the figure of the circle we can understand what seems at first to be a paradox of gift exchange: when the gift is used it is not used up. Quite the opposite in fact: the gift that is not used is lost while the one that is passed along remains abundant. In the Scottish tale the girls who hoard their bread are fed only while they eat. The meal finishes in hunger though they took the larger piece. The girl who shares her bread is satisfied. What is given away feeds again and again while what is kept feeds only once and leaves us hungry.

The tale is a parable, but in the Kula ring we saw the same as a social fact. The necklaces and armshells are not diminished by their use, but satisfy faithfully. It is only when a foreigner intervenes to buy a few for the museum that they are "used up" by a transaction. The Maori hunting tale showed us that not just food in parables but food in nature remains abundant when it is treated as a gift, when we participate in the moving circle and do not stand aside as hunter or exploiter. Gifts form a class of property whose value is only in their use and which literally cease to exist if they are not constantly consumed. [3] When gifts are sold they change their nature as much as water changes when it freezes and no rationalist telling of the constant elemental structure can replace the feeling that it is lost.

In E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, Dr. Aziz, the Moslem, and Fielding, the Englishman, have a brief dialogue, a typical debate between gift and commodity. Fielding says:

"Your emotions never seem in proportion to their objects, Aziz."

"Is emotion a sack of potatoes, so much to the pound, to be measured out? Am I a machine? I shall be told I can use up my emotions by using them, next."

"I should have thought you would. It sounds common sense. You can't eat your cake and have it, even in the world of the spirit."

"If you are right, there is no point in any friendship; it all comes down to give and take, or give and return, which is disgusting, and we had better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves."

In the world of the gift, as in the Scottish tale you not only can have your cake and eat it too, you can't have your cake unless you eat it. It is the same with feeling. Our emotions are not used up in use. They may rise and fall, certainly, but they become strong and sure as we use them and only die away when we try to keep the lid on.

Gift and feeling are alike in this regard. Though once that is said we must qualify it, for the gift does not imitate all emotion, it imitates the emotions of relationship. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, the gift joins people together. It doesn't just carry feeling, it carries attachment or love. The gift is an emanation of Eros. The forms of gift exchange spring from erotic life and gifts are its vehicles. In speaking of "use," then, we see that the gift displays a natural fact: libido is not lost when it is given away. Eros never wastes his lovers. When we give ourselves to that god he does not leave off his attentions; it is only when we fall to calculation that he remains hidden and no body will satisfy. Dissatisfaction comes not merely from being filled but from being filled with a current that will not cease: With the gift, as in love, our satisfaction sets us at ease because we know that somehow its use at once assures its plenty.

Scarcity and abundance have more to do with the form of exchange than with how much stuff is at hand. Scarcity appears when wealth cannot flow. Elsewhere in *A Passage to India*, Dr. Aziz says, "If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes. Did you ever hear that useful Urdu proverb?" and Fielding replies, "My proverbs are: a penny saved is a penny earned; A stitch in time saves nine; Look before you leap; and the British Empire rests on them." He's right. An empire does need its clerks with their ledgers and their clocks! saving pennies in time. The problem is that wealth ceases to move freely when all things are counted and carry a price.

It may accumulate in great heaps but fewer and fewer people can afford it. After the war in Bangladesh, thousands of tons of donated rice rotted in warehouses because the market was the only known mode of distribution and the poor, naturally, couldn't afford to buy. Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist who has done some of the best work on gift exchange, begins a comment on modern scarcity with the paradoxical contention that hunters and gatherers "have affluent economies, their absolute poverty notwithstanding." He writes:

"Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. [Both Samuelson and Friedman begin their economies with 'The Law of Scarcity,' it's all over by the end of chapter one.] Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples. The apparent material status of the economy seems to be no clue to its accomplishments; something has to be said for the mode of economic organization.

