

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY





NEW

SZÉCHENYI PLAN

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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Week 2

The notion of the gift, gift exchange,
gift versus commodity

Tamás Dombos, Viola Zentai

The gift

- Marcel Mauss: *The Gift* (1923)
- Logic: the gift seems to enact generosity but in fact is enacts duty.
- Gift: total social fact / phenomenon
 - multidimensional: open to all segments of society
 - legal aspects: individual and collective obligations
 - economic aspects: value, usefulness, accumulation, wealth, consumption
 - religious content: animism, magic, diffuse beliefs
 - aesthetic content : dance, music
 - structural dimension: organisation, categorisation, infrastructure

Potlatch

- Boas (1897)
- Ceremonial gift exchange among Indian tribes in the North-Western Pacific (US)
- Winter: permanent celebration, visiting
- Exchange of objects on a massive scale in the form of barter and gift
 - food (dried fruit, sugar, flour)
 - blankets
- Burning blankets, destroying canoes, excessive eating
 - ⇒ demonstration of the chief's wealth



Explaining potlach

- Melanesia, Papua New Guinea: major similarities
- In less developed forms: South America, Africa, Malaysia
- The principle of obligation:
 - the obligation to give
 - the obligation of accept
 - the obligation to return
- The system of total prestation:
 - the liaison between two persons (marriage, inheritance, exchange) cements members of society
 - individuals act on behalf of communities
- The nature of competition:
 - the obligation to return: The gift giver is giving a loan. This is an unequal position, tends to reproduce prestige.

Moka

- Competitive gift exchange in Mount Hagen (Papua New Guinea)
- Tribes are in war against each other in alliances
- Death in the battle: the allied should be compensated
- The chief offers pigs, the gifts should be returned, and returned over and over ... ⇒ moka-chain
- The obligation to always give more pig each time
- Dependent on production of pigs to exchange:
 - the family farming
 - gift giving within the tribe: for the sake of the moka
⇒ reinforces power relations within the tribe



Gift in modern capitalism

- Gifts are exchanged not only in tribal societies:
 - among relatives it is commonplace
 - expression of gratitude (doctors, teachers, colleagues)
 - Christmas gifts: a significant portion of retail revenues
- Strict regulations:
 - obligation to accept and return
 - prohibition of giving money (gift vouchers) – Western value
 - prohibition of excessive gift (excessive duty of return)
- Ceremonial :
 - Christmas dinner /lunch
 - marriage ring

Hau and mana

- "The spirit of the gift": metaphors
- Hau
 - Maoris (New Zealand)
 - hau = spiritual power which resides in the woods, in objects exchanged as gifts
 - the hau yearns for returning to its place of origin, circulates through gift giving
 - failing to return causes death
- Mana
 - Polynesia
 - resides in all humans and animals: power, authority
 - outside of the gift circulation the mana dies

Significance of gift giving

- Societies and economies are based on reciprocity
 - not on barter (Adam Smith)
 - evolution process:
 - total prestation
 - ⇒ personal gifts
 - ⇒ commodity exchange
 - distrust in the market
- Relations between objects and between people are co-determined
 - foundations of economic anthropology

Distinction between gift and commodity

- Gregory (1980, 1982):
 - binary categories
 - gift: inalienable and similar goods are circulated among people tied by social relations
 - commodity: alienable and different goods are circulated among independent actors

Distinction between gift and commodity

- Carrier (1995):
 - based on person-object and person-person relations
 - gift: obligatory exchange through which people connected by social relations circulate goods tied to them
 - commodity: voluntary exchange through which people not connected by social relations circulate goods that are not tied to them

Critique of the gift-commodity distinction

- Lévi-Strauss (1949): *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*
 - gift circulation is identical with exchange along their structural properties
 - the natural law of gift giving, gift acceptance, gift return
 - science: the interpretation of the participants should be excluded
- Bourdieu (1994): *Practical reason: on the theory of action*
 - the Lévi-Straussian objectivist understanding is reductionist
 - because of a calculative content, the difference is not significant, BUT
 - the fact that the participants collectively misconceive its logic is constitutive of the distinction itself
 - the delayed return veil the calculation: symbolic order is enacted by the denial of calculation

Inalienable possessions

- Anette Weiner (1992)
- Critique of reciprocity centred explanation
- “Non-exchange”, “keeping while giving”
- Some objects cannot be sold, exchanged or given away as gift
 - essential ties to the owner, it is part of the owner’s identity
 - its own history connected to the owner
 - typical history: find the owner through gift giving
 - keeping the object endows power to the owner

Summary

Most societal

Least societal

Malinowski

pure gift

reciprocated gifts

trade

Mauss

total prestation

gift

individualised
exchange

Sahlins

generalised
reciprocity

balanced
reciprocity

negative
reciprocity

Godelier

keeping

giving

selling