

Give It Away

David Graeber

2008

Have you noticed how there aren't any new French intellectuals any more? There was a veritable flood in the late '70s and early '80s: Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Kristeva, Lyotard, de Certeau ... but there has been almost no one since. Trendy academics and intellectual hipsters have been forced to endlessly recycle theories now 20 or 30 years old, or turn to countries like Italy or even Slovenia for dazzling meta-theory.

Pioneering French anthropologist Marcel Mauss studied "gift economies" like those of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia. His conclusions were startling.

There are a lot of reasons for this. One has to do with politics in France itself, where there has been a concerted effort on the part of media elites to replace real intellectuals with American-style empty-headed pundits. Still, they have not been completely successful. More important, French intellectual life has become much more politically engaged. In the U.S. press, there has been a near blackout on cultural news from France since the great strike movement of 1995, when France was the first nation to definitively reject the "American model" for the economy, and refused to begin dismantling its welfare state. In the American press, France immediately became the silly country, vainly trying to duck the tide of history.

Of course this in itself is hardly going to faze the sort of Americans who read Deleuze and Guattari. What American academics expect from France is an intellectual high, the ability to feel one is participating in wild, radical ideas demonstrating the inherent violence within Western conceptions of truth or humanity, that sort of thing but in ways that do not imply any program of political action; or, usually, any responsibility to act at all. It's easy to see how a class of people who are considered almost entirely irrelevant both by political elites and by 99 percent of the general population might feel this way. In other words, while the U.S. media represent France as silly, U.S. academics seek out those French thinkers who seem to fit the bill.

As a result, some of the most interesting scholars in France today you never hear about at all. One such is a group of intellectuals who go by the rather unwieldy name of Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales, or MAUSS, and who have dedicated themselves to a systematic attack on the philosophical underpinnings of economic theory. The group take their inspiration from the great early-20th century French sociologist Marcel Mauss, whose most famous work, *The Gift* (1925), was perhaps the most magnificent refutation of the assumptions behind economic theory ever written. At a time when "the free market" is being rammed down everyone's throat as both a natural and inevitable product of human nature, Mauss' work which

demonstrated not only that most non-Western societies did not work on anything resembling market principles, but that neither do most modern Westerners is more relevant than ever. While Francophile American scholars seem unable to come up with much of anything to say about the rise of global neoliberalism, the MAUSS group is attacking its very foundations.

A word of background. Marcel Mauss was born in 1872 to an Orthodox Jewish family in Vosges. His uncle, Émile Durkheim, is considered the founder of modern sociology. Durkheim surrounded himself with a circle of brilliant young acolytes, among whom Mauss was appointed to study religion. The circle, however, was shattered by World War I; many died in the trenches, including Durkheim's son, and Durkheim himself died of grief shortly thereafter. Mauss was left to pick up the pieces.

By all accounts, though, Mauss was never taken completely seriously in his role of heir apparent; a man of extraordinary erudition (he knew at least a dozen languages, including Sanskrit, Maori and classical Arabic), he still, somehow, lacked the gravity expected of a grand professeur. A former amateur boxer, he was a burly man with a playful, rather silly manner, the sort of person always juggling a dozen brilliant ideas rather than building great philosophical systems. He spent his life working on at least five different books (on prayer, on nationalism, on the origins of money, etc.), none of which he ever finished. Still, he succeeded in training a new generation of sociologists and inventing French anthropology more or less single-handedly, as well as in publishing a series of extraordinarily innovative essays, just about each one of which has generated an entirely new body of social theory all by itself.

Mauss was also a revolutionary socialist. From his student days on he was a regular contributor to the left press, and remained most of his life an active member of the French cooperative movement. He founded and for many years helped run a consumer co-op in Paris; and was often sent on missions to make contact with the movement in other countries (for which purpose he spent time in Russia after the revolution). Mauss was not a Marxist, though. His socialism was more in the tradition of Robert Owen or Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: He considered Communists and Social Democrats to be equally misguided in believing that society could be transformed primarily through government action. Rather, the role of government, he felt, was to provide the legal framework for a socialism that had to be built from the ground up, by creating alternative institutions.

The Russian revolution thus left him profoundly ambivalent. While exhilarated by prospects of a genuine socialist experiment, he was outraged by the Bolsheviks' systematic use of terror, their suppression of democratic institutions, and most of all by their "cynical doctrine that the end justifies the means," which, Mauss concluded, was really just the amoral, rational calculus of the marketplace, slightly transposed.

