

Rioting & Looting: As a Modern-Day Form of Potlatch

Neal Keating

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A spectre haunts the modern world. It is the spectre of the gift. Everywhere the fight goes on, to get people to respect property, and to accept the miseries that come with such respect, such as work, destitution, and injustice. It is an endless fight by necessity. The minute it ceases, or weakens (e.g., gets caught on videotape), people break out into activities of an altogether different nature. They riot, and they loot. They relieve things of their fixed commodity values. The redistribution of these relieved things does not take the form of a sale, nor even a trade. Without a fixed price, they can only be considered as gifts.

Many societies throughout the world practiced their entire economic activities along the lines of gift-exchanges, the most famous of which is the potlatch.¹ As the modern societies continue to approach total collapse, we see an interesting trend developing. Potlatching is making a comeback! This was recently demonstrated in 1992 in South-Central Los Angeles, when more than twelve-thousand people took to the streets to express themselves through the destruction of great amounts of accumulated wealth.

Dan Cranmer's Potlatch

Around Christmas in 1921, a Nimkish Kwakiutl fellow named Dan Cranmer hosted a six-day potlatch at Village Island, near Alert Bay in the Canadian province of British Columbia.² The occasion was that of his marriage. Cranmer, being true to his Kwakiutl traditions, planned to celebrate the event with a long feast during which he would give everyone gifts. Some three-hundred guests (fellow Kwakiutls) were on hand to witness and receive Cranmer's giving away of all his accumulated wealth.

Cranmer reportedly started out on the first day by receiving much of this wealth from his wife's family (like a dowry). That night there was a dance. The next day he gave away twenty-four canoes, pool tables for two chiefs, four gasoline boats, and another pool table. He gave away blankets, gaslights, violins and guitars, kitchen utensils and three-hundred trunks. Women were given bracelets, shawls and dresses. Sweaters and shirts were given to youngsters, and coins were thrown in the air for children to collect. Another dance was held afterwards. He did not remember what he did on the third day (perhaps he was in a swoon). During the fourth day he gave away sewing machines, gramophones, bedsteads, and bureaus, along with more boxes and trunks. On the fifth day he gave away cash. And on the sixth he gave away about 1000 sacks of flour, each worth three dollars (a lot of money in 1921), as well as some sugar. It was one of the largest potlatches on record.

Although it sounds like a good time for everyone, Cranmer's potlatch was in fact against the law, and he, along with fifty other Kwakiutls, had criminal charges brought against them as a

¹ (1990) Mauss, Marcel: *The Gift*, New York, Norton. see note 13 on p.86, as well note 209 on p.122. The word potlatch derives from the Nootka *patshatl*. The Kwakiutl term was P!Esa', "to flatten" [one's rival], or it can mean "baskets being emptied," "feeder," or "place of being satiated." The two general meanings are gift and food, which as Mauss points out, are not mutually exclusive. In addition there are several terms distinguishing types of potlatches. For example, the Tsimshian distinguish a *yaok*., which is a large intertribal potlatch, from all the other kinds of potlatches. The Haida spoke of a *walgat*, a funeral potlatch, and the *sika*, a potlatch held for other reasons. The Kwakiutl equivalent of *yaok* is *maxwa*.

² (1991) Cole, Douglas: "Underground Potlatch" *Natural History* 1991, volume 10, pp.50-53. See also (1992) Loo, Tina: "Dan Cranmer's potlatch" *Canadian Historical Review*, June 1992, volume 73, pp.125-141. See also (1966) Codere, Helen: "Daniel Cranmer's Potlatch" in *Indians of the North Pacific Coast*, edited by Tom McFeat, University of Washington.

result. Twenty-two of those people were imprisoned for two months, and the rest were given suspended sentences on the condition that they surrender all their potlatch gear, which included dance masks, ceremonial whistles, and plaques of beaten copper (known as “coppers”).

