

# Marcel Mauss's Economic Vision, 1920-25: Anthropology, Politics, Journalism

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## Abstract

Marcel Mauss took some time to resume his academic and political duties after the Great War, but the period 1920-1925 was one of intense activity and achievement on all fronts. He assumed Durkheim's responsibility as leader of a depleted *Année Sociologique* group and relaunched the journal. He was optimistic that his international socialist politics would bear national fruit and it did. He was also a prolific financial journalist at this time, writing about the exchange rate crisis of 1922-1924. He maintained a Chinese wall between these compartments of his life, briefly combining them in the last chapter of *The Gift* which is only a tentative synthesis. This separation of his intellectual and political commitments makes it easier for anthropologists to ignore his politics and, worse, to perpetuate in his name that opposition between market contracts and gifts as economic principles that he wrote his famous essay to refute.

## Keywords

*L'Année sociologique*, contract, finance, First World War, gift, Marcel Mauss, journalism, politics

## Mauss after the war

The First World War was more than a watershed; it was an irreversible fissure in modern European history. The state had acquired undreamt of powers in the course of the war: to mobilize and kill off huge armies, to control production and distribution, to monopolize propaganda; from now on it was a struggle between rival state forms for world domination. The claim of Western societies to lead the rest of humanity in reason and civilization had been mortally wounded by the senseless slaughter of the trenches. Life after the war was quite unlike what had gone before. Marcel Mauss, who admitted to a sense of relief when the war first allowed him to escape from his scholarly burdens, took his time to resume his academic and political activities. The death of Emile Durkheim and numerous colleagues during the war took some adjusting to (see Jane Guyer's and Heonik Kwon's articles in this issue), while some close friends told him it was now time to grow up. So, to a double life as a professor of the religions of uncivilized peoples in the marginal *Ecole pratique des hautes études* and as a political activist-cum-dilettante, he now had to add responsibility for the movement launched by his uncle at a time when the sociology project still felt rather precarious.

Yet the years 1920-25 were packed and fruitful. Mauss's political party and the Left in general had a real shot at winning power in France and did so in 1924. Two-thirds of his *Ecrits politiques* (Mauss, 1997) were written in this period. He resumed teaching religion at the *Ecole pratique* and was able to relaunch *Année sociologique* by the period's end (Jane Guyer in this issue), contributing to the 1925 volume his most famous essay, on *The Gift*. There have been two English translations, of which we shall refer to the second by WD Halls unless specified otherwise (Mauss, 1990 [1925]). He also included a commemorative piece, 'In memoriam: the unpublished work of Durkheim and his collaborators' and a vast amount of work as editor and reviewer. He suffered some reverses at this time, including a serious illness, but remained optimistic for both political and intellectual regeneration on a social scale that was increasingly international in scope. He began serious work on a book dealing with the main political currents of the day, nationalism and socialism (Mauss, 2006 [1953]). His interest in the American 'potlatch' was expanded by the publication of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), confirming his belief that competitive gift-exchange was endemic in Melanesia and Polynesia, as well as elsewhere. And the *Institut d'ethnologie* was formed in 1925 with Rivet, Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss himself in charge.

In the late 1920s, things began to unravel on all fronts. Mauss's personal standing as a *savant* grew inexorably; but his party suffered political reverses, its newspaper and journal folded, the cooperative movement foundered and, after a successor half-volume, the *Année sociologique* second series ended; his close friend, Henri Hubert, died in 1927. The years 1920-25 stand apart for the energy and fulfilment they brought. Mauss himself kept a sort of Chinese wall between his academic

and political interests; so it is not so surprising that the two have been kept apart, especially in the Anglophone world, where his political writings are virtually unknown (save for Graeber, 2001). Mauss allowed himself one public attempt to bridge them, the concluding chapter of *The Gift*. Mary Douglas, in her Foreword to the second English edition (Mauss, 1990 [1925]), is rather dismissive of this chapter. For her, the essay should be seen as a great leap forward in anthropological science, theoretical forerunner of his *Manual of Ethnography* (Mauss, 2009 [1947]) and a suitable launch of his career at the Institute: ‘his own attempt to use the theory of the gift to underpin social democracy was very weak...really jumping the gun’ (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: xv).

