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The Gift

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The Enduring Relevance of Mauss' *Essai sur le don*

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ABSTRACT

The author rereads Mauss' "Essay on the Gift" to focus on the essential differences between the archaic gift and the modern gift, the first of which is the separation between people and things. In fact, if in so-called primitive societies the gift is a "total welfare" (religious, economic, social, political), in modern societies the circulation of things becomes autonomous and we find the gift in the sphere of primary ties and, only partially, in those of the market and the state. The paradox of the gift, which Mauss emphasises, is its being a mélange of obligation and freedom: why do we in turn give when we receive something as a gift? This aspect – reciprocating the thing received – in Māori society is referred to as "hau" and contains the identity of the giver: the gift encloses, in a way, the self of the giver. For Mauss, even in modern society, presenting something to someone implies presenting something of the Self. Even when it comes to the gift between strangers, such as the gift of blood or the gift of organs, it expresses the social identity of the giver and the recipient, since it can be perceived as society's recognition of a general gift or of the recipient's belonging to this society.

Keywords: gift as a link between people; gift as freedom and obligation; gift as positive indebtedness; gift as total social fact.

How can we think about the gift today? Two models seem radically opposed: that of the archaic gift and that of the modern gift. For many authors, Mauss' thinking on the gift applies to archaic societies, it cannot be used to understand giving in our own. It is true that in his seminal essay, first published in 1924, he writes: "We believe we have found one of the human foundations on which our societies are built..." (Mauss, 1990,

p. 42). But this is a conclusion most authors reject. As Goux says: “One cannot jump from potlatch to social security so blithely” (Goux, 2000, p. 283). “Mauss wants to extend his observations to our own societies, as if they were two manifestations of a single phenomenon, or at least of the same order. Mauss is blinded by his discovery” (Piron, 2002, p. 134). The archaic gift is obligatory and reciprocal, the modern gift, free and unilateral; “anonymous and impersonal” adds Titmuss in his renowned work on blood donation (Titmuss, 1972). The argument goes that early societies relied on coercion to make their society work: they forced their members to give. How can we possibly apply a forced donation such as this to our society, the solidarity of which, in Durkheim’s words (Tarot, 1999), is “organic”, where freedom to act plays a larger part?

This is what is at stake in the passage from archaic to modern giving. When we think of giving in society today, we spontaneously bring to mind a particular type of gift: philanthropic, humanitarian. The gift is defined as free in the sense of requiring no reciprocity: “What one gives to someone without receiving anything in return”, says *Le Petit Robert* dictionary. This way of seeing the gift is opposed to the dominant view in the social sciences, where it is reduced to self-interested exchange, tending towards equivalence; unilateral gift on the one hand, exchange tending towards equivalence on the other. Let us note that these two positions, while opposed, nevertheless share a common trait: definition of the gift as a comparison of what circulates between the donor and recipient. These are the two simplistic approaches that – until recently – have characterized donation. The last fifteen years have seen a change. For the first time, the word “gift” has appeared as an entry in the *Dictionnaire de sociologie* (Boudon *et al.*, 1999). And in an article by Alain Testart it is defined in the following way:

It is the legal aspect that allows us to distinguish the two phenomena [gift and exchange]: the right to demand a counterpart/return characterizes the exchange and is missing in the gift. To give is therefore to deprive oneself of the right to demand something in return. (Boudon *et al.*, 1999, p. 68)

This definition conceptualizes the gift in a way that distinguishes it from the two simple approaches – the common understanding and that of the social sciences. Crucially, it fails to assert that there is no return (the common conception), and it also fails to assert that the return is equivalent (the social science conception). This definition, in other words, fails to make any statement at all about actual return. Return is not its starting point. As a consequence, the gift is no longer defined by the terms of the previous definitions, i.e. simply *that which circulates*. Because from the

moment we acknowledge that we voluntarily deprive ourselves of the right to return, we cease to define the gift by *the fact* that there is, or is not, a return. And we take into account its relationship with the social bond. We recognize that giving is influenced by the nature and intensity of that bond between giver and receiver. We define ourselves by our ties, and the more intense the bond the more of it circulates through the gift. It is possible to establish certain relationships between what circulates, and the nature and intensity of the bond, by examining the meaning of what is in circulation. This is what many authors have done, Sahlins as the best known: "The social gap between the parties conditions the mode of exchange" (Sahlins, 1976). This general rule establishes a relationship between the bond and that which is in circulation.

