Why has the concept of exchange proved such a useful tool of analysis in anthropology?

Ko Maru kai atu
Ko maru kai mai
ka ngohe ngohe – *Maori proverb*
[Give as much as you take,
all shall be very well]

In her introduction to *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Mary Douglas notes that Marcel Mauss' *Essai sur le don* was part of "an organized onslaught on contemporary political theory, a plank in the platform against utilitarianism"[1] and Mauss evidently wants to draw conclusions from what he saw as "survivals" in order to conceive an "optimum economy"[2] better adjusted to the motivations of the human animal. In the face of those who would champion the pursuit of individual interest, he is unambiguous: "happily we are still somewhat removed from this constant icy, utilitarian calculation"[3]. This essay examines Mauss' characterisation of how exchange works and assesses ethnographic descriptions of exchange by Bronislaw Malinowski, Keith Hart and Stephen Gudeman, seeking to understand whether anthropological descriptions of exchange have an explanatory value.

[1] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p.x
[2] Mauss (2002), p.98
[3] ibid., p.98

Mauss' conviction is rooted in the emblematic quality of the North American potlatch which he takes as embodying a total system of giving that is echoed universally in human systems of exchange. Within the system Mauss describes, if a gift may be reciprocated with an item of similar value, statuses can remain stable within a society. Where the expectation is for one-upmanship in generosity of spirit, the exchange escalates. In either case, this exchange as cited by Mauss from studies of the Haïda and Tlingit of the Northwest coast of North America, of Melanesia, Polynesia, of Eskimo and Australian hunters and in the legal principles of Roman, Germanic and classical Hindu texts, represents what he calls a "*system of total services*"[4] – the gifts manifest an inherent interdependence.

The paradox of the gift is that it is apparently voluntary, but seems simultaneously inextricable from a society-wide series of transactions that display status through magnanimity, conspicuous consumption or destruction, both voluntary and yet obligatory as part of participation. The exchange is more than it seems since it has an economic component, and yet is also a contract, an act of politeness or diplomacy, and an assertion regarding future relations. Mauss uses as an example the people of Kiriwina described by Malinowski: "When we come to Dobu, we are afraid of them. They might

[4] ib., p.7

kill us. But then I spit out ginger root, and their attitude changes. They lay down their spears and receive us well"[5]. Thus the phrase "total" services is also used by Mauss to mean that in inter-tribal exchanges it is "indeed the whole clan that contracts on behalf of all … through the person of its chief"[6].

Mauss' assimilation of diverse ethnographic material results for him in a rejection of "The brutish pursuit of individual ends"[7]. This mistrust of the unregulated market results in a call to limit the rewards of financial speculation[8], but there underlies it an uncertainty within Mauss' writing about exactly what kind of self-interest it is that drives the exchange system of the potlatch. Whilst Mauss indulges the constructed golden age nostalgia that the largesse of chiefs is indicative of a bygone paternalistic elite stewardship, he is unsure of the contrast he asserts: "In those civilisations they are concerned with their own interest, but in a different way from our own age. They hoard, but in order to spend, to place under an obligation, to have their own 'liege men'"[9]. Yet he questions, "are we sure that it is any different in our own society, and that even with us riches are not above all a means of lording it over our fellow men?"[10]

Jonathan Parry suggests that what Mauss intends to demonstrate in *The Gift* is

[5] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p.246; cited here from Mauss (2002), p.105
[6] Mauss (2002), p.8
[7] ib., p.98
[8] ib., p.88
[9] ib., p.96
[10] ib., p.96

the inapplicability of the modern economic distinction between self-interestedness and the disinterested gift[11]. Against Marshall Sahlins, Parry argues that it is not the case that Mauss is offering two competing explanations for what motivates reciprocity. Modes of thought such as the Maori *hau* – whereby an object is considered to be perilously imbued with the spiritual essence of its owner and must be passed on – are inseparable from the effectiveness of exchange as means of establishing bonds between opposed groups[12] since the exchange is meaningful precisely "because of this participation of the person in the object"[13]. Mauss' model of exchange discards the opposition of self-interest / disinterest, to observe the interdependence of the collectivity.