"The market industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely unparalleled and to a degree nowhere else approximated. Where production and distribution are arranged through the behavior of prices, and all livelihoods depend on getting and spending, insufficiency of material means becomes the explicit, calculable starting point of all economic activity. The entrepreneur is confronted with alternative investments of a finite capital, the worker (hopefully) with alternative choices of remunerative employ...Consumption is a double tragedy: what begins in inadequacy will end in deprivation. Bringing together an international division of labor, the market makes available a dazzling array of

products: all these Good Things within a man's reach—but never all within his grasp. Worse, in this game of consumer free choice, every acquisition is simultaneously a deprivation, for every purchase of something is a foregoing of something else, in general only marginally less desirable..."

Scarcity appears when there is a boundary. If there is plenty of blood in the system but something blocks its passage to the brain, the brain does well to complain of scarcity. The assumptions of market exchange may not necessarily lead to the emergence of boundaries, but they do in practice. When trade is "clean" and leaves people unconnected, when the merchant is free to sell when and where he will, when the market moves mostly for profit and the dominant myth is not "to possess is to give" but "the fittest survive," then wealth will lose its motion and gather in isolated pools. Under the assumptions of trade, property is plagued by entropy and wealth becomes scarce even as it increases.

A commodity is truly "used up" when it is sold because nothing about the exchange assures its return. A visiting sea captain may pay handsomely for some Kula necklaces, but because their sale removes them from the circle it wastes them, no matter the price. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. The mythology of the rich in the over-producing nations that the poor are in on some secret about satisfaction—black "soul," gypsy duende, the noble savage, the simple farmer, the virile gamekeeper—obscures the harshness of modern capitalist poverty, but it does have a basis, for people who live in voluntary poverty or who are not capital-intensive do have more ready access to "erotic" forms of exchange that are neither exhausting nor exhaustible and whose use assures their plenty.

If the commodity moves to turn a profit, where does the gift move? The gift in all its realms, from the soul to the kitchen, moves toward the empty place. As it turns in its circle it always comes to him who has been empty-handed the longest, and if someone appears elsewhere whose need is greater it will leave its old channel and move to him. Our generosity may leave us empty, but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to fill us again. Social nature abhors a vacuum. The gift finds us attractive when we stand with a bowl that is un-owned and empty. As Meister Eckhart says, "Let us borrow empty vessels."

The begging bowl of the Buddha, Thomas Merton has said, "represents the ultimate theological root-of the belief, not just in a right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings...When the monk begs from the layman and receives a gift from the layman, it is not a selfish person getting something from somebody else. He is simply opening himself in this interdependence." The wandering mendicant takes it as his task to carry what is empty from door to door. There is not profit; he merely stays alive if the gift moves toward him. He makes its spirit visible to us.

His well-being, then, is a sign of its well-being, as his starvation would be a sign of its withdrawal. Our English word "beggar" comes from the Beghards, a brotherhood of mendicant friars that grew up in the thirteenth century in Flanders. There are still some places in the East, I gather, where wandering mendicants live from the begging bowl. In Europe they died out at the close of the Middle Ages.

As the bearer of the empty place, the holy mendicant has an active duty beyond his supplication. He is the vehicle of that fluidity which is abundance. The wealth of the group touches his bowl at all sides, as if it were the center of a wheel where the spokes meet. The gift gathers there and the mendicant gives it away again when he meets someone who is empty. In European folk tales the beggar often turns out to be Wotan, the true "owner" of the land, who asks for charity though it is his own wealth he moves within and who then responds to neediness by filling it with gift. He is the godfather to the poor.

Folk tales commonly open with a beggar motif. In a tale from Bengal, the king has two queens, both of whom are childless. A faquir, a wandering mendicant, comes to the palace gate to ask for alms. One of the queens walks down to give him a handful of rice. When he finds that she is childless, however, he says that he cannot accept the rice but has a gift for her instead, a potion that will remove her barrenness. If she drinks this nostrum with the juice of the pomegranate flower, he tells her, in due time she will bear a son whom she should then call Pomegranate Boy. All this comes to pass and the tale proceeds.

