

5. 'The work of anthropologists published before the year 2000 is not worth reading today.' Discuss with reference to ONE of the following anthropologists covered in the course: Marcel Mauss; Zora Neale Hurston; Margaret Mead; Max Gluckman.

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Marcel Mauss' essay "*The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*" is considered to be a foundational paper in the field of anthropology. Yet some would question its usefulness in the modern day, given that it was published nearly a century ago. In this essay, I will analyse the extent that his most famous piece can assist us in understanding current social phenomena.

Mauss' essay presents a framework wherein a gift represents a contract that materialises and reinforces relationships. The contract implicit within a gift has three responsibilities: to give, to receive, and to return. Interestingly, this implies that gifts are not singular events, but part of a flowing cycle. Gifts flow from one individual to another and continue to do so for as long as the relationship stands. Mauss then posits that this system of responsibility is core to preventing conflicts within a society. These contracts may be used for political, economic, or social reasons. Furthermore, he demonstrates that gifts are key tools for maintaining peace by examining three examples of gift giving: the potlatch ceremony, the hau, and the Kula ring. I will examine the first two cases, as they are especially potent for comprehending the modern world.

The most interesting of these examples for contemporary use is the potlatch feast. During such a feast gifts are exchanged between tribes in a competitive manner: chieftains attempt to out-do each other by giving ever grander prizes to their peers and discarding valuable items given to them¹. Sharing the most valuable objects and throwing away as much value as possible yields status, as it shows to their fellow chieftains that they have a surplus of wealth. Such a ritual cements the hierarchy of tribes by placing low-ranking tribes in debt to those who have more resources at their disposal via the responsibility to reciprocate. This is an example of "competitive" or "antagonistic"² gifting. Despite attempts by the Canadian government to extinguish the practice, potlatches remain crucial to the political systems of some indigenous cultures in North America.

Gifts as demonstrations of wealth can be observed across the world today, particularly in foreign aid. Countries attempt to show their prosperity, morality, and generosity by sending resources to nations in crisis. However, it also places the receivers at the bottom of the hierarchy as their debts to the wealthy countries increase. This is one way that countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, and China maintain their power on the world stage. Methods such as these form a new colonialism where debts are used in place of military

¹Johansen, D.O. and Gates, C.M., 1967. *Empire of the Columbia: A history of the Pacific Northwest*. New York: Harper & Row., pp. 7-8

²Mauss, M., 2002. *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. routledge.

occupation.

Beyond creating a hierarchy between countries, this usage of debt prevents the recipients from developing, which is crucial to globalisation. As a country develops, worker's rights improve and therefore labour becomes more expensive. This causes capitalists to move production to countries with weaker protections for labourers so they can increase their profit margins. Moving to such countries allows the produce to remain cheap for those in rich countries while still enjoying their elevated rights. It is in the interests of these capitalists for the host country to not prove its labour protections, thus it is beneficial for givers of aid to avoid investing in infrastructure and instead only provide temporary aid such as food. Only through a Maussian lens can this cycle of aid be understood.

While the potlatch represents a more aggressive application of gifting, there are more passive forms. The Māori are a people who separate ownership and possession of an item. It is believed that the original owner of an item always owns it, as their spirit becomes entangled with the object. This means that when another person comes to possess the item, they are in possession of a part of the owner. The new custodian of the item is motivated to give an item of value in return, lest they invoke misfortune. This exchange of spirit-imbued objects encourages peace, as neither party wants to receive bad luck. Mauss goes on to assert that this is fundamental to understanding why people across the world are compelled to reciprocate. However, it is worth noting that Mauss' analysis of the Hau has been criticised as reductive, as hau is one part of a greater system of belief³. His understanding has since been built upon by other theorists to create a more informed view.

Older anthropological papers such as "*The Gift*" are not without their flaws. Chief among them is the patronising notion of a "primitive" or "archaic" society. These are incredibly loaded phrases which were not properly scrutinised until the 1980s by Kuper⁴ and Leach. Who gets to decide what "primitive" looks like? Who is it defined in relation to? What are the criteria? Baked into the phrase is the assumption that societies can be placed on a linear scale from *primitive* to *advanced* and it is often implicit that the society the author exists within is far along that scale. This condescending view of certain cultures runs counter to the key idea of ethnography: to take others' viewpoints seriously and attempt to understand them within their worldview. Due to this shortcoming, it can be argued that "*The Gift*" and many of its peers fail to fully step in the shoes of the peoples they study.

Despite its flaws, Mauss' work continues to provide a powerful framework for understanding the social, political, and economic phenomenon of gift exchange. He establishes gift exchange not as a simple transfer of items, but a glue that keeps people together. It is used to provide material examples of a relationship,

³Thompson, D. (1987) 'The Hau of the Gift in Its Cultural Context', 11.

⁴Kuper, A., 1988. *The invention of primitive society: transformations of an illusion*. Psychology Press.

encourage peace, and support hierarchies. That final pattern is particularly useful for understanding neocolonialism and how it keeps nations poor.

Bibliography