I have to agree that the essay itself does not provide an effective intellectual bridge between the two compartments of Mauss’s life. *The Gift* approaches the evolution of human exchange as moving through three stages: from a total exchange of services as in moiety systems, through competitive gift-exchange involving political leaders to individual contract, whose illumination (‘the non-contractual element in the contract’) was the aim of Durkheim’s *Division of Labour in Society* (1960 [1893]), itself the main source for Mauss’s essay. Yet any elaboration of what capitalist markets are really like or even a recapitulation of Durkheim’s main arguments are largely missing here. As a result, the programmatic conclusions float at some remove from the substance of the essay and his successors have been able to suppose that its point really is just to expose the ‘gift economy’ to scholarly view. Mauss himself is responsible for the contrasting interpretations that his essay has generated. Hubert did not spare him at the time: ‘It is often rather vague...Are you really sure that the development of social insurance can be attached to your “human bedrock”, as you say?’ (Fournier, 2006: 244).

So, why then take seriously the relationship between Mauss’s sociology and his politics? Mauss, while tending to his uncle’s legacy, was making a profound break with the latter’s sociological reductionism in these years, opening himself to psychology and the humanities, while espousing a method of ‘total social facts’ which underpins *The Gift* and figures prominently in those same conclusions. This was just one of the ways he responded to the war. Another was the shift to studying contemporary politics in his (ultimately abortive) ‘Nation’ project. I have argued elsewhere (Hart, 2007) that Mauss himself can be seen as a ‘total social fact’ in ways that undoubtedly concerned him and might deserve our attention. I do not claim that his work is a seamless whole, but rather that it might pay to juxtapose his disparate efforts of this extraordinary period in order to throw new light on the meaning of his great essay for us today.

To that end, I propose here to examine his journalism in the years, 1920-25, with a view to isolating his views on economy at the time. I will then offer an interpretation of *The Gift*, particularly as it bears on markets and money, as well as the proposals made by Mauss there for the management

of our societies. The aim is a more integrated account of his economic vision, one that has resonance for our own crisis. We will see. Such an exercise goes to the heart of a persisting translation problem which partly accounts for the diverging traditions of Maussian scholarship that we hope to bring together in this conference. When I want to know what Mauss or his main interpreters meant, I read the originals in French. But his work has been ill-served in how it has been made available to the Anglophone world. The two published English translations are seriously defective in some important ways, not necessarily because of the translator's fault, but because key concepts like *prestation* and *morale* are almost impossible to render in English. My main aim here is to persuade some English-speakers to take up the large body of French scholarship that awaits translation, especially his political writings and subsequent commentary on them. In recent years, Marcel Fournier's indispensable biography has been published in an abridged English edition (2006). Accordingly, I will make exclusive reference here to that edition and to the second English translation of *The Gift* (1990).

## Mauss the financial journalist

England was a big part of Mauss's story. He won distinction during the war as a translator for British and Australian troops on the front line. He took a good part of his cooperative socialism from English sources: the Rochdale pioneers, the Webbs and their Fabian Society, the Labour Party of Keir Hardie. He admired English anthropologists, such as Rivers, Seligman, Frazer, Malinowski and Marett; and travelled there often to give lectures, attend conferences and meet friends. Whereas Durkheim had written *The Division of Labour in Society* against English utilitarianism as personified by Herbert Spencer, Mauss looked to that country's socialist tradition as a source of inspiration for his own politics. If Paris was in ferment during the immediate post-war period, its *avant-garde* artists (American as well as French) carrying on the pre-war movement under radically altered circumstances (Shattuck, 1955), England too was hardly quiet.