Such stories say that the gift always moves in a circle from plenty to emptiness. The gift seeks the barren and the arid and the stuck and the poor. [4] A commodity stays where it is and says "I am," but the gift says "I am not" and longs to be consumed. A guest in my home, it has no home of its own but moves on, leaving early in the morning

before the rest of us have risen. The Lord says “all that opens the womb is mine” for it is He who filled the empty womb, having earlier stood as a beggar by the sacrificial fire or at the gates of the palace.

III

The gift the beggar gives to the queen in this last folk tale brings the queen her fertility and she bears a child. Fertility and growth are common fruits of gift exchange. Think back on all we have seen so far—the Gaelic tale, the Kula ring, the rites of the first-born, feeding the forest hau, and so on—fertility is often a concern and invariably either the bearers of the gift or the gift itself grows as a result of its circulation.

If the gift is alive, like a bird or a cornstalk, then it really grows, of course. But even inert gifts, such as the Kula articles, are felt to increase in worth as they move from hand to hand. The distinction—alive/inert—is not finally very useful, therefore, because if the gift is not alive it is nonetheless treated as if it were and whatever we treat as living begins to take on life. Moreover, gifts that take on life will in turn bestow life. The final gift in the Gaelic tale is used to revive the dead sisters. Even if such miracles are rare, it is still a fact of the soul that depression—or any heavy, dead feeling—will lift away when a gift comes toward us. Gifts not only move us, they enliven us.

The gift is a servant to forces which pull things together and lift them up. There are other forces in the world that break things down into smaller and smaller bits, that find the fissures in stones and split them apart or enter a marriage and leave it lifeless at the core. In living organisms, the atomizing forces are associated with decay and death, while the cohering forces, the ones that wrap the morning-glory around a fence post or cover the ashy slopes of a new volcano with little pine trees, these are associated with life. Gift property serves an upward force. On one level it reflects and carries the form of organic growth, but above that, at the level of society and spirit, the gift carries our own liveliness. We spin upward with the gift, or at least it holds us upright against the forces that split us apart and pull us down.

To speak in this manner risks confusing biological “life” with cultural and spiritual “life”—a confusion I would like to avoid for the two are not always the same. They are linked, but there is also a gap. In addressing the question of increase let us therefore take a gift at the level of culture—something inorganic and inedible in fact—and see how far we can go toward explaining its felt increase without recourse to the natural analogy.

The North Pacific tribes of the American Indians (the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Haida, and others) exchanged as ceremonial gifts large decorated copper plaques. These coppers were always associated with the property given away at a potlatch—a ceremony that marked important events such as a marriage or, more commonly, the assumption of rank by a member of a tribe. The word “potlatch” simply means “giving.” [5]

Coppers increased in worth as they circulated. At the time when Franz Boas witnessed the exchange of a copper in the 1890s, their worth was reckoned in terms of woolen Hudson Bay Company trade blankets. To tell the story briefly and in terms of the increase involved, one of the tribes in Boas’s report has a copper to give away; they invite a neighboring tribe to a feast and offer them the gift. The second tribe accepts, putting themselves under the obligation to make a return gift. The transaction takes place the next day on a beach. The first tribe brings the copper and the leader of the second tribe lays down 1,000 trade blankets as a return gift.

Then things get interesting. The chiefs who are giving the copper away don’t accept the return gift. Instead they slowly replay the entire history of this copper’s previous passages, first one man saying that just 200 more blankets will be fine and then another saying that really an additional 800 will be needed to make everyone feel right, while the recipient of the copper responds saying either “What you say is good, it pleases my heart,” or else begging for mercy as he brings out more and more blankets. Five times the chiefs ask for more blankets and five times they are brought out until 3,700 are stacked up in a long row on the beach.

When the copper’s entire history has been acted out, the talk stops. Now comes the true return gift, these formalities having merely raised the exchange into the general area of this copper’s worth. Now the receiving chief, on his own, announces he would like to “adorn” his guests. He brings out 200 more blankets and gives them individually to the visitors. Then he adds still another 200, saying, “you must think poorly of me,” and telling about his forefathers.

These 400 blankets are given without any of the dialogue that marked the first part of the ceremony. It is here that the copper increases in worth. The next time it is given away, people will remember how it grew by 400 blankets in its last passage.