Note that denying the right to return does not mean that there will be no return. There may or may not be one. The essential point is that the gift is no longer defined by this criterion. It is certainly a negative approach: to deprive oneself, to voluntarily renounce. But it is not difficult to turn it around; for if there is no requirement of return, if there is no right to return, we can deduce that any return will be free, in the sense that it will not be made by virtue of an obligation, contracted by the recipient. We could therefore propose, starting from this definition, but using its complementary proposition, that giving makes the receiver free to give. Or that giving is a form of circulation of things, a form of transfer that frees the partners from the contractual obligation to give something in exchange for receipt of something else. Conversely, we could define the contract as the fact of depriving the other of the freedom to give. This reverses the usual way of posing the question: rather than asking why one gives, one asks why it might be good to deprive the other of their freedom to give. With such a definition, we take the gift gesture away from a contractual meaning, the commercial or legal. We move away from conceptions of giving that are extreme but have in common with them the comparison of that which circulates.

Why is this fundamental? Because this definition forces us to take into account the meaning of the gift; it opens the way to meanings that are multiple. The meaning of what circulates is no longer a given. It is to be discovered, even in cases where there is a return. With this definition, we break away from the dominant model explaining what circulates – the market – and can now penetrate to the heart of the phenomenon of the gift. It is an indispensable entry to the world of giving. And it is what allows us to think of the modern gift and the archaic gift in the same way.

This is precisely what Marcel Mauss did in his *Essay on the Gift*. Instead of simply observing and comparing what was flowing in one direc-

tion and then the other, he asked himself the question of the meaning of the relationship between those who were giving.

1. MAUSS' MIXTURE

This is the thesis I wish to put forward and it is a proposition that is far from obvious. For if we now return to Mauss, we begin by getting a shock. Such a conception seems to radically contradict the opening of the *Essay on the Gift*. In archaic societies, the gift, Mauss says at the outset, is apparently free and disinterested, but in reality it is constrained and self-interested. Mauss speaks of the “[...] apparently free and gratuitous, yet coerced and self-interested character of these services” (Mauss, 1990, p. 147). And how does he demonstrate that the facts contradict appearances? By observing that there is, in fact, a return. In other words, Mauss proceeds exactly as I have just tried to suggest that one ought not to! Instead of focusing on the meaning of what circulates for the actors, he observes what circulates and concludes that since there is a return, the gift was self-interested.

Thus begins the *Essay*. Many authors stop their reading or their understanding of the text here. But one must continue, because it becomes clear that Mauss allows himself to be immersed in and influenced by what he observes, and little by little, modifies his position. The further he gets into his investigation, the more he seeks to understand the gift's meaning, the more he focuses on its spirit, its atmosphere. Thus Mauss says of the potlatch that it is: “Noble, replete with etiquette and generosity; and, in any case, when it is made in another spirit, with a view to immediate gain, it becomes the object of very marked scorn” (Mauss, 1990, p. 37). And then we notice that Mauss, because he looks for the meaning of the gesture he observes, makes fewer and fewer oppositional comparisons between the constraint of the archaics and the freedom of the moderns. He modifies his theoretical conception. His questioning remains the same, but his quest shifts. Its emphasis on the contrast of the ideal (pure gift; Malinowski, 1989, p. 238) with the reality (the obligation to give) moves to a documentation of the mixture of both (obligation and freedom). This is shown in the formulas he uses to describe giving: “In disinterested and obligatory form at the same time” (Mauss, 1990, p. 33), “obligation and freedom intermingled” (p. 65), “to go out of oneself, to give, freely and obligatorily” (p. 71). This displacement is fundamental because it constitutes the gift as a social fact.

