
Books/Book chapters

Social Sciences

2010

Gift Relationship

Matt Bowden

Technological University Dublin, Matt.Bowden@TUDublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschsslbk>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bowden, M. (2010) The Gift Relationship, in Anheier, H.K. and Toepler, S. (eds) International Encyclopedia of Civil Society, pp.759-763. New York: Springer

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Sciences at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

The Gift Relationship

Matt Bowden

School of Social Sciences and Law
Dublin Institute of Technology

Introduction

The *gift relationship* is a foundational concept in our understanding of civil society. Because it embodies the idea of exchange of goodwill between actors the concept is central to our appreciation of its constituent concepts of trust, reciprocity and solidarity. Furthermore, we know from the literature on social capital that everyday exchange and reciprocation between actors produces social ties and creates social bonds. However while crucial to social capital, the gift relation has a dark side that presents a challenge for the nature of democracy in civil society; while gifting creates ties and underpins social bonding, it also reproduces systems of power and domination. In this latter sense it may indeed be contrary to the principles of participation upon which civil society is founded. Furthermore, the practice of gifting has proved to be resilient despite social change.

To define the gift relation, three main theoretical contributions are outlined and considered: the first from Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) who emphasised the religious, symbolic and moral origins of the gift relation; the second from Richard Titmuss (1907-1973) who argued that the ethic of the gift relationship was embodied in the practice of voluntary blood donation that underpinned social citizenship; and, the third from Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) who argued that gifts constituted a form of master-slave relationship based upon internalised obligation which tied the receiver to an unrecognised system of power.

Definition: Three Contributions to the Theory of the Gift Relation

The gift relation predates the money based economy and the cultural practice of gifting has survived a number of major social transformations in human history. Marcel Mauss (1950) [1990] began his anthropological account with the idea of the gift economy being a 'system of total services' exemplified in the 'potlatch' as

practiced by the North West native American tribal groups; the Haida and the Tlingit. Here the potlatch also involved hostility and rivalry between nobles: tribal chiefs contracted on behalf of all their subjects and they engaged in the destruction of property as a challenge to visitors or neighbouring groups to reciprocate; to destroy produce or valuables in equal or greater quantities.

Mauss provided us with an exposition drawn from anthropological works throughout Polynesia and South Asia (including for instance Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islands) to demonstrate that although there were some local variations, such potlatch systems were widespread in this part of the world for a substantial period of time.

In this analysis, Mauss identified that the obligation attaching to exchange of goods carried spiritual power; the object given was endowed with a symbolic value greater than its material worth. An example of this chosen by Mauss is the Maori *Hau* which encapsulated the spirit that moved with the object. If you were given a gift and you passed it on to another, and for which you received goods as reciprocation, you were compelled to pass these on to the original source of the gift. The object was endowed with a soul and it was believed that it had a homing instinct to return to its place of origin. Harm would befall one if one did not uphold the spirit of the *Hau* (Mauss, 1950: 15-16). The spiritual power of the *Hau* thus acted as a form of external constraint upon individual actors.

According to Mauss, the potlatch involves obligation and honour on the one hand, but also status, and ultimately, freedom on the other. Trade is premised upon the money economy whereas the potlatch involves prestige. Citing Malinowski's study of the of the Trobriand Islands, Mauss draws attention to the practice of the hoarding of yams: Islanders stockpiled them not for accumulating wealth but to give them to away so as to gain prestige for their families. By virtue of its incorporation in ancient Roman, Hindu and Germanic laws the practice of gift-reciprocation from archaic societies entered into early formal contracts resulting in its survival into contemporary society.

Following his mentor Emile Durkheim, Mauss's version of the gift relation ties the practice to an objective morality. Gift and reciprocation is contrary to rationality in that it has spiritual and moral origins. An individual in is not free of obligation, nor

purely self-interested as the concept of the rational agent of both classical and contemporary liberal economics. Rather he or she acts relative to the groups and subgroups (civil society) of which they are part. Human agents practice the gift relation by virtue of our human sociability. From Mauss's version of the gift, we can conclude that our social practices cause economic effects, and not the reverse. That is not to say that the gift relation is entirely non-rational, for in Mauss's framework it involves the maximisation of status and prestige which outweighs utility and wealth based on money.

The act of giving is thus part of our social potentiality and the origin of our altruism; it connects individual action to social groups, to culture and the wider society.

Titmuss (1970) conceptualised the gift relation as a form of social altruism best expressed in systems of voluntary blood donation. Social good is about the expression of confidence in humanity; donors and beneficiaries are unknown strangers. People, he argued, 'cause good' in the act of blood donation because they express faith in the future altruism of such unknown strangers. In this context, Titmuss (1970: 243) argued that the market was an exclusionary device that separated people from their right to give. In this line of thought, there is no expectation of individualised reciprocation: one is not bound by obligation but by securing one's wellbeing in the future. This involves some degree of rational calculation as it entails securing future provision contingency.

The organisation of voluntary blood banking is a redistributive system and underlines the principles of social insurance in some social security systems. However, Titmuss's definition might be criticised for being rather one-dimensional. In this regard, Sahlins's (1974) typology of gift relations distinguished between *generalised*, *balanced*, and *negative reciprocity*. Generalised reciprocity refers to gifts where one does not have to give in order to receive; this represents the ideal of a 'pure gift' where the obligation to reciprocate is blurred and typical of that which operates in kin networks. Balanced reciprocity involves direct and immediate reciprocity between giver and receiver where goods of equal value are exchanged. Negative reciprocity refers to the maximisation of advantage by one person at the expense of the other, described by Sahlins (1974: 195) as 'the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity'.

Developing this typology, reciprocity might be considered in four senses when applied to the analysis of welfare states (Adloff and Mau, 2007: 115-116). The first of these relates to *generalised reciprocity* associated with systems of compensatory redistribution underpinning basic incomes policies where the welfare state follows a 'normative-relational' logic of solidarity between classes. The second form of *balanced reciprocity* underlines social insurance which safeguards both social status and living standards and works according to the logic of equivalence whereby benefits can be expected in correