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FOREWORD

No free gifts

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Charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources. Though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know that it wounds. I worked for some years in a charitable foundation that annually was required to give away large sums as the condition of tax exemption. Newcomers to the office quickly learnt that the recipient does not like the giver, however cheerful he be. This book explains the lack of gratitude by saying that the foundations should not confuse their donations with gifts. It is not merely that there are no free gifts in a particular place, Melanesia or Chicago for instance; it is that the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding. There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor's intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient. The public is not deceived by free gift vouchers. For all the ongoing commitment the free-gift gesture has created, it might just as well never have happened. According to Marcel Mauss that is what is wrong with the free gift. A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction.

Mauss says as much in reply to Bronislaw Malinowski who was surprised to find such precisely calculated return gifts in Melanesia. He evidently took with him to his fieldwork the idea that commerce and gift are two separate kinds of activity, the first based on exact recompense, the second spontaneous, pure of ulterior motive. Because the valuable things that circulated in the Trobriand Islands and a vast surrounding region were not in commercial exchange, he expected the transfers to fall into the category of gifts in his own culture. So he expended a lot of care in classifying gifts by the purity of the motives

of the giver and concluded that practically nothing was given freely in this sense, only the small gift that a Trobriand husband regularly gave his wife could count. 'Pure gift? Nonsense!' declares Mauss: the Trobriand husband is actually recompensing his wife for sexual services. He would have said 'Nonsense!' just as heartily to Titmus's idea that the archetypal pure-gift relationship is the anonymous gift of blood,[1] as if there could be an anonymous relationship. Even the idea of a pure gift is a contradiction. By ignoring the universal custom of compulsory gifts we make our own record incomprehensible to ourselves: right across the globe and as far back as we can go in the history of human civilization, the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of obligatory returns of gifts.

Though this insight was taken up by archeologists and historians for reinterpreting antique systems of tax, revenues, and trade[2], a fancy archeological insight was not Mauss's objective. The *Essay on the Gift* was a part of an organized onslaught on contemporary political theory, a plank in the platform against utilitarianism. This intention is fully recognized in the new journal, *MAUSS*.[3] Mauss himself wrote very little about political philosophy but *The Gift* does not spring from nowhere; references to Emile Durkheim make quite clear where to look for the rest of the programme. And nor does Durkheim come from nowhere. First, I will explain the plan of the book, then I will place it in its context. Finally, I will indicate some of the work that has stemmed from it, and suggest what is still to be done to implement the original programme.

In this book the author has produced an idea that he has probably been mulling over for a long time. Indeed, the idea is profoundly original. We have seen how it runs against our established idea of gift. The book starts with describing the North American potlatch as an extreme form of an institution that is found in every region of the world. The potlatch is an example of a total system of giving. Read this too fast and you miss the meaning. Spelt out it means that each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. It is a total system in that every item of status or of spiritual or material possession is implicated for everyone in the whole community. The system is quite simple: just the rule that every gift has to be returned in some specified way sets up a perpetual cycle of exchanges within and between generations. In some cases the specified return is of equal value, producing a stable system of statuses; in others it must exceed the value of the earlier gift, producing an

escalating contest for honour. The whole society can be described by the catalogue of transfers that map all the obligations between its members. The cycling gift system is the society.

The Gift is a grand exercise in positivist research, combining ethnology, history, and sociology. First Mauss presents the system as found in working order. This takes him to the ethnography of North America. What is striking about the potlatch among the Haïda and Tlingit of the Northwest coast is the extreme rivalry expressed by the rule always to return more than was received; failure to return means losing the competition for honour. There comes a point when there are just not enough valuable things to express the highest degrees of honour, so conspicuous consumption is succeeded by conspicuous destruction. Then he turns to Melanesia where, in a less extreme form, there are the essentials of potlatch, that is, totalized competitive giving that incorporates in its cycles all things and services and all persons. He treats Polynesia as a variant, because there the totalized giving does not presume rivalry between donor and recipient. When the paths of Polynesian gifts are traced, a stable, hierarchical structure is revealed. It is not the competitive potlatch, but it is still a total system of gift. Where does the system get its energy? In each case from individuals who are due to lose from default heaping obloquy on defaulters and from beliefs that the spirits would punish them. The system would not be total if it did not include personal emotions and religion.