2. THE GIFT AS A SOCIAL FACT

Why is this so important? First, because, with his focus on obligation, Mauss begins by breaking with pure giving and constitutes his object of study as a sociological phenomenon. As Mary Douglas notes, the notion of the pure unilateral gift: "Puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties" (Douglas, 1990, p. 7). Mauss introduces obligation and interest: without these dimensions, the gift is an unrelated transfer, a non-social, individual act. Any return, or even idea of return, signals its condemnation, its negation.

Such a gift... cannot exist: neither as an affective relationship nor as a moral experience. It represents at most an advertising gimmick, or the mystique of a narcissistic [and ultimately despotic] self-confirmation of its own self-sufficiency. (Sequeri, 1999)

But it is not only by introducing obligation, and opposing it to the pure gift, that Mauss makes the gift a social fact. It is also by reintroducing freedom. For the gift as pure constraint is not a "complete" social fact either. Human society is not a society of ants. In his essay, Mauss gradually moves from the classical ethnological conception of the archaic gift as a determined compulsory system to one of freedom¹ or, more precisely, of obligation mixed with freedom. The gift becomes the expression of the symbolic nature of human communication (Tarot, 1999). And there is no symbolism without freedom. In bringing this to light, Mauss decompartmentalizes the archaic gift and makes possible a general reflection on the gift.

Mauss does not fall into the trap of reciprocity-equivalence on the one hand, pure gift on the other. He frees himself from the obsession with equivalence, in the short or long term, which often characterizes the study of the gift among ethnologists. Mauss asserts that the return may not exist, and that this risk is, in fact, one of its necessary conditions: the gift is uncertain. This is why it seems to me that to make the obligation to return a necessity, as many readers have done in order to remain true to his point of departure, is to deny the spirit of the *Essay on the Gift* and the point at which Mauss ends up.

¹ I admit that Mauss remains ambiguous. For example, on page 180, while he speaks of "determined partners in a determined sense" his description does not correspond to something determined, and he adds that we do not know the precise rules that guide it (Mauss, 1990, p. 184), nor do we know the sanctions that would follow its contravention (p. 185). Finally (p. 186), he speaks of uncertainty.

3. MAUSS RECOGNIZES THE DIFFERENCES

But if Mauss gradually leaves this initial opposition behind, it does not prevent him from recognizing the essential differences between archaic and modern giving. The most important, for him, is the appearance of the separation between people and things.

We now live in societies that strongly distinguish [...] persons and things. This separation is fundamental: it constitutes the very condition for a part of our system of property, transfer and exchange. But [this distinction] is foreign to the law we have just studied (i.e., that of archaic societies). (Mauss, 1990, p. 47)

This idea runs throughout his *Essay*, as does the insight that the: “Coming and going of souls and things that are all intermingled with one another” (Mauss, 1990, p. 49) constitutes the fundamental explanation of the archaic gift, at the same time as it explains the primary difference between them and us. To get to modern society, we have passed from a system of “total welfare” or the unity of social spheres to the appearance of law or “rights” as a sphere unto itself. The dynamic established between the gift and law will become an essential element in the understanding of modern society and that which circulates within it.

This difference explains the characteristics of the modern gift, and in particular, the fact that it is found principally in primary ties, even if it exists to some extent in the spheres of the market and the state. But these spheres have different regulating principles. This is how Mauss invites us to think about the gift in its unity and its differences. Systems of circulation of things, previously confused, have become autonomous. Does this mean that the mixture of gift and rights, freedom and obligation, no longer exists? No, but it takes different forms, more obligatory here, freer elsewhere. The change leads to a higher degree of potential freedom overall, as the gift is not as closely involved with everything circulating in society.