Mauss' essay on "the gift" was, more than anything, his response to events in Russia particularly Lenin's New Economic Policy of 1921, which abandoned earlier attempts to abolish commerce. If the market could not simply be legislated away, even in Russia, probably the least monetarized European society, then clearly, Mauss concluded, revolutionaries were going to have to start thinking a lot more seriously about what this "market" actually was, where it came from, and what a viable alternative to it might actually be like. It was time to bring the results of historical and ethnographic research to bear.

Mauss' conclusions were startling. First of all, almost everything that "economic science" had to say on the subject of economic history turned out to be entirely untrue. The universal assumption of free market enthusiasts, then as now, was that what essentially drives human beings is a

desire to maximize their pleasures, comforts and material possessions (their “utility”), and that all significant human interactions can thus be analyzed in market terms. In the beginning, goes the official version, there was barter. People were forced to get what they wanted by directly trading one thing for another. Since this was inconvenient, they eventually invented money as a universal medium of exchange. The invention of further technologies of exchange (credit, banking, stock exchanges) was simply a logical extension.

The problem was, as Mauss was quick to note, there is no reason to believe a society based on barter has ever existed. Instead, what anthropologists were discovering were societies where economic life was based on utterly different principles, and most objects moved back and forth as gifts and almost everything we would call “economic” behavior was based on a pretense of pure generosity and a refusal to calculate exactly who had given what to whom. Such “gift economies” could on occasion become highly competitive, but when they did it was in exactly the opposite way from our own: Instead of vying to see who could accumulate the most, the winners were the ones who managed to give the most away. In some notorious cases, such as the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, this could lead to dramatic contests of liberality, where ambitious chiefs would try to outdo one another by distributing thousands of silver bracelets, Hudson Bay blankets or Singer sewing machines, and even by destroying wealth sinking famous heirlooms in the ocean, or setting huge piles of wealth on fire and daring their rivals to do the same.

All of this may seem very exotic. But as Mauss also asked: How alien is it, really? Is there not something odd about the very idea of gift-giving, even in our own society? Why is it that, when one receives a gift from a friend (a drink, a dinner invitation, a compliment), one feels somehow obliged to reciprocate in kind? Why is it that a recipient of generosity often somehow feels reduced if he or she cannot? Are these not examples of universal human feelings, which are somehow discounted in our own society but in others were the very basis of the economic system? And is it not the existence of these very different impulses and moral standards, even in a capitalist system such as our own, that is the real basis for the appeal of alternative visions and socialist policies? Mauss certainly felt so.

In a lot of ways Mauss’ analysis bore a marked resemblance to Marxist theories about alienation and reification being developed by figures like György Lukács around the same time. In gift economies, Mauss argued, exchanges do not have the impersonal qualities of the capitalist marketplace: In fact, even when objects of great value change hands, what really matters is the relations between the people; exchange is about creating friendships, or working out rivalries, or obligations, and only incidentally about moving around valuable goods. As a result everything becomes personally charged, even property: In gift economies, the most famous objects of wealth heirloom necklaces, weapons, feather cloaks always seem to develop personalities of their own.

In a market economy it’s exactly the other way around. Transactions are seen simply as ways of getting one’s hands on useful things; the personal qualities of buyer and seller should ideally be completely irrelevant. As a consequence everything, even people, start being treated as if they were things too. (Consider in this light the expression “goods and services.”) The main difference with Marxism, however, is that while Marxists of his day still insisted on a bottom-line economic determinism, Mauss held that in past market-less societies and by implication, in any truly humane future one “the economy,” in the sense of an autonomous domain of action concerned solely with the creation and distribution of wealth, and which proceeded by its own, impersonal logic, would not even exist.

Mauss was never entirely sure what his practical conclusions were. The Russian experience convinced him that buying and selling could not simply be eliminated in a modern society, at least “in the foreseeable future,” but a market ethos could. Work could be co-operatized, effective social security guaranteed and, gradually, a new ethos created whereby the only possible excuse for accumulating wealth was the ability to give it all away. The result: a society whose highest values would be “the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast.”

Some of this may seem awfully naïve from today’s perspective, but Mauss’ core insights have, if anything, become even more relevant now than they were 75 years ago now that economic “science” has become, effectively, the revealed religion of the modern age. So it seemed, anyway, to the founders of MAUSS.

The idea for MAUSS was born in 1980. The project is said to have emerged from a conversation over lunch between a French sociologist, Alain Caillé, and a Swiss anthropologist, Gérald Berthoud. They had just sat through several days of an interdisciplinary conference on the subject of gifts, and after reviewing the papers, they came to the shocked realization that it did not seem to have occurred to a single scholar in attendance that a significant motive for giving gifts might be, say, generosity, or genuine concern for another person’s welfare. In fact, the scholars at the conference invariably assumed that “gifts” do not really exist: Scratch deep enough behind any human action, and you’ll always discover some selfish, calculating strategy. Even more oddly, they assumed that this selfish strategy was always, necessarily, the real truth of the matter; that it was more real somehow than any other motive in which it might be entangled. It was as if to be scientific, to be “objective” meant to be completely cynical. Why?

Caillé ultimately came to blame Christianity. Ancient Rome still preserved something of the older ideal of aristocratic open-handedness: Roman magnates built public gardens and monuments, and vied to sponsor the most magnificent games. But Roman generosity was also quite obviously meant to wound: One favorite habit was scattering gold and jewels before the masses to watch them tussle in the mud to scoop them up. Early Christians, for obvious reasons, developed their notion of charity in direct reaction to such obnoxious practices. True charity was not based on any desire to establish superiority, or favor, or indeed any egoistic motive whatsoever. To the degree that the giver could be said to have gotten anything out of the deal, it wasn’t a real gift.

But this in turn led to endless problems, since it was very difficult to conceive of a gift that did not benefit the giver in any way. Even an entirely selfless act would win one points with God. There began the habit of searching every act for the degree to which it could be said to mask some hidden selfishness, and then assuming that this selfishness is what’s really important. One sees the same move reproduced so consistently in modern social theory. Economists and Christian theologians agree that if one takes pleasure in an act of generosity, it is somehow less generous. They just disagree on the moral implications. To counteract this very perverse logic, Mauss emphasized the “pleasure” and “joy” of giving: In traditional societies, there was not assumed to be any contradiction between what we would call self-interest (a phrase that, he noted, could not even be translated into most human languages) and concern for others; the whole point of the traditional gift is that it furthers both at the same time.

These, anyway, were the kind of issues that first engaged the small, interdisciplinary group of French and French-speaking scholars (Caillé, Berthoud, Ahmet Insel, Serge Latouche, Pauline Taieb) who were to become MAUSS. Actually, the group itself began as a journal, called *Revue du*

MAUSS a very small journal, printed sloppily on bad paper whose authors conceived it as much as an in-joke as a venue for serious scholarship, the flagship journal for a vast international movement that did not then exist. Caillé wrote manifestos; Insel penned fantasies about great international anti-utilitarian conventions of the future. Articles on economics alternated with snatches from Russian novelists. But gradually, the movement did begin to materialize. By the mid-'90s, MAUSS had become an impressive network of scholars ranging from sociologists and anthropologists to economists, historians and philosophers, from Europe, North Africa and the Middle East whose ideas had become represented in three different journals and a prominent book series (all in French) backed up by annual conferences.

Since the strikes of 1995 and the election of a Socialist government, Mauss' own works have undergone a considerable revival in France, with the publication of a new biography and a collection of his political writings. At the same time, the MAUSS group themselves have become evermore explicitly political. In 1997, Caillé released a broadside called "30 Theses for a New Left," and the MAUSS group have begun dedicating their annual conferences to specific policy issues. Their answer to the endless calls for France to adopt the "American model" and dismantle its welfare state, for example, was to begin promulgating an economic idea originally proposed by American revolutionary Tom Paine: the guaranteed national income. The real way to reform welfare policy is not to begin stripping away social benefits, but to reframe the whole conception of what a state owes its citizens. Let us jettison welfare and unemployment programs, they said. But instead, let us create a system where every French citizen is guaranteed the same starting income (say, \$20,000, supplied directly by the government) and then the rest can be up to them.

It is hard to know exactly what to make of the Maussian left, particularly insofar as Mauss is being promoted now, in some quarters, as an alternative to Marx. It would be easy to write them off as simply super-charged social democrats, not really interested in the radical transformation of society. Caillé's "30 Theses," for example, agree with Mauss in conceding the inevitability of some kind of market — but still, like him, look forward to the abolition of capitalism, here defined as the pursuit of financial profit as an end in itself. On another level, though, the Maussian attack on the logic of the market is more profound, and more radical, than anything else now on the intellectual horizon. It is hard to escape the impression that this is precisely why American intellectuals, particularly those who believe themselves to be the most wild-eyed radicals, willing to deconstruct almost any concept except greed or selfishness, simply don't know what to make of the Maussians why, in fact, their work has been almost completely ignored.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber
Give It Away
2008

Retrieved on 14 November 2010 from www.freebay.net
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License. See
creativecommons.org for details.

theanarchistlibrary.org