When the war ended, Russia was trying to secure its revolution against all-comers, Germany was in civil war and even Britain had a failed revolution that is little-known today. The artistic and literary scene was in ferment. In 1922, the year that Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts* came out, T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, James Joyce *Ulysses* and Wittgenstein his *Tractatus*, while the hit movie of the year was Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, a tale of an Eskimo's resilience in the face of personal hardship and a harsh environment. The old imperialist story about 'our' mission to civilize 'them' lay in tatters. Demoralization was everywhere, especially among the intellectuals. So, when Malinowski produced his account of native adventurers in the Western Pacific (1922), latter-day heirs to the archaic tradition of noble heroes, his story found a receptive audience. The

*kula* ring of the Trobriand Islanders and their Melanesian neighbours provided an allegory of the world economy. Here was a civilization spread across many small islands, each incapable of providing a decent livelihood by itself, that relied on an international trade mediated by the exchange of precious ornaments. There were no states, money or capitalists and, instead of buying cheap and selling dear, the trade was sustained by an ethic of generosity. *Homo economicus* was not only absent, but upstaged by comparison, a shabby and narrow-minded successor to a world we in the West had lost.

Marcel Mauss was excited by all this, but he felt Malinowski had gone too far. *The Gift* is substantially in dialogue with *Argonauts*, but typically his most important points are contained in a long footnote. Before examining this aspect of Mauss's analysis, we need to place it within a context revealed by his political journalism. In particular, Mauss wrote a series of articles in his party's newspaper, *Populaire*, on the exchange rate crisis of 1922-24 (Mauss, 1997). These have generally been treated as being lightweight, even boring, unconnected to his academic work; but I argue here that they do offer some insight into Mauss's economic ideas and hence into his arguments in *The Gift*, both analytical and programmatic.

The financial turmoil that Keynes predicted (2007 [1919]) would be the consequence of the Versailles treaty was soon realized. The stability of the franc was a matter of acute public concern, since it was taken to be a measure of France's international standing; and political panic when the franc dropped was commonplace. The Left blamed it all on a few rich families. Mauss wrote seven articles about the exchange rate crisis in *Populaire*, beginning December 1922; and returned to the issue a year later, eventually producing an article daily for two weeks in March 1924.<sup>1</sup>

The style of this financial journalism is notable on several counts. Mauss sets out in alarmist fashion, but settles down into a voice of reason, seeking to steer a pragmatic course of stabilization in the national interest. Being able to take a position on the economy was vital to political engagement: 'Every socialist is obliged to have a few notions about political economy, or economic sociology as we now say' (27 February, 1924). The problems were both urgent and complex. More striking still is the tone Mauss adopts when discussing what we would call 'the markets', as if he were himself an expert player. After studying the price curves, exchange rates and money supply since the end of the war, he makes the 'bold assertion, which militants and scientists must venture only very scrupulously' that 'the dollar will float between 20 and 25 francs, but will not go much higher than that' (10 March, 1924). The dollar exchange rate had been 11 francs in 1921. He studied fiduciary inflation and concluded that it was not the cause of exchange rate depreciation, blaming rather panic in the markets. Storms were brewing from every direction: 'These are human phenomena at work: collective psychology, imponderables, beliefs, credulity, confidence, all swirling about' (29

February, 1924). Another striking feature of these articles is personal attacks. Clemenceau was a particular target, but Mauss's sharpest invective was directed at Lucien Klotz, an 'incompetent Jew [and] insignificant personality' whom Clemenceau had put in charge of Finance 'perhaps out of Satanism'. He treated Poincaré with more respect, but still insisted on pointing the finger at real persons rather than indulge the convenient abstractions beloved by left-wing conspiracy theorists.

An unpublished paper, 'Second general conclusion. A means of overhauling society: the manipulation of currencies' (Fournier, 2006: 212 and 390 n.105), provides a link between these reflections on national political economy and both the substantive analysis and programmatic conclusions of *The Gift*. Here Mauss claims, following Simiand, that the great economic revolutions are 'monetary in nature' and that the manipulation of currencies and credit could be a 'method of social revolution...without pain or suffering'. He wished to give an economic content to juridical socialism. 'It suffices to create new monetary methods within the firmest, the narrowest bounds of prudence. It will then suffice to manage them with the most cautious rules of economics to make them bear fruit among the new entitled beneficiaries. And that is revolution. In this way the common people of different nations would be allowed to know how they can have control over themselves—without the use of words, formulas or myths'. I will return to this when considering interpretations of *The Gift*. In the meantime, it should be noted that Mauss was very confident of electoral victory for the Left when he wrote about the exchange rate crisis: 'Socialist democracy is on its way...The future is ours...We are living in a great time' (6 May, 1924). And his confidence was justified in the following month. In that same month the editors signed a publishing contract for the new series of *Année sociologique* and the second half of 1924 was spent preparing its publication, along with Mauss's famous essay on *The Gift*.