This reflection on the mixture of obligation and freedom will lead Mauss to a key idea of the *Essay*, that of the gift as an expression of social identity. How can we explain the force that leads one to give back when one has received? This is the question that Mauss asked himself about the gift. And he answered it by way of the indigenous notion of *hau*, as presented by a Māori sage, and which he interpreted as signifying a transfer of identity: “Even when abandoned by the giver, [the thing received] is still something of him” (Mauss, 1990, p. 12); “[...] to make a gift to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself” (p. 12).

4. THE MODERN IDEA OF "HAU"

This is the most controversial part of the *Essay* and the one that has been most commented upon. "How can one give oneself through the gift of a thing?" wonders Goux (2000, p. 267). "How can someone transpire in something?" Or again: "How can a finite thing... embody the being of the giver? There lies the mystery or the paradox of the gift. Transpiration of the being in the having, presence and existence of other in the finished thing". For many authors, the answer given by Mauss is unacceptable, even scandalous. Why does one give when one has received? Because of the *hau* of the thing received, answers Mauss, which contains the identity of the donor. Many authors have proposed their own interpretation of the words of the Māori sage, among the most famous, Lévi-Strauss (1950); Firth (1959); Sahlins (1976); Godelier (1996). What was wrong with this great thinker, such a modern mind, asks Firth (quoted by Sahlins, 1997, pp. 206-207)? Does one need the involvement of spirits to explain the return of the gift, when the fear of sanction, the desire to receive again – in short, social control or interest – are sufficient to account for the phenomenon? For his part, Lévi-Strauss concluded that Mauss had allowed himself to be entangled in the indigenous theory, rather than adopting the necessary scientific distance. Since then, while recognizing Mauss' genius, those in his orbit never cease to return to the theory of the *hau* and Mauss' supposed error. Thus, Babadzan (1998) entitles his article *Pour en finir avec le Hau* (To put an end to the Hau) and laments the fact that Mauss believed in spirits.

Two questions spontaneously come to mind. First, how could a sociologist and anthropologist unanimously recognized as possessing such breadth and rigor have committed such an elementary error, one which Mauss himself undoubtedly taught generations of students to avoid? And why, more than 70 years later, are we still motivated to comment on the passage so often if it is so obviously wrong? How have we not moved on?

Personally, I don't know whether Mauss was right to interpret the Māori *hau* in this way. Perhaps Sahlins, or Lévi-Strauss, or Firth, or some other author, is closer to what Ranapari, the Māori sage, really meant. But in any case, the answer to the question accounts neither for the popularity of the concept nor for the fact that it has appealed to so many authors (most recently Iteanu, 2004). For my part, I am inclined to believe, with Graeber, that:

[...] in his interpretation of the *hau*, Mauss himself created a kind of myth, and as with all myths, Mauss expresses something essential, something that would have been difficult to express otherwise. Otherwise, his explanation would have been long forgotten. (Graeber, 2001, p. 155)

Mauss' interpretation put his finger on a fundamental phenomenon, on a dimension of the gift that affects us all: that it affects the identity of the partners. This idea: "Of the power that is given to the other contracting party by anything that has been in contact with the party proposing the contract" certainly belongs to the archaic world, since as Mauss writes, it is: "A direct consequence of the spiritual character of the thing that is given" (Mauss, 1990, p. 48). But far from being solely archaic, we find it surprisingly central to our current conception of the gift. "This vase, it is my aunt", says an heiress while showing her apartment to Anne Gotman (Gotman, 1989).

