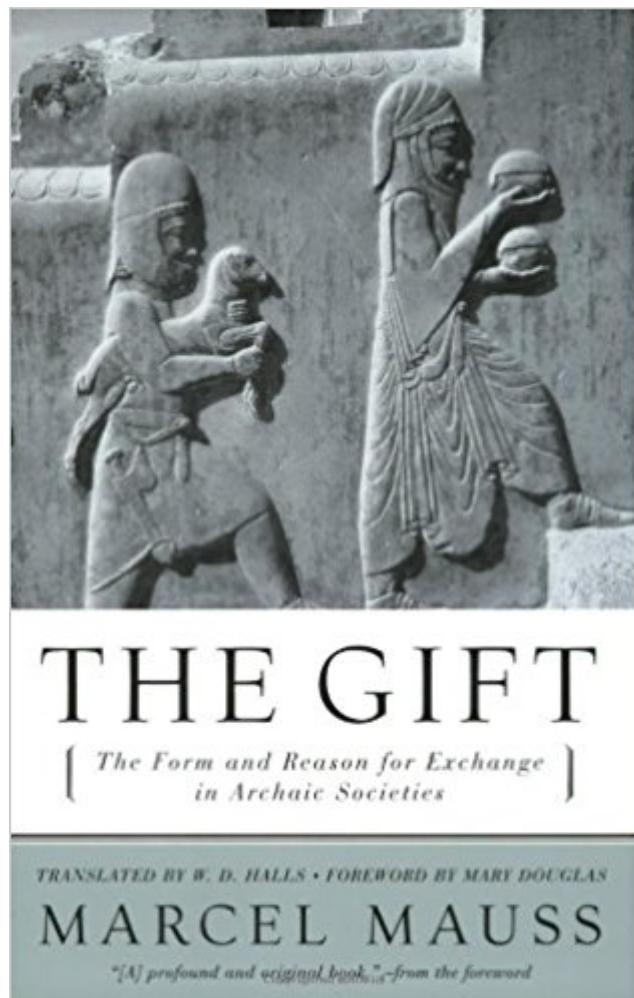


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The Gift: The Form And Reason For Exchange In Archaic Societies



Synopsis

Since its first publication in English in 1954, *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss's groundbreaking study of the relation between forms of exchange and social structure, has been acclaimed as a classic among anthropology texts. A brilliant example of the comparative method, "The Gift" presents the first systematic study of the custom widespread in primitive societies from ancient Rome to present-day Melanesia of exchanging gifts. The gift is a perfect example of what Mauss calls a total social phenomenon, since it involves legal, economic, moral, religious, aesthetic, and other dimensions. He sees the gift exchange as related to individuals and groups as much as to the objects themselves, and his analysis calls into question the social conventions and economic systems that had been taken for granted for so many years. In a modern translation, introduced by distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas, "The Gift" is essential reading for students of social anthropology and sociology.

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Customer Reviews

In his *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss attempts to explain and understand gifts in primitive societies. Mauss first decides to show that the motives behind giving gifts are more complicated than commonly believed to be. In modern day society, gifts are often thought of as something given out of good will and without the expectation of something in return. Mauss shows us that in many tribal and native cultures, this is not necessarily true. In discussing the Maori, he says, "They had a kind of exchange system, or rather one of giving presents that must ultimately either be reciprocated or given back" (10). The principle of gift giving is governed by the concept of mana, which is the authority, honor,

and prestige derived from the wealth and glory of being a superior gift giver. One must give gifts in order to maintain and increase mana and reciprocates them in order to prevent oneself from losing it. The obligations to give and receive are both very important. To reject a gift leads to two problems. Initially, Mauss states that to do so "is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality" (13). To reject such an important bond in a society that so heavily values communal identity is "tantamount to declaring war" (13). The second problem is that of losing mana and being viewed as afraid to accept gifts because one is unable to reciprocate them. The concept of gift giving as one that has the motives of power and authority involved displaces the common belief of gift giving. Durkheim's influence on Mauss is apparent in Mauss' discussion of the contract and sacred qualities.

Marcel Mauss' "The Gift" (1925) is one of the most influential pieces of anthropology written in the twentieth century. It explores the economies of pre-capitalist cultures and peoples from several different parts of the world, including Melanesia, Polynesia, and the Pacific Northwest. This specific edition, with an introduction by Mary Douglas (a magnificent anthropologist in her own right), is especially recommended, and sheds a tremendous amount of light on Mauss' sometimes unclear conclusions. In fact, if you can't read the book, Douglas' introduction stands by itself as a wonderful summary of Mauss' ideas. For those interested in the history of anthropology and its development over time, Mauss was one of Durkheim's greatest students (Durkheim was also Mauss' uncle) and his influence can be seen quite a bit in this work. While Durkheim believed in the individual and the potential for individual action, he was a vocal critic of individualism per se. For example, he recognized that it couldn't explain rule-governed action, a phenomenon rife in every culture. Durkheim's positivism is also on display; Mauss never feels his point is made unless he has shown it several times over with people from different parts of the world. The main idea here is the centrality of what Mauss calls the "gift." What is a gift? It is an item given within a complex set of social relations and institutions which at the same time comprises those relations and institutions. Mauss also emphasizes that most all cultures see gifts as obligatory and mutual. "Even the idea of a pure gift is a contradiction.

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