Mauss's economic vision in these years had much more to it than these questions of exchange. He embraced internationalism and was pleased that his uncle's notion of the division of labour was now routinely applied to the growing interdependence of nations. He began compiling material for his book on 'The Nation' (See *L'Année sociologique*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 1953: 7-68; extracts in Schlanger, 2006: 41-48) with its intended focus on the nationalization of socialism. He wrote critically about the Russian revolution, condemning the Bolsheviks' use of violence and their destruction of the market economy, with its accumulated reservoir of trust. He supported an 'economic movement from below', based on syndicalism, cooperation and mutual insurance, and shared the Webbs' vision of a 'consumer democracy'. Mauss devoted considerable attention to cooperatives as a fundamental plank of his party politics in the early 20s; but this too waned in the latter part of the decade.

## What is *The Gift* about?

The idea of economic progress through specialization was at the core of the British economics founded by Adam Smith. A century later economic individualism was the cornerstone of an evolutionary social theory articulated by Herbert Spencer and popularized as the native ideology of a triumphant western bourgeoisie. Durkheim (1960 [1893]) sought to show that division was a dialectical process of separation and integration, that society became stronger as labour was divided and as the scope for individual action was enhanced. Emphasis on the making of individual contracts obscured the social glue of ‘the non-contractual element in the contract’ that made the economy possible—a combination of law, state, customs, morality, and shared history that it was the sociologist’s task to make more visible. The individual is the result of social development and not, as in Smith’s origin myth, its source.

*The Gift* (Mauss, 1990 [1925]) is in a direct line of descent from Durkheim’s book, published over three decades before. Mauss summarily eliminates the two utilitarian ideologies that purport to account for the evolution of contracts: ‘natural economy’, Smith’s idea that individual barter (markets without money) is an expression of human nature; and the notion that primitive communities are altruistic, giving way eventually to our own regrettably selfish, but more efficient individualism. Against the contemporary move to replace markets with communist states, he insists that the complex interplay between individual freedom and social obligation is synonymous with the human condition and that markets and money are universal, if not in their current impersonal form. In this way he fleshes out his uncle’s social agenda, but also questions the accuracy of the latter’s model of mechanical solidarity for stateless societies.

The argument proceeds through five sections of unequal length. The Introduction (7 pages) identifies the essay’s aim: to reach

...conclusions of a somewhat archaeological kind concerning the nature of human transaction in societies around us or that have immediately preceded our own. We shall describe the phenomena of exchange and contract in those societies that are not, as has been claimed, devoid of economic markets – since the market is a human phenomenon that, in our view, is not foreign to any known society – but whose system of exchange is different from ours.

The market here lacks traders, impersonal money and modern sale contracts; but we can see the morality and organization of such transactions which

still function in our societies, in unchanging fashion and, so to speak, hidden below the surface, and as we believe we have found one of the human foundations on which our societies are built, we shall be able to deduce a few moral conclusions concerning

certain problems posed by the crisis in our own law and economic organization. There we shall call a halt (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 4).

This dual purpose couldn't be clearer; but Mauss's decision to leave out any extended discussion of the morality and economic organization of capitalist societies is one of the main causes for widely divergent interpretations of his work. It is not, as we have seen, that he lacked the capacity for such a discussion; but rather that he chose once more to separate his academic and political writing, save for the semi-detached concluding chapter. Mauss's key term for the range of archaic contracts he intends to investigate is untranslatable into English and something of a feudal relic in French. *Prestation* is a service performed out of obligation, something like 'community service' as an alternative to imprisonment. Its main use today is as a guarantee to service essential machines when they break down. According to him, the earliest forms of exchange took place between entire social groups and involved the whole range of things people can do for each other, a stage he called the *système des prestations totales* (Chapter 1, 11 pages). But his main interest is in the 'potlatch', a form of gift-exchange involving aggressive competition between leaders of groups (*prestations totales de type agonistique*).