Bronislaw Malinowski's account of the Kula ring in his monographs on the Trobriand islanders depicts an extensive, elaborate and consistent system of exchange within a non-monetary milieu. We are reminded of Rodney Needham's description of the Purum of the eastern border of India with Myanmar whose cycles of masculine and feminine goods move in opposite directions such that the subordinate wife-taker gives three years of bride service and a prestation of rice beer and pork curry to the prospective father-in-law; while the wife may take objects such as a brass cup or loom to her new

[11] Jonathan Parry, '*The Gift*, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift'', *Man* (1986), p.458
[12] Parry (1986), pp.456-457
[13] ibid., p.457

home[14]. In the case of the Trobriand islanders, the inter-tribal circulation of *soulava* (necklaces of red spondylus shell disks, clockwise) and *mwali* (bracelets of white *Conus millepunctatus* shell rings, anti-clockwise; sometimes also *doga*[15]: circular boar's tusks) serves to strengthen dyadic intra-tribal bonds, and acts as the foundation and backdrop for relations between island tribes, for group expeditions and magic rituals.

The exchange of a *soulava* and a *mwali* is usually separated by at least some minutes and sometimes some years[16] – in the latter case, the giving of intermediary gifts (*basi*[17]) perpetuates a sense of continuity. Malinowski's classes the exchange a ceremonial act since it is conducted in public, with formalities, obligations and religious or magical import. That the Kula ring creates the conditions for other kinds of exchange is observed by Malinowski such that, "in the long run, not only objects of material culture, but also customs, songs, art motives and general cultural influences travel along the Kula route"[18]. Similarly, the Kula transaction is concurrent with, but completely distinct from the activity of bartering (*gim wali* in the Kiriwinian) which Hart correlates against the level of political stability between tribes[19]. Hart's claim is that whenever political relations between coastal and inland villages in the Trobriands are poor, less interpersonal trade

[14] Rodney Needham, *Structure and Sentiment* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp.94-95
[15] *The ethnography of Malinowski: The Trobriand Islands 1915-18*, ed. Michael W. Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p.193
[16] *The ethnography of Malinowski* (1979), p.170
[17] ib., p.171
[18] ib., p.168
[19] Keith Hart, 'Heads or tails? Two sides of the coin', *Man*, 21 (1986), 4, pp.637-56; cited here from Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, 'Introduction', *Money and the morality of exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.10

occurs because individuals are loath to risk the potential for conflict inherent in barter. Instead, trade is formalised in predictable ritual ceremonies which preclude haggling. Conversely, when political relations are good between the coast and the interior, the rise in informal trade corresponds to the low social distance and strong political order which prevails. The Kula ring therefore offers the anthropologist a paradigm for interpreting the degree to which trade is formalised between groups as an expression of the state of inter-group relations.

The British taxation of the Tiv in northern Nigeria is observed by Paul and Laura Bohannan to have had the – presumably intended – effect of drawing them into greater external trade and breaking down tribal gerontocratic power structures[20]. The Bohannans remark three separate spheres of exchange within the traditional Tiv economy. Subsistence goods would be exchanged in the market place, brass rods could be exchanged for prestige goods, and rights to marriageable women were exchanged by elders. Maurice Bloch and Parry disagree with Igor Kopytoff's assessment that it was the introduction of money technology which elided these spheres of exchange, claiming instead that the introduction of a new colonial set of exchange relations was the dominant cause[21]. Kopytoff's contention is that the introduction of money into an exchange system

[20] Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, 'Introduction', *Money and the morality of exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.14
[21] Parry and Bloch (1989), p.16

instigates an inexorable commodification since there exists a "drive to extend the fundamentally seductive idea of exchange to as many items as the existing exchange technology will comfortably allow"[22]. Bloch and Parry also reject the distinction posited by Gudeman regarding the origin of a commodity's appeal before and after the monetization of exchange. Gudeman argues that whereas in pre-monetary exchanges objects become personified by the *hau* effects of their donor, in a system of monetary exchange, the source of the animation shifts. The person is commodified, and the fetishisation of the commodity has become dependent upon its quasi-autonomous existence independent of a producer[23].

To conclude, the concept of exchange has proven useful to the anthropological analysis of peoples in part because exchange is not simply what occurs in societies – it is an integral part of what constitutes a society. Be it the symbolic exchange that is participation within a common linguistic lexicon or the economic exchange of commodities and labour, as the Trobriand saying has it, "Once in the Kula, always in the Kula"[24]. Where Western late capitalist thought would seem to dichotomise trade and gift-giving, self-interest and disinterest, product and alienated property, Mauss describes

[22] Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', ed. A. Appadurai, *The social life of things: commodities in a cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.72; cited here from Parry and Bloch (1989), p.15
[23] Parry and Bloch (1989), p.11
[24] *The ethnography of Malinowski* (1979), p.163

how the tenets of reciprocity and obligation ensure that the gift forms part of a long tradition of social contract-building – and ought to be thought of as part of a system of total services.

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