The law Cranmer had violated is known as Canada’s Indian Act of 1885, which specifically made any potlatching illegal. The reasoning behind this act was produced by a typical blend of missionary and governmental rationales which had as their goal the assimilation of Aborigines into modern society, and the extinction of their cultures. The motives behind these goals were hardly just misguided altruism. In reality, The Canadian government (as did the American government) was seeking the absolute extension of the rule of property. Potlatching was a threat to this rule because among other things, potlatching was an economic system of distribution that followed along communal lines. It took commodities and turned them into gifts, thus mocking the entire system of capitalist production. Potlatch destroys property. It is the old story of the “lazy Indian,” the one who is indolent and thriftless. The big project was figuring out how to get these people to work. Forcing practices of private property on them seemed the obvious choice. Potlatching was perceived by Canadian legislators as a “mania,” an “insane exuberance of generosity”³ that had to be stopped. Cranmer might as well have gone a-looting.

The Nature of Potlatch

Potlatching is but one form of an economic system that is based not on barter or sale, but is based on compulsory gift-giving. We now know that various forms of the gift economy existed all over the world.

Most of the Aboriginal tribes living along the Northwest Pacific coast of North America potlatched.⁴ Formally speaking, a potlatch was a gathering of people on any number of occasions, including birth, puberty, marriage or death. During these gatherings there would be feasting, dancing, and the redistribution of property or its destruction.

In these societies, children were raised with the idea of the gift firmly implanted in their worldview. For example, Franz Boas observed that when a Kwakiutl child is born, it is first given the name of the birthplace, which it keeps for about a year. Then a relative of the child gives a paddle or a mat to each of the clan members to mark the occasion of his second name. When a boy reaches puberty, he takes his third name, by distributing gifts to everyone in his clan. It is in effect, his first potlatch. He is usually assisted in this ceremony by relatives, especially the nobility.⁵

During the bigger potlatches, the Yaoks and the Maxwas, property would be distributed by the host to his guests in between the dancing and the feasting. This was the general mechanism by which he acquired rank and status within his society. The status of the host gift-giver was directly proportional to his capacity for gift-giving. The greater the gift, the greater the status of the giver. But wait! As Mary Douglas put it, there are no free gifts! Every gift given carried with it the obligation to reciprocate, often with 100% interest. Today’s potlatch guest would be tomorrow’s potlatch host. Potlatching thus generated rivalry between status-seekers (typically

³ see Cole (above).

⁴ These include the Kwakiutl, the Tlingit, the Haida, the Tsimshian, the Nootka, the Coast Salish, and the Chinook.

⁵ (1966) Boas, Franz “The Potlatch” in *Indians of the North Pacific Coast*, edited by Tom McFeat, University of Washington.

the big chiefs) as each one tried to outdo the other in their capacity to give everything away. At times these contests would escalate to the point where the distribution of property became inadequate for the expression of a chief's disregard for wealth and property. The next step would be to actually destroy property, often by burning it up. He might burn up his canoes, or his house, or the entire village. He might break his coppers and throw them in the sea. He may cut the throat of his slaves. All this he would do in full view of his guests, and usually with the complete approbation of his clan. Throughout the goal was to flatten his rival's rank and enlarge his own. The "winner" of such a contest is not just the individual potlatcher, but also the dead from whom the potlatcher claims hereditary title, as well as the living clan of the potlatcher.

Marcel Mauss first noted the underlying principles of the gift in Northwest Coast Potlatch and then discovered its occurrence in varying forms at diverse locations, including Malaysia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Africa, North America, ancient Rome, as well as the ancient Indo-European world. Because of the rivalrous and ecstatic nature of potlatch, what Benedict thought of as the Dionysian ethos,⁶ Mauss referred to Potlatch as an "agonistic"⁷ form of the gift economy. His general characterization of the gift economy is as a "system of total services." He describes this system as:

"First it is not individuals, but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. The contracting parties are legal entities: clans, tribes, and families who confront and oppose one another either in groups who meet face to face in one spot, or through their chiefs, or in both these ways at once. Moreover, what they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract."⁸

The central question posed by Mauss is this: "What rule of legality and self-interest [in a gift economy]...compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?"⁹

What Mauss demonstrates and Bataille greatly amplifies is that the essence of this contract holds that things contain an animated force, and that this force produces both social solidarity as well as the obligation to reciprocate. The Maori word for it is *Hau*, or the spirit of the thing given. Tamati Ranaipiri, a Maori, explained the nature of the *Hau*:

"Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (*taonga*) and that you give me this article. You give it to me without setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me something as payment in return (*utu*). He makes a present to me of something (*Taonga*). Now, this *Taonga* that he gives me is the spirit (*Hau*) of the *Taonga* that I had received from you and given to him. The *Taonga* that I received for

⁶ (1961) Benedict, Ruth: *Patterns of Culture*, Houghton Mifflin: Boston.