And what do we find when we observe people who have been given a gift that is not in the least primitive, made possible by the latest refinements of modern medical technology: organ transplantation? It is the fear of losing one's identity (Godbout, 2000). More generally, it is the idea of "giving of oneself" that is found at every turn in modern thinking on donation and which explains the danger than can accompany it, and why it is not always desirable. It is also the idea of recognition, which Marcel Hénaff tends to reserve for ceremonial giving (Hénaff, 2002). Often, in the gift, writes Mauss about the Brahmans: "The bond established between donor and recipient is too strong for both of them" (p. 59). This danger explains why it may be preferable to go through the market. Money allows things to circulate without transporting the identity of the giver, as Montaigne wrote when he exclaimed that he would rather buy a royal office than have it given to him, for: "By buying it, I give only money; otherwise, it is myself that I give" (quoted in Davis, 2000, p. 74).

When objects pass through the world of the gift, everything happens as though they still had a soul. And one can even wonder if, far from having been fooled by the indigenous interpretation as Lévi-Strauss believes, Mauss did not, on the contrary, project a modern idea onto the archaic society. For this is a constant theme in writings on the gift in our society.

Rings and other jewelry are not real gifts but only pretend to be... The only present, the only gift is a fragment of yourself. It is a gift of your blood that you must give me. (Emerson, 2000 [1844], p. 131)

It is therefore worth taking seriously Mauss' most controversial theory. When objects pass through the gift, it is still as if they have a soul, even in societies that have relegated animism to those considered un- or under-developed. Mauss' most controversial idea, the one closest to indigenous thought, according to Lévi-Strauss, joins the family of beliefs we call common sense. "After having cleared the indigenous theory, it was necessary to reduce it by an objective criticism that would allow it to reach the

underlying reality" (Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. 38). But what is Mauss' underlying theory when he speaks of *hau*? What if it is the current theory of giving in *our* society (Hénaff, 2002)? Indeed, what is Mauss saying? Let us return to the beginning of the *Essay*. He says there that what we observe in archaic societies takes the form of a gift, looks like a gift, but is not in fact a gift because it involves a return and an obligation to return (Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. 3). To conclude that it is not a true gift, Mauss refers to gratuity and disinterest, that is to say to the common conception of the gift in his own society. At the beginning, he radically opposes what one observes in archaic societies – the obliged return – to his reference conception – the true gift – the one not only with the form, but (because it is free and gratuitous) the reality of it. The observed gift has the form, the appearance of a true gift, but in actuality it is not one. Thus for Mauss the true gift must be free and disinterested. To say that it has only the form but not the reality, is at the same time to define the gift as free and gratuitous, to maintain this definition as a reference. This is his initial position. But gradually he ends up mixing the two, thus modifying both his theoretical conception and his interpretation of what he observes. What he observes is a mixture of freedom and obligation. In the *Essay*, the moral foundation is shifted from the idea of free and gratuitous to one of transfer of identity through the *hau*: to the idea that a true gift is a gift of oneself. It is impossible not to recognize oneself in the Maussian notion of the gift. This is why the idea of the *hau* has been so frequently commented upon: because it is *ours*.

The *Essay* constantly speaks of the "true gift", the ideal gift, without saying so explicitly. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss' belief, the Maussian conception of the *hau* is typically western, it is the idea of giving of oneself that spontaneously comes to the mind of the modern individual when one speaks to them of the gift. Let us add that the model of circulation of the archaic gift developed by Mauss, based on his three moments (to give, to receive, to return) is found nowhere, as such, in the societies he observed. Even though it is certainly an eminently valid interpretation of what Mauss (or more precisely the ethnologists read by Mauss) observed, it corresponds to no actual representation of the behavior of early people. On the other hand, we do find it historically in western society, first of all in Seneca "[...] a benefit is a service given by someone who would have been free, so it is just as well not to give it" (Sénèque, 1972, p. 77); "there is no gift because it could not have been given" (Caillé, 2000, p. 201). The model itself is therefore not indigenous, and probably reflects our own society's preoccupation with the gift.