After presenting the system of gift functioning among American Indians and in Oceania, and among Eskimo and Australian hunters, Mauss then turns to records of ancient legal systems. Roman, Germanic, and other Indo-European laws all show signs of the basic principles. There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions. Only after the full tour of ethnographic and legal evidence do we finally reach the chapter on the theory of the gift in classical Hindu law. Now we have definitely moved away from working social systems to myths, legends, and fragments of laws: not the system of gift but, as the chapter heading says, the theory of gift. Mauss's early book with Henri Hubert (1889) on Sacrifice[4] took for its central theme a Vedic principle that sacrifice is a gift that compels the deity to make a return: *Do ut des*; I give so that you may give. Given the centrality of India in Max Muller's philological speculations on mythology, any book at that time on religion would need to study Hindu law and epic deeply. It strikes

me as likely that Mauss did get the idea of a morally sanctioned gift cycle upholding the social cycle from the Vedic literature that he studied in that first major research. I am inclined to think that he harboured and developed the great idea all those years. Certainly there is a close connection of matter and treatment between the two books.

In some histories of anthropology the main difference between old-fashioned folklore and modern ethnography has been identified as the replacement of library research by fieldwork. But I would suggest that the main important change came from a new criterion of sound analysis. *The Gift* was like an injunction to record the entire credit structure of a community. What a change that involved from current ideas about how to do ethnology can be seen by reading any of the earlier books cited in the voluminous footnotes whose unsystematic accounts of beliefs and ceremonies provided the uninterpreted bare bones of the gift system.

Because it starts from Northwest Coast American Indians and Melanesians and goes on to Polynesia and then to ancient texts, the book would seem to spring from the fusty debates of library researchers on comparative religion. Yet it is not about religion. It is about politics and economics. After the survey of evidence come the political and moral implications. Following Durkheim, Mauss also considered that every serious philosophical work should bear on public policy. The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity. Consequently, a brief reference to contemporary debates on health and unemployment insurance is in place, with the argument deduced from the preceding pages that the wage does not cover society's obligation to the worker. No obligations are ever completely covered. Though Mauss here refers approvingly to some English proposals on social policy, he is writing in a tradition strongly opposed to English liberal thought. At this point the Durkheimian context needs to be filled in.

The main strands in Durkheim's opposition to the English Utilitarians were already formulated by French political philosophers.[5] As Larry Siedentrop summarizes a tradition that stemmed from the eighteenth century, from Rousseau and Tocqueville, it made three criticisms of English liberalism: first, that it was based on an impoverished concept of the person seen as an independent individual instead of as a social being: second, that it neglected how social relations change with changes in the mode of production; and third, that it had a too negative concept of liberty and so failed to appreciate the moral role of political participation. Furthermore, early

English empiricist philosophy did not explain the role of social norms in shaping individual intentions and in making social action possible; their sensationalist model of the mind allowed no scope for explaining rule-governed action. Individualism is the essence of the French critique of utilitarianism. This is exactly where Durkheim's life work starts, as would appear from comparing his writings with the following paragraph by his biographer, Steven Lukes:[6]

> Benjamin Constant believed that 'when all are isolated by egoism, there is nothing but dust, and at the advent of a storm, nothing but mire',[7] while it was Alexis de Tocqueville who gave *individualisme* its most distinctive and influential liberal meaning in France. For Tocqueville it meant the apathetic withdrawal of individuals from public life into a private sphere and their isolation from one another, with a consequent and dangerous weakening of social bonds: individualism was
>
> > a deliberate and peaceful sentiment which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows . . . [which] at first saps only the virtues of public life, but, in the long run . . . attacks and destroys all others and is eventually absorbed into pure egoism.[8]
>
> (Lukes, 1973)

Among French socialists individualism was a bad word, referring to *laissez faire*, anarchy, social atomization, and exploitation of the poor under a regime of industrial capitalism. However, Durkheim's position was more complex. He believed that the success of a political system would depend on the extent to which it allowed individual self-awareness to flourish. He tried to keep a delicate balance between reproaching utilitarianism for overlooking that humans are social beings and reproaching socialism for overlooking the demands of the individual.