This second chapter (28 pages) is the substantive core of the essay and it repays closer study. Its title is important: 'The *extension* of this system [of *prestations totales*]: liberality, honour and money [*monnaie*]', italics added. One of Mauss's key modifications to his uncle's legacy was to conceive of society as a historical project of humanity whose limits were extended to become ever more inclusive. The point of *The Gift* is that society cannot be taken for granted as a pre-existent form. It must be made and remade, sometimes from scratch. How do we behave on a first date or on a diplomatic mission? We make gifts. The moiety systems described in the first chapter are going nowhere. But heroic gift-exchange is designed to push the limits of society outwards. They are 'liberal' in a similar sense to the 'free market', except that generosity powers the exchange, self-interested for sure, but not in the way associated with *homo economicus*. Malinowski's account of the *kula* ring is the contested origin for Mauss's discussion. 'The whole intertribal *kula* is merely the extreme case...of a more general system. This takes the tribe itself, in its entirety, out of the narrow sphere of its physical boundaries and even of its interests and rights' (1990 [1925]: 28). No society is ever economically self-sufficient, least of all these Melanesian islands. So to the need for establishing local limits on social action must always be added the means of extending a community's reach abroad. This is why markets and money in some form are universal, and why any attempt to abolish them must end in catastrophe.

Malinowski (in *Economic Journal*, 1921) was adamant that the Trobriand *kula* valuables were *not* money in that they did not function as a medium of exchange and standard of value. But, in



a long footnote to chapter 2, Mauss holds out for a broader conception: ‘On this reasoning...there has only been money when precious things...have been really made into currency – namely have been inscribed and impersonalized, and detached from any relationship with any legal entity, whether collective or individual, other than the state that mints them... One only defines in this way a second type of money -- our own’. He suggests that primitive valuables are like money in that they ‘have purchasing power and this power has a figure set on it’ (1990 [1925]: n.29, 100-102). He also takes Malinowski to task for reproducing the bourgeois opposition between commercial self-interest and the free gift, a dichotomy that many Anglophone anthropologists have subsequently attributed to Mauss himself (Hart, 2007).

In *The Gift*, he acknowledges the validity of criticisms made by historians and others that social scientists tend to abstract too much and proposes instead to address the full complexity of ‘individuals in their moral, social, mental and above all corporeal and material integrity’ (Fournier, 2006: 240). Along with his incipient interest in joking relationships, this essay was intended to ‘...counter the Durkheimian image of a society functioning as a “homogenous mass” with the image of a more complex collectivity, groups and subgroups that overlap, intersect and fuse together’ (ibid: 245). Mauss claims that he has studied archaic societies in their dynamic integrity, not as congealed states to be decomposed into analytical instances of rules pertaining to law, myth, or value and price:

It is by considering the whole entity that we could perceive what is essential, the way everything moves, the living aspect, the fleeting moment when society, or men, become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation in relation to others.

In this concrete observation of social life lies the means of discovering new facts...Nothing is more urgent or more fruitful than this study of total social facts (1990 [1925]: 80).

There follows a chapter (18 pages) on ‘Survivals of these principles in ancient systems of law and ancient economies’, societies which had trade, money and contract in their modern form. Mauss draws here on his profound knowledge of ancient languages and texts; apart from offering a model of how we could go about doing the same thing now, it need not detain us. His concluding chapter (19 pages) addresses the relevance of all this for contemporary societies. It has three sections: 1. moral conclusions; 2. conclusions for economic sociology and political economy; and 3. conclusions regarding general sociology and morality. The difficult term for us is *morale*, which refers to moral science, morality, customs and spirit (the way it appears in English).