5. IDENTITY AND GIVING TO STRANGERS

We find the same phenomenon when we look at the modern gift par excellence: the gift to strangers. The experience of donation by organ recipients cannot be explained by interest or fear of sanctions, but by the obligation to give back or risk, not only a transformation of one's identity, but possibly even an attack from the donor's identity (Godbout, 2000). The tendency to personalize giving in philanthropy has also been noted, as Silber points out: "[In philanthropy], far from being separated from the gift, the identity of the donor retains its imprint and remains attached to the gift" (Silber, 1999, p. 143). In this regard, she quotes one of the greatest American philanthropists:

It is neither expected nor desirable to find the principle of competition in the most judicious use of surplus wealth. What matters most to the trustee [donor] is the best use for him, *for his heart must be in his work*. (Andrew Carnegie, quoted in Silber, 1999, p. 142; emphasis added)

"[There exists] a deep connection between giving and the identity of the donor" (Silber, 1999, p. 141; Pulcini, 2001). Radley and Kennedy (1992) reach the same conclusion after comparing the philanthropic behaviors of three social groups (entrepreneurs, professionals, and workers): charitable giving reflects both the identity that donors ascribe to themselves as a group and the identity that they ascribe to recipients as a group. But aid for developing countries could equally highlight this phenomenon – with its negative dimensions. "Even more than through the market, it is through unreturned gifts that dominated societies end up identifying with the west and losing their souls", says economist Serge Latouche in *L'occidentalisation du monde* (Latouche, 1992). Giving, even between strangers, can reinforce or threaten the recipient's identity.

But what about blood donation, which Titmuss considers characteristic of modern donation in his famous 1972 book? For Titmuss, the two primary differences between modern and archaic donation are anonymity and the consequent fact that the donation does not create a personal bond, does not entail reciprocity:

Unlike gift exchange in traditional societies, there is in the free gift of blood to unnamed strangers no contract of custom, no legal bond, no functional determinism, no situations of discriminatory power, domination, constraint or compulsion, no sense of shame or guilt, no gratitude imperative and no need for the penitence of a Chrysostom. (Titmuss, 1972, p. 239)

Not only is this gift given to strangers, but it is even possible to believe, as the author points out, that if they knew each other: "Both givers and

recipients might refuse to participate in the process on religious, ethnic, political or other grounds" (Mauss, 1990, p. 74). Titmuss contrasts Mauss' model of the tight community with what he calls "the community of strangers". On the face of it, Titmuss completely deconstructs Mauss' conception of donation by applying his schema to the modern donation of blood. But is blood donation representative of giving to strangers in modern society? On the contrary, couldn't it be thought to represent an extreme case, where the manipulation of blood by intermediaries ends up transforming the gift into a product of some kind for the recipient, thus rendering "the gift of blood" incomplete, unable to be received as such? The donor gives, but the recipient receives, not a gift, but a product often broken down into its elements, which they would have great difficulty "identifying" with the donor. Little research has been done on blood recipients, but a recent survey points in this direction. Most of the recipients received it as just one product among others. "It's part of a package with other medications", said one interviewee (Henrion, 2003).

Blood donation is exceptional (Anderson & Snow, 1994). In most other cases, as we have just seen, even when donors and recipients do not know and will never see each other, we observe in the donation to strangers the phenomena and characteristics specific to donation analyzed by Mauss, and in particular the play of identity, positive or negative. And even in the case of blood, the phenomenon of personalization is not completely absent. In her survey, Henrion encountered two cases (out of ten) where the phenomenon of identification with the donor occurred despite everything. "I am convinced that since the transfusion, I have been influenced in my evolution by this foreign body", says an interviewee (Henrion, 2003, p. 103). In addition, some types of blood product (platelets or leukocytes) are not sent to a blood bank, because they cannot be stored; they must go directly from the donor to the recipient even if they don't know each other. In this case, the usual characteristics of donation are present, including: "An emotional relationship between the donor and the patient. If the patient dies from the disease, it may cause an emotional shock to the donor. The responsible institution will have to support the donor" (Hagen, 1982, p. 42). This is why it seems that in general, and contrary to what Titmuss asserts, donation to strangers also embodies social identity: that of the donor and that of the recipient. The specific characteristics of blood donation are readily explained by the fact that the recipient does not receive the blood as a gift.