⁷ Mauss, pp.7.

⁸ Mauss, pp.5.

⁹ Mauss, pp.3.

the *Taonga* (which came from you) must be returned to you. It would not be fair (*tika*) on my part to keep these *Taonga* for myself, whether they were desirable (*rawe*) or undesirable (*kino*). I must give them to you because they are a *Hau* of the *Taonga* that you gave me. If I kept this other *Taonga* for myself, serious harm might befall me, even death. This is the nature of the *Hau*, the *Hau* of personal property, the *Hau* of the *Taonga*, the *Hau* of the forest.”¹⁰

Gift Economy vs Modern Economy

For the longest time, economic evolution was thought of as a single one-way progression from barter to sale and money, and lastly evolving into credit. Those societies that did not display any of these characteristics were thought of as backward, simple, and without any kind of market. However, the discovery of gift economies calls this entire trajectory into question. For gift economies are largely devoid of barter or sale, yet they operate on a complex credit system. Furthermore they definitely operate within a market setting. It is the rules of exchange that are different. Finally, the incentives of self-interest are fully operational in gift economies. The absolute sovereignty of the individual self is maintained in a system that can only be called communal.

It is precisely the *Hau* that modern economics cannot recognize, and this is the critical difference between the two systems. The *Hau*, is not just a superstitious fancy, but is in fact an ecological ethic of total interrelatedness which is supported by contemporary physics and biology, most notably in Chaos theory, with its well-known statement that the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings in China today will affect the weather over Seattle next week.¹¹ Perhaps the *Hau* is best expressed through Bataille’s theory of General Economy. This theory starts from a general perspective: how is life possible? Is it possible to speak of the flow of living matter in general? Bataille explains that “A movement is produced on the surface of the globe that results from the circulation of energy at this point in the universe.” The connection with economics, is that “the economic activity of men appropriates this movement, making use of the resulting possibilities for certain ends.” The problem, especially for modern economics, is that this movement has a pattern and laws of which the men who appropriate it are unacquainted.¹²

This movement is the animating force, what Dylan Thomas called “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” Bataille’s basic observation is that all organisms are provided with more energy than they need to stay alive. This surplus of energy (which he terms wealth) can be used for the growth of the organism, or system. If the system can no longer grow, or if the surplus cannot be absorbed into the growth, it must be destroyed, spent and lost, one way or another, willingly or unwillingly, and entirely without profit. This is what is willingly and lavishly done in potlatch. While this might seem straightforward enough, it is anathema to classical economic theories such as drive modern economies. It is not rational. It is paradoxical, but so is life.

In Bataille’s theory, life on Earth is first and foremost characterized by the superabundance of energy freely given to it by the Sun. This superabundance carries over into the everyday activities of humans. The problem of life then is not that of scarcity, but of excess. Organisms have had to evolve mechanisms for squandering and destroying this excess, this accursed share. These are

¹⁰ Mauss, pp.11.

¹¹ (1987) Gleick, James: *Chaos*. Viking: New York.

¹² (1988) Bataille, Georges: *The Accursed Share*. Zone: New York.

mechanisms of luxury. Eating, death and sexual reproduction constitute the three luxuries of nature. As any cellular biologist can tell you, none of these three luxuries are necessary for there to be life.

If excess is a basic biological factor, then we have to deal with it one way or another. There appear to be two basic responses that humans have made: either reciprocating the excess, by adapting their lifestyles to the condition of luxurious exuberance, or by somehow eliminating the conditions of continual excess.