To return to the question of increase at the level of culture, there is a particular kind of investment in the exchange of copper. Each time the copper passes from one group to another, more blankets are heaped into it, so to speak. The source of increase is clear: each man really adds to its worth as the copper comes toward him. But it is important to remember that the investment is itself a gift, so the increase is both concrete (blankets) and emotional (the spirit of generosity). At each transaction the concrete increase (the “adornment”) is a witness to the increase in feeling. In this way, though people may remember it in terms of blankets, the copper becomes enriched with feeling. And not all feelings, either, but those of generosity, liberality, good will—feelings that draw people together.

Coppers make a good example here because there is concrete increase to manifest the feeling, but that is not necessary. The mere passage of the gift, the act of donation, contains the feeling and therefore the passage alone is the investment. The gift is a pool or reservoir in which the sentiments of its exchange accumulate so that the more often it is given away the more feeling it carries, like an heirloom that has been passed down for generations. The gift gets steeped in the fluids of its own passage. In the folk tales the gift is often something seemingly worthless—ashes or coals or leaves or straw—but when the puzzled recipient carries it to his doorstep he finds it turned to gold. In such tales the mere motion of the gift across the boundary from the world of the donor (usually a spirit) to the doorsill of the recipient is sufficient to transmute it from dross to gold. [6]

The Potlatch as a Goodwill Ceremony

Typically the increase inheres in the gift only so long as it is treated as such—as soon as the happy mortal starts to count it or grabs his wheelbarrow and heads back for more, the gold reverts to straw. The growth is in the sentiment and cannot be put on the scale.

The potlatch can rightly be spoken of as a goodwill ceremony. One of the men giving the feast in the potlatch Boas witnessed says as the meal begins: “This food here is the good will of our forefathers. It is all given away.” The act of donation is an affirmation of good will. When someone in one of these tribes is mistakenly insulted, his response, rather than turning to a libel lawyer, is to give a gift to the man who insulted him, and if indeed the insult was mistaken, the man gives a gift in return, adding a little extra to demonstrate his goodwill, a sequence which has the same structure (back and forth with increase) as the potlatch itself. When a gift passes from hand to hand in this spirit—and here we have come back to the question of increase—it becomes the binder of many wills. What gathers in it is not only the sentiment of generosity but the affirmation of individual good will, making of those separate parts a *spiritus mundi*, a unanimous heart, a band whose wills are focused through the lens of the gift. In this way, the gift is an agent of social cohesion and this banding function again leads to the feeling that a gift grows through its circulation. The whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. If it brings the group together, the gift increases in worth immediately upon its first circulation, and then, like a faithful lover, continues to grow through constancy.

I do not mean to imply that gifts such as these coppers are felt to grow merely because the group projects its own life onto them, for that would imply that the group’s liveliness can be separated from the gift, and it can’t. If the copper is taken away, so is the life. When a song moves us we don’t say we’ve projected our feelings onto the melody, nor do we say a woman projects the other sex onto her lover. Equally the gift and the group are two separate things and there is nothing to be withdrawn. We could say, however, that a copper is an image for the life of the group, for a true image has a life of its own. All mystery needs its image. It needs these two, the ear and the song, the he and the she, the soul and the word. The tribe and its gift are separate but they are also the same—there is a little gap between them so they may breathe into each other, and yet there is no gap at all for they share one breath, one meal for the two of them. People with a sense of the gift not only speak of it as food to eat, they also feed it (as the Maori ceremony “feeds” the forest hau). The nourishment flows both ways. When we have fed the gift with our labor and generosity, it grows and feeds us in return. The gift and its bearers share a spirit which is kept alive by its motion among them and from that the life emerges, willy-nilly. Still, the spirit of the gift is alive only when the gift is being passed from hand to hand. When Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, told the history of the Souix

“sacred pipe” to Joseph Epes Brown, he explained that at the time the pipe had first been given to him, his elders had told him that its history must always be passed down, “for as long as it is known, and for as long as the pipe is used, [the] people will live; but as soon as it has been forgotten, the people will be without a center and they will perish.”

