

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Sponsored by a Grant TÁMOP-4.1.2-08/2/A/KMR-2009-0041

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June 2011

Week 2

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

The gift

- Marcel Mauss: *The Gift* (1923)
- Logic: the gift seems to enact generosity but in fact it 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 potlatch

- 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
- 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 |

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