The conquest of nature that was attempted in North America (sixteenth century up to present) by the nascent modern economies can be seen as one long attempt at erasing such excess. In this case it was the excess of wilderness, as well as those people who were integrated in this excess, with their “insane exuberances of generosity” that were the potlatches, to say nothing of the hundreds of other “pagan” practices throughout the continent. Such practices were generally thought of by the missionaries and the various governments as preventive of acquiring “civilization.” They were probably right. Clastres demonstrated that stateless societies generally deployed built-in sociocultural mechanisms that prevented the development of coercive forces such as needed for the existence of the State.¹³

In contrast, the inclusion of the *Hau* in one’s economic considerations by definition demands a reciprocal participation in a wild, luxurious exuberant world peopled by interrelating creatures that are not even always humans. For humans are not the only ones in “the flow of living matter in general.”¹⁴ It is no surprise that the dead play a significant, if not central, role in virtually every potlatch. Here we arrive at a different understanding of wealth (and perhaps the meaning of life), not as the force or right to continually acquire and accumulate energy, but as the ability to squander and consume its excess in a festive way. From the standpoint of modern economy, this appears insane. Yet from the standpoint of both gift economy and general economy, the endless development of productive forces (which is, after all, the goal of the modern economy) is not only mad, it is doomed. It does not fully reckon with the energy it seeks to appropriate, and will likely be consumed by it as a result.

In the modern economy, surplus value (*i.e.*, energy) is not publicly squandered in a collective festival or sacrifice in which all take part. It is instead accumulated by the small number of people who constitute the upper classes. This accumulation is then appropriated for further development of productive forces, which in turn generate ever greater amounts of surplus, and for which a further accumulation is attempted. When these attempts fail, as they constantly do today, the pressures of the surplus begin to burst the seams of the system. At those times, there is nothing to enhance solidarity. There is no *Hau*. There are only armies of police to hold together a society bereft of any other commonly-held self-interests. The society undergoes what it could otherwise bring about in a better way. Thus, instead of regular communal destructions of property (*e.g.*, burning down the schools every five years), we have international wars.

The history of the State, or “civilization,” is the history of such accumulation. Even Henry Kissinger has been able to see that “every civilization that has ever existed has ultimately collapsed.” Could it be that the reason is because these societies closed their eyes and souls to the excess of nature and in so doing somehow hoped to overcome it?

¹³ (1987) Clastres, Pierre: *Society Against the State*. Zone: New York.

¹⁴ See Bataille (above). pp.23.

The Gift-Exchange at Christmas

It is not too gross a generalization to say that the gift-exchange at Christmas is a faint, schizy echo of those human epochs when the total system of social, cultural and economic exchanges took the form of gift-exchanges. As such it is something of a mockery of what the gift is all about. It is small wonder that suicides occur with greater frequency during Christmas. It is generally at this time when people are culturally compelled to make some kind of attempt at human intimacy, some kind of effort to express or feel the interrelatedness between people. But because of the nature of human interactions in the context of modern economies which prevail during the rest of the year — these efforts are usually consigned to either the paltry exchange of commodities, or the rather painful realization that there is very little intimacy possible in the given circumstances. People may mean well when they engage in reciprocal gift exchanges at this time, but all they are really exchanging are images of reciprocity.

Rioting and Looting as a Return to Our Potlatch Roots

Americans today generally think the intentional destruction of property is a bad thing. When rioters and looters take to the streets, people generally agree that society is breaking down. Those people caught rioting and looting get put in prison. Laws are made against such actions. The same goes for the rest of the modern world. Yet within the context of gift economies like potlatch, such actions were not only held in high regard, they enhanced social solidarity. Although the contexts in which potlatching went on are very different from the context in which the L.A. riots of 1992 took place, there is a common ground. That ground is the necessity to squander the surplus. In one case the forcing pressure is custom, in the other it is injustice. The point is that they are both pressures demanding the destruction of property through its redistribution or outright elimination. This pressure will make itself felt one way or another.

With the knowledge of the gift and the accursed share, it seems reasonable that the gift economy is a far more preferable mechanism for our material activities. It offers the advantages of individual autonomy, a flexible market for exchange, but without all the problems that come with commodities, like work. Going from here to there will certainly be tricky, but I suggest we start with a lesson from the Kwakiutl. The big chief is not made so by force, nor by right. He is made by rank and status, which he acquires through a demonstrated superior disregard for material wealth. On those grounds I suggest that the twelve-thousand or so people who were arrested for rioting, and especially looting, be made into potlatch chiefs. Furthermore, I suggest that an obligation to reciprocate is incumbent upon the rest of us. The South-Central potlatchers threw a grand maxwa. Who will throw the next potlatch?

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