If one were to be forgetful of this traditional hostility to English utilitarianism it would be easy to misunderstand Durkheim's language and to fall into the trap of thinking that he really believed that society is a kind of separate intelligence that determines the thoughts and actions of its members as the mind does those of the body it is lodged in. Arguing against the nineteenth-century forms of utilitarianism, especially against the political philosophy of Herbert Spencer, it would have seemed hard for the anti-utilitarians to overestimate the importance of shared norms. And as for those whom he attacked, especially

those across the Channel or across the Atlantic, it was evidently easier to misrepresent him than to disagree with what he was actually saying. Bartlett refers to Durkheim's idea of the collective memory as a quasi-mystic soul; Herbert Simon dissociates himself from Durkheimian 'group mind' implications; Alfred Schutz disdainfully dismisses Halbwachs' theories on the 'Collective Memory of Musicians' (which are very much the same as his own) because they are tainted by Durkheim's alleged theory of a unitary group consciousness; see also Bruno Latour on Durkheim's 'big animal'.[9] All these and many others forget that Durkheim's work was actually part of an ongoing research project with close collaborators who quite clearly did not give it this interpretation. So the counterattack has travestied versions of 'group mind', 'mystical unit', 'group psyche' that his language occasionally justifies but his precepts as to method certainly do not. This is why positivism was such an important plank in his programme. Positivism represented an attempt at objectivity. This is why it was necessary for Mauss to set out the plan of his book by beginning with the survey of functioning social systems, ending with Hindu texts about a vanished system (or one that had perhaps never existed in that form).

Today the same political debate is still engaged, between the contemporary utilitarians and those who, like Durkheim, deplore the effects of unfettered individualism. Some of those working in learned communities that embrace methodological individualism may be right to feel threatened by his teaching. Personally, I think it would be better for them to take it seriously. Hostility and a sense of threat are a sign that collective representations are at work. Our problem is how to take our own and other people's collective representations into account. Durkheim expected to do so by setting up sociology as a science, using positivist methods and looking for social facts. Science was to be a way of escaping bondage to past and to present loyalties. It is easy to mock his scientific pretensions, but who would deny that we really do need to seek for objectivity and to establish a responsible sociological discourse free of subjective hunches and concealed political pressure?

From this point of view *The Gift* rendered on extraordinary service to Durkheim's central project by producing a theory that could be validated by observation. For anthropologists the book has provided a basic requirement for modern fieldwork. It quickly became axiomatic that a field report would be below standard unless a complete account could be given of all transfers, that is, of all dues, gifts, fines, inheritances and successions, tributes, fees and payments; when

this information is in place one also knows who gets left at the end of the day without honour or citizenship and who benefits from the cumulative transfers. With such a chart in hand the interpreter might be capable of sensing the meanings of ballads, calypsos, dirges, and litanies; without it one guess will do as well as any other.

Mauss rendered other inestimable services to Durkheim's project of a science of sociology. One is to have demonstrated that when the members of the Durkheimian school talked of society they did not mean an undecomposable unity, as many of their critics have supposed. If they had thought of society as an unanalysable, unchanging, sacralized entity, the researches of Durkheim's best pupils would never have been undertaken. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*[10] gives snapshot pictures of Australian aborigines and American Indians worshipping spirits who sustain the social forms. It all seems very cut and dried. Durkheim and Mauss in *Primitive Classification*,[11] write as if categories are never negotiated but always come ready tailored to fit the institutions. Their argument at that point was not about change. They did in fact have a theory of change, that is, that changes in the organization of production radically transform the system of categories and beliefs.[12] If their theory had really been about a static social system, there would not have been any point in Maurice Halbwachs considering how public memory changes when part of the population goes away, taking its memories with it, or when a new influx comes bringing memories of their own past to the common pool.[13] Nor would Georges Davy have been so interested in the conditions under which oath-breaking is thought to be punished by God and those in which the sacredness of the oath diminishes.[14] It is an ignorant reading that supposes that Durkheim and his colleagues were looking for static correlations. The modern economy with its increasing specialization of functions is the backdrop to all these comparisons, and particularly to the gift system yielding place to the industrial system.