The increase is the core of the gift, the kernel. In this essay I use the term “gift” for both the object and its increase, but at times it seems more accurate to speak of the increase alone as the gift and to treat the object involved more modestly as its vehicle or vessel. Certainly it makes sense to say that the increase is the real gift in those cases where the gift-object is sacrificed, for the increase continues despite (even because of) that loss; it is the constant in the cycle, not consumed in use. A Maori elder who told of the forest hau distinguished in this way between object and increase, the mauri set in the forest and its hau which causes the game to abound. In that cycle the hau is nourished and passed along while the gift-objects (birds, mauri) disappear.

Marshall Sahlins, when he commented on the Maori gift stories, asked that we “observe just where the term hau enters into the discussion. Not with the initial transfer from the first to the second party, as well it could if the hau were the spirit in the gift, but upon the exchange between the second and third parties, as logically it would if [the hau] were the yield on the gift. The term profit is economically and historically inappropriate to the Maori, but it would have been a better translation than ‘spirit’ for the hau in question.”

Sahlins’s gloss highlights something which has been implicit in our discussion, though not yet stated directly—the increase comes to a gift as it moves from second to third party, not in the simpler passage from first to second. It begins when the gift has passed through someone, when the circle appears. But, as Sahlins senses, “profit” is not the right word. Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but the gifts that remain gifts do not earn profit, they give increase. The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of the increase: in gift exchange it stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind (as profit).

With this in mind, we may return to a dictum laid out early in the essay: one man’s gift must not be another man’s capital. A corollary may now be developed, saying: the increase which comes of gift exchange must remain a gift and not be converted to capital. St. Ambrose of Milan states it directly in a commentary on Deuteronomy: “...God has excluded in general all increase of capital.” This is an ethic in a gift society. Just as one may choose to treat the gift as gift or to take it out of circulation, so the increase may either be passed along or laid aside as capital.

I have chosen not to allow this essay to wander very far into the labyrinths of capitalism, so I shall only sketch this choice in its broadest terms. Capital is wealth taken out of circulation and laid aside to produce more wealth. Cattle devoured at a feast are gift, but cattle set aside to produce calves or milk are capital. All peoples have both and need both. A question arises, however, whenever there’s a surplus. If you have more than you need, what do you do with it? What happens to the gravy? Capitalism as an ideology addresses itself to this choice and at every turn applauds the move away from gift and calls that sensible (“a penny saved...”). [7]

The Growth of Capital is Not the Increase in the Gift

Here it becomes necessary to differentiate two forms of growth, for the growth of capital is not the increase of the gift. Nor are their fruits the same. The gift grows more lively but capital grows in a lump—more cows, more factories...When all surplus is turned to capital, the stock increases but not the liveliness, and there is busyness without elevation, increase without feeling, a growth more sedimentary than organic, the conglomeration of stones rather than the flourishing of trees.

The accumulation of capital has its own benefits—security and material comfort being the most obvious and appealing—but the point here is that whatever those benefits, if they flow from the conversion of gifts to capital then the fruits of the gift are lost. At that point property becomes correctly associated with the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and emotion. To recall our earlier tales, when a goat given from one tribe to another is not treated as a gift, or when any gift is hoarded and counted and kept for the self, then death appears, or a hungry toad, or storm damage. Capitalism as a system has the same problems on a larger scale. Somewhere property must be truly consumed. The capitalist, busy turning all his homemade gravy back to capital, must seek out foreigners to consume the goods (though as before they get only the dumb consumption of commodities). And what was a toad

in the psyche or storm damage in the tribe now becomes alienation at home or war and exploitation; abroad, those shades who follow capital whenever it feeds on the gift.

The gift remains a gift only so long as its increase remains a gift. Those people, therefore, who prohibit “in general all increase on capital,” as St. Ambrose has it, those who insist that any conversion of property from one form to another must be in the direction of the gift, who love the increase more than its vehicles and feel their worth in liveliness, for such people the increase of gifts is not lost and the circuit in which they move becomes an upward spiral.