A Māori concept, the *hau*, as interpreted by Mauss, is also a modern concept. In our societies: "To make a gift to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself" (Mauss, 1990, p. 12). "To accept a gift is [at least

in part] to accept an identity, and to refuse a gift is to refuse a definition of oneself [...]. Gifts are one of the ways in which others convey to us the image they have of us” (Schwartz, 1967, p. 8). Giving, even between strangers, can reinforce or destroy the recipient’s identity. It is true that this threat can be mitigated by the presence of organizational intermediaries; this is a fundamental role in society. The function of these intermediaries is to depersonalize the donation, to anonymize the recipient and thus to reduce its harmful character in cases where the recipient considers themselves incapable of giving in return. Doctors attempt to do this in organ transplantation by hoping to convince the recipient to adopt a mechanistic model (a heart is only a pump, a liver is only a filter), which neutralizes the gift of life by turning it into an object. Mauss’ fundamental distinction becomes relevant again here to an understanding of the workings of transplantation. The gift can then be seen as general and societal, as a recognition by that society of the recipient’s inclusion and belonging.

6. THE POSTULATE OF DONATION

The gift to strangers certainly constitutes the most important challenge for thinking about the gift in its most general form. But Mauss’ question retains the whole of its meaning. Even if it is easy to understand the force that pushes us to give when the link is personal, it nevertheless also pushes us to give to strangers, the fact that the push is increased when we are offered something, even something small, remains in part an enigma. This phenomenon, at the core of Mauss’ *Essay*, is still very much with us today. Philanthropic organizations use it routinely, if not systematically. They accompany their request for a donation with a small symbolic gift. And it has been found to be very effective.

The discussion of giving doesn’t end with the model of the obligatory and reciprocal (i.e. equivalent) ritual of early societies on one hand, and the pure and unilateral gift of the moderns on the other. On the contrary, it begins here. Couldn’t there be a common source to all of these forms of giving, which we will one day better grasp, without erasing their differences? This is how we understand Mauss, who ended up asking himself whether the gift, far from being archaic, wasn’t actually the “rock” of society, of any society. “We touch upon fundamentals” (Mauss, 1990, p. 70). And didn’t the “need” to give come from the fact that we are all, in the beginning, in a state of debt, and isn’t our identity built by making active what we have received, by giving in turn?

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RIASSUNTO

L'autore rilegge il "Saggio sul dono" di Mauss per mettere a fuoco le differenze essenziali tra il dono arcaico e il dono moderno, la prima delle quali è la separazione tra le persone e le cose. Infatti, se nelle società cosiddette primitive il dono è una "prestazione totale" (religiosa, economica, sociale, politica), nelle società moderne la circolazione delle cose diviene autonoma e ritroviamo il dono nella sfera dei legami primari e, solo in parte, in quelle del mercato e dello Stato. Il paradosso del dono, su cui Mauss mette l'accento, è il suo essere un mélange di obbligazione e libertà: perché a nostra volta doniamo quando riceviamo qualcosa in dono? Questo aspetto – ricambiare la cosa ricevuta – nella società Māori viene denominato "hau" e contiene l'identità del donatore: il dono racchiude, in un certo qual modo, il Sé del donatore. Per Mauss anche nella società moderna presen-

tare qualcosa a qualcuno implica presentare qualcosa di Sé. Anche quando si tratta del dono tra sconosciuti, come il dono del sangue o il dono di organi, esso esprime l'identità sociale del donatore e del ricevente, poiché può essere percepito come riconoscimento, da parte della società, di un dono generale o dell'appartenenza del ricevente a questa società.

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