Another of Mauss's contributions to this collaborative effort is to have introduced a realistic idea of individuals in the pre-market social system where, according to Durkheim's formulations, one might expect only a community of humans mechanically connected to one another by their unquestioning use of this same ideas. Durkheim shared the common belief of his day in a gradual enriching and unfolding of the personality as the collective representations loosened their grip. However, Mauss manages to incorporate individuals acting in their own interests, even in the kinds of societies in which Durkheim had

thought that there was no scope for individual self-interest. On this Mauss rightly remarks that the concept of interest is itself modern.[15] He introduces psychology into the new sociology with essays on collective representations about death, about the body, and about the person.[16] In these he takes off from Durkheim's ideas and develops extended innovations upon them.

He also discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange. This is an enormous development beyond Durkheim's ideas of solidarity based on collective representations. The gift cycle echoes Adam Smith's invisible hand: gift complements market in so far as it operates where the latter is absent. Like the market it supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges. Gifts are given in a context of public drama, with nothing secret about them. In being more directly cued to public esteem, the distribution of honour, and the sanctions of religion, the gift economy is more visible than the market. Just by being visible, the resultant distribution of goods and services is more readily subject to public scrutiny and judgements of fairness than are the results of market exchange. In operating a gift system a people are more aware of what they are doing, as shown by the sacralization of their institutions of giving. Mauss's fertile idea was to present the gift cycle as a theoretical counterpart to the invisible hand. When anthropologists search around for a telling distinction between societies based on primitive and modern technologies, they try out various terms such as pre-literate, simple, traditional. Each has limitations that unfit it for general use. But increasingly we are finding that the idea of the gift economy comprises all the associations – symbolic, interpersonal, and economic – that we need for comparison with the market economy.

When I try to consider what would be needed now to implement Mauss's original programme, I wonder which current ideas would be replaced if *The Gift* were to be as significant as he could have hoped. Where anthropology is concerned he would surely be more than satisfied. Nothing has been the same since. The big developments stem from this work. Before we had *The Gift*'s message unfolded for us we anthropologists, if we thought of the economy at all, treated it almost as a separate aspect of society, and kinship as separate again, and religion as a final chapter at the end. Evans-Pritchard, who promoted the original English translation and wrote a foreword to the edition that this one replaces, had Mauss's teaching very much at heart when

he described the marriage dues of the Nuer as a strand in the total circulation of cattle, and wives, and children, and men: every single relationship had its substantiation in a gift.[17] This was a beginning, but there is no doubt that Claude Lévi-Strauss is the most indebted, which means of course that he gave counter-gifts as magnificent as he received. After *The Elementary Forms of Kinship*[18] we had to count transfers of men and women as the most important among the gifts in total symbolic systems. Numerous, very fine, comparative studies stand as testimony to the transformation of our outlook. However, it is not so easy to carry forward these analyses and apply them to ourselves.

The problem now is the same as it was for Mauss when it comes to applying his insights to contemporary, industrial society. Yet this is what he wanted to see done. As the last chapter in this volume shows, his own attempt to use the theory of the gift to underpin social democracy is very weak. Social security and health insurance are an expression of solidarity, to be sure, but so are a lot of other things, and there the likeness ends. Social democracy's redistributions are legislated for in elected bodies and the sums are drawn from tax revenues. They utterly lack any power mutually to obligate persons in a contest of honour. Taking the theory straight from its context in full-blown gift economies to a modern political issue was really jumping the gun. His own positivist method would require a great deal more patient spadework, both on theory and in collecting new kinds of data. I myself made an attempt to apply the theory of the gift to our consumption behaviour, arguing that it is much more about giving than the economists realize. Class structure would be clearly revealed in information about giving within and exclusion from reciprocal voluntary cycles of exchange. Much of the kind of information I needed about what happens in our society was missing from census and survey records.[19] It was information that could have been collected if Mauss's theory was recognized. If we persist in thinking that gifts ought to be free and pure, we will always fail to recognize our own grand cycles of exchanges, which categories get to be included and which get to be excluded from our hospitality.[20] More profound insights into the nature of solidarity and trust can be expected from applying the theory of the gift to ourselves. Though giving is the basis for huge industries, we cannot know whether it is the foundation of a circulating fund of stable esteem and trust, or of individualist competition as Thorstein Veblen thought.[21] We cannot know because the

information is not collected in such a way as to relate to the issues.