Footnotes

1. This story illustrates almost all the main characteristics of a gift and so I shall be referring back to it throughout the essay. As an aside, therefore, I want to take a stab at its Meaning. It says, I think, that if a girl without a father is going to get along in the world, she'd better have a good connection to her mother. The birds are the mother's spirit, what we'd now call the girl's psychological mother. The girl who gives the gift back to the spirit-mother has, as a result, her mother-wits about her for the rest of the tale.

Nothing in the tale links the dead man with the girl's father, but the mother seems to be a widow or at any rate the absence of a father at the start of the story is a hint that the-problem may have to do with men. It's not clear, but when the first man the daughters meet is not only dead but hard to deal with we are permitted to raise our eyebrows.

The man is dead, but not dead enough. When she hits him with the stick we see that she is in fact attached to him. “So here's the issue: when a fatherless woman leaves home she'll have to deal with the fact that she's stuck on a dead man,= It's a risky situation—the two elder daughters end up dead.;

Not much happens in the wild run through the forest, except that everyone gets bruised. The girl manages to stay awake the whole time, however. This is a power she probably got from the birds, for they are night birds. The connection to the mother cannot spare for her the ordeal, but it allows her to survive. When it's all over she's unstuck and we may assume that the problem won't come up again.

Though the dilemma of the story is not related to gift, all the psychological work is accomplished through gift exchange.

2. When things run in a self-regulating cycle, we speak of time and cause and value in a different way. Time is not linear (it's either “momentary” or “eternal”) and one event doesn't “cause” another, they are all of a piece. In addition, one part is no more valuable than another. When we speak of value we assume we can set things side by side and weigh them and compare. But in a self-regulating cycle no part can be taken out, they are all one. Which is more valuable to you, your heart or your brain? The value, like the time, is not comparative, it is either “priceless” or “worthless.”

We say these things about gifts as well. It's almost a matter of definition, of course, that gifts cannot be sold, but here we see their pricelessness as a characteristic that goes with the circle. Likewise gifts have no cause. One doesn't say “I got this gift because I gave him one.” Or rather, one can, but if he does he's out of the circle looking in, that is to say, he's begun to barter. In barter the sale causes the return; but gifts just move, that's all. When a wheel spins we don't say that the top of it “causes” the bottom to move around. That's silly. We just say, “the wheel spins,” as we say, “the gift moves in a circle.” Likewise, the sense of time is different. In exchange trade we know when the debt is Due. In gift we do not speak, we turn back to our own labor in silence.

3. They call this “use-value” in economics. I am not fond of the term. It usually shows up at the bottom line, a passing admission that at the boundary of exchange calculus there are folks who really use property to live.

4. Folk tales are the only “proof” I can offer here. The point is more spiritual than social: in the spirit world, new life comes to us when we “give up.”

5. I cannot here tell the story of potlatch in its full detail, but I should note that two of its better known characteristics in the popular literature—the usurious nature of loans and the rivalry or “fighting with property”—while based on traceable aboriginal motifs, are really post-European elaborations. The tribes had known a century of European trade before Boas arrived. When Marcel Mauss read through Boas's material he declared potlatch “the

monster child of the gift system.” So it was. As first studied, potlatch was the progeny of a “civilized” commodity trade mated to an aboriginal gift economy; some of the results were freakish.

6. Here is a typical tale from Russia: a woman walking in the woods found a baby wood-demon lying naked on the ground and crying bitterly. So she covered it up with her cloak, and after a time came her mother, a female wood-demon, and rewarded the woman with a potful of burning coals, which afterwards turned into bright golden ducats.”

The woman doesn't cover the baby because she wants to get paid, she does it because she's moved to; then the gift comes to her. It increases solely by its passage from the realm of wood-demons to her cottage.

7. To move away from capitalism is not to change the form of ownership from the few to the many, though that may be a necessary step, but to cease turning so much surplus into capital, that is, to treat most increase (even if it comes from labor) as a gift. It is quite possible to have the state own everything and still convert all gifts to capital, as Stalin demonstrated. When he decided in favor of the “production mode” he acted as a capitalist, the locus of ownership having nothing to do with it.

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