# Mauss, Marcel (1872-1950)

Born in Épinal, France, Marcel Israël Mauss, the nephew and a disciple of Émile Durkheim, was a sociologist whose work greatly influenced the nascent discipline of anthropology. After teaching ‘History of Religion and Uncivilised Peoples’ at the *École pratique des hautes études* from 1901 to 1931, he took up the chair of Sociology at the Collège de France. He is widely known for his study of the rites of exchange across cultures (*‘*Essai sur the don’ 1923-1924). In Mauss’s theory, the gift is seen as the result of an almost magical operation that goes beyond the sheer materiality of the object presented, engaging the receiver as well as the giver in a form of spiritual transaction. One focal point of Mauss’s analysis is the ‘Potlatch’ ritual practiced by native North Americans, which he uses to highlight the mechanisms binding giver and receiver in an unbreakable obligation of reciprocity, compelling the receiver to reciprocate on the same scale the giver’s original gesture to avoid losing honour and status. Georges Bataille was straightforwardly inspired by Mauss for the formulation of his own notion of the ‘accursed share’. The Situationists attentively read Mauss to think about ways of circumventing capitalistic modes of exchange. Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed to pursue Mauss’s work when founding the ‘anthropologie structurale’.

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**List of works**

Mauss, M. and Durkheim, É. (1913) ‘Note sur la notion de civilisation’, *Année sociologique*, 12: 46-50.

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**References and further reading**

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1968) ‘Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss’, in Mauss, M. *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris: P.U.F., VII-LII.

James, W. and Allen, N. J. eds. (1998) *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Murray, S. O. and Mauss, M. (1989) ‘A 1934 Interview with Marcel Mauss’, *American Ethnologist* 16 (1): 163-168.