I conclude by asking why this profound and original book had its impact mainly on small professional bodies of archeologists, classicists, and anthropologists. The answer might be that the debate with the utilitarians that Mauss was ready to enter before World War I had lost its excitement by the time he published this volume. One of the most fascinating topics in Lukes's biography is the relation of Durkheim's school to Marxism. Before the war the real enemy, the open enemy of French political philosophy was Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism. After the war utilitarianism became the narrow province of a specialized discipline of economics. The political enemies of social democracy became communism and fascism. I have remarked how they traced a counterpoint to Marx's central ideas, neutralizing them as it were from communist taint and making something like Marxism safe for French democracy by diluting the revolutionary component.[22]

The political mood of the interwar years was dominated by concern for the erosion of civil liberties and excessive corporatist claims on the individual.

Now, however, the fashion has changed again. Utilitarianism is not just a technique of econometrics, nor a faded philosopy of the eighteenth century. Solidarity has again become a central topic in political philosophy. Social Darwinism walks again and the survival of the fittest is openly invoked. Philosophically creaking but technically shining, unified and powerful, utility theory is the main analytical tool for policy decisions. However, its intellectual assumptions are under attack. The French debate with the Anglo-Saxons can start again. This time round the sparks from Mauss's grand idea might well light a fuse to threaten methodological individualism and the idea of a free gift.

Notes

1. R. Titmus (1970) *The Gift Relationship*, New York: Pantheon.
2. K. Polanyi, C.M. Arensberg, and H.W. Pearson (1957) *Trade and Market in Early Empires*, Glencoe: Free Press.
3. An acronym for Mouvement Anti-utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (New Series, vol. 1, 1988, La Découverte, Paris).
4. H. Hubert and M. Mauss (1899) 'Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice', *Année Sociologique*, 2: 29–138. (English translation by W.D. Halls, *Sacrifice: its Nature and Function*, with a Foreword by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Routledge, London, 1964.)
5. L. Siedentrop (1979) 'Two Liberal Traditions' in A. Ryan (ed.) *The Idea of Freedom*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 153–74. Starting from Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and with Condillac, Bonald, and Maistre, Larry Siedentrop names as the nineteenth-century protagonists of this criticism Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant, and Les Doctrinaires. The latter group included Guizot and de Tocqueville who took the critique of political theory as an urgent post-revolutionary reform. There was more than a touch of political reaction in the movement. The Doctrinaire theorists were strongly committed to the idea of hierarchy and the Doctrinaire government (1815–20 and 1820–7) tried to restore the conditions of the *Ancien Régime*.
6. S. Lukes (1973) *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work,* London: Allen Lane pp. 197–8.
7. B. Constant quoted in Lukes (1973), himself quoting H. Marion (n.d.). 'Individualisme', in *La Grande Encyclopédie*, vol. xx, Paris.
8. A. de Tocqueville (1835–40) *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ii, 2, Ch. 11 in *Oeuvres Complètes*, J.P. Mayer (ed.) (1951) Paris, t.1, pt. 2:10.
9. Bartlett (1932) *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
   H. Simon (1945) *Administrative Behavior, A Study of Decision-making Processes in Administrative Organisation*, Glencoe: Free Press.
   A. Schutz (1951) 'Making Music Together' in *Collected Papers*, 1–3, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
   B. Latour (1988) in review of Mary Douglas's *How Institutions Think, Contemporary Sociology, an International Journal of Reviews*: 383–5.
10. E. Durkheim (1912) *Les Formes Elémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*, Paris: Alcan.
11. E. Durkheim and M. Mauss (1903) 'De quelques formes primitives de classification: contribution à l'etude des representations collectives', *l'Année Sociologique* 6.
12. E. Durkheim (1893) *De la Division du Travail Social: étude sur l'organisation des sociétés superieures*, Paris: Alcan.
13. M. Halbwachs (1925) *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*, Paris: Alcan.
14. G. Davy (1922) 'La foi jurée', *Étude Sociologique du Problème du Contrat, la Formation du lien contractuel*, Paris. (English translation by W.D. Halls, *The Division of Labour in Society*, Macmillan, London and New York, 1984.)
15. See A. Hirschman (1973) *The Passions and the Interests*, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
16. M. Mauss (1926) 'L'idée de mort', *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique*,
    M. Mauss (1936) 'Les techniques du corps', *Journal de Psychologie*, 3–4.
17. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) *The Nuer: The Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
    E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1951) *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.