Mauss’s chief ethical conclusion is that the attempt to create a free market for private contracts is utopian and just as unrealizable as its antithesis, a collective based solely on altruism. Modern capitalism rests on an unsustainable attachment to one of these poles and it will take a social

revolution to restore a humane balance. If we were not blinded by ideology, we would recognize that the system of *prestations* survives in our societies—in weddings and at Christmas, in friendly societies and more bureaucratic forms of insurance, even in wage contracts and the welfare state. With regard to the economy, Mauss who, as we saw, had already claimed that the *kula* valuables are money, takes Malinowski to task for reproducing in his typology of transactions the ideological opposition between commercial self-interest and the free gift.

There are two prerequisites for being human: we must each learn to be self-reliant to a high degree and to belong to others, merging our identities in a bewildering variety of social relationships. Much of modern ideology emphasizes how problematic it is to be both self-interested and mutual. Yet the two sides are often inseparable in practice and some societies, by encouraging private and public interests to coincide, have managed to integrate them more effectively than ours. Human institutions everywhere are founded on the unity of individual and society, freedom and obligation, self-interest and concern for others. The pure types of selfish and generous economic action obscure the complex interplay between our individuality and belonging in subtle ways to others.

The economic movement from below that he advocated in his political journalism—syndicalism, cooperatives, mutual insurance—is a secular version of what can be found in archaic societies. Gift-exchange and the movement for cooperative socialism are all founded on ‘total social facts’, in the sense that they bring into play the whole of society and all its institutions—legal, economic, religious, and aesthetic. This is the challenge they pose for sociological method and for politics too. Perhaps the value of *The Gift* may be usefully restricted to its role as a precursor of the mature ethnographic science that anthropology later became. It certainly cannot be read as a charter for contrasting the paired ideal types, ‘gift economy’ and ‘market (or commodity) economy’ (see David Graeber in this issue). Whatever the differences between *prestations* and sale contracts, Mauss went out of his way to emphasize that the foundations of human exchange are universal. Capitalism has been built on an unsustainable and extreme version. The presence of other economic mechanisms in our societies has been hidden from view and marginalized by the dominant form. It is therefore both an intellectual and a political task to show what else there is and to make possible a new moral emphasis in economic life and law.

While *The Gift* stands alone as an intellectual exercise, when he wrote it Marcel Mauss was intensely active on all fronts at once, academic, political and journalistic, in what turned out to be the peak years of his engagement with society, the early 1920s. Perhaps it is not essential to read his financial journalism in order to understand his greatest essay, written and published at exactly the same time. But I would argue that they are both indispensable to gaining an effective grasp of the man. Certainly the dynamic understanding that he brought to the exchange rate crisis helps me to

understand why he was at once enthused by and critical of Malinowski's account of the *kula*. Does it all add up to a coherent 'economic vision', placing Mauss on a par with Keynes or even Polanyi, with both of whom he has much in common? Perhaps not. But if we ask what relevance he might have to our own times of economic crisis, investigation of his essay in the context of his life and times would surely help us better to understand our own. In that sense, Mauss lives.

## Postscript

Gillian Tett, a *Financial Times* journalist with a doctorate in social anthropology from Cambridge, has published an extraordinary account of the economic crisis that has broken over the last few years (Tett, 2009). She tells the story of the specific origin of credit derivatives, their subsequent perversion and the financial disaster that they brought down on all our heads. She warned against the dangers of massive growth in the volume of 'credit default swaps' and 'collateral debt obligations' long before the crisis broke (and was chastised for doing so). The book was a best-seller.

Tett's account shares some of the qualities of Mauss's journalism: forward-looking, analytical and personal, with a keen sense of history and a desire to educate the people. The common people of different nations may, thanks to her persistent and imaginative efforts, get to know better 'how they can have control over themselves—without the use of words, formulas or myths'. She generously acknowledges her anthropological training, of which Mauss was undoubtedly the leading pioneer in his own country, as having given her the vision and method to see what most other professionals could not. The *Année sociologique* group shared a sense that intellectual progress was a result of and stimulus to social improvement. Gillian Tett's example shows how the two sides of Mauss's endeavour, especially as he realized them in those crowded years after the war, might someday be brought together.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fournier 2006: 209-212; see also his edition of Mauss's *Écrits politiques* (1997: 477-504; 571-691; 150 out of 700 pages, over a fifth of the book!

<sup>2</sup> See Hann and Hart (2011).