

Give it Away

David Graeber

Pioneering French anthropologist Marcel Mauss studied “gift economies” like those of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia. A former amateur boxer, he was a burly man with a playful, rather silly manner, the sort of person always juggling a dozen brilliant ideas rather than building a great philosophical system.

Mauss was also a revolutionary socialist. From his student days on, he was a regular contributor to the left press and remained most of his life an active member of the French cooperative movement. He founded and for many years helped run a consumer co-op in Paris; and was often sent on missions to make contact with the movement in other countries (which led him to spend time in Russia after the revolution). Not a Marxist, though he advocated a socialism more in the tradition of Robert Owen or Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and he considered Communists and Social Democrats to be equally misguided in believing that society could be transformed primarily through government action.

The Russian revolution thus left him profoundly ambivalent. While exhilarated by prospects of a genuine socialist experiment, he was outraged by the Bolsheviks’ systematic use of terror, their suppression of democratic institutions, and most of all by their “cynical doctrine that the end justifies the means,” which, Mauss concluded, was really just the amoral, rational calculus of the marketplace, slightly transposed.

Mauss’s essay on “the gift” was, more than anything, his response to events in Russia—particularly Lenin’s New Economic Policy of 1921, which abandoned earlier attempts to abolish commerce. If the market could not simply be legislated away, even in Russia, probably the least monetarized European society, then clearly, Mauss concluded, revolutionaries were going to have to start thinking a lot more seriously about what this “market” actually was, where it came from, and what a viable alternative to it might actually be like.

Mauss’s conclusions were startling. First of all, almost everything that “economic science” had to say on the subject of economic history turned out to be entirely untrue. In the beginning, goes the official version, there was barter. People were forced to get what they wanted by directly trading one thing for another.

Since this was inconvenient, they eventually invented money as a universal medium of exchange. The invention of further technologies of exchange (credit, banking, stock exchanges) was simply a logical extension.

The problem was, as Mauss was quick to note, there is no reason to believe a society based on barter has ever existed. Instead, what anthropologists were discovering were societies where economic life was based on utterly different principles, and most objects moved back and forth as gifts—and almost everything we would call “economic” behavior was based on a pretense of pure generosity and a refusal to calculate exactly who had given what to whom.

Such “gift economies” could on occasion become highly competitive, but when they did it was in exactly the opposite way from our own: Instead of vying to see who could accumulate the most, the winners were the ones who managed to give the most away. In some notorious cases, such as the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, this could lead to dramatic contests of liberality, where ambitious chiefs would try to outdo one another by distributing thousands of silver bracelets, Hudson Bay blankets or Singer sewing machines, and even by destroying wealth—sinking famous heirlooms in the ocean, or setting huge piles of wealth on fire and daring their rivals to do the same.

All of this may seem very exotic. But as Mauss also asked: How alien is it, really? Why is it that, when one receives a gift from a friend (a drink, a dinner invitation, a compliment), one feels somehow obliged to reciprocate in kind? Why is it that a recipient of generosity often somehow feels reduced if he or she cannot? Are these not examples of universal human feelings? Mauss felt these very different impulses and moral standards are the real basis for the appeal of alternative visions and socialist policies. In gift economies, Mauss argued, exchanges do not have the impersonal qualities of the capitalist marketplace: In fact, even when objects of great value change hands, what really matters is the relations between the people. As a result, everything becomes personally charged, even property: In gift economies, the most famous objects of wealth—heirloom necklaces, weapons, feather cloaks—always seem to develop personalities of their own.

Mauss was never entirely sure what his practical conclusions were. The Russian experience convinced him that buying and selling could not simply be eliminated in a modern society, at least “in the foreseeable future,” but a market ethos could. Work could be co-operatized, effective social security guaranteed, and, gradually, a new ethos created whereby the only possible excuse for accumulating wealth was the ability to give it all away. The result: a society whose highest values would be “the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast.”

David Graeber has written *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Values: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, 2001 (a synthesis of economic, political, and cultural theories of value) and *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, 2004

fifth Estate

David Graeber
Give it Away

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/367-winter-2004-2005/give-it-away>
Fifth Estate #367, Winter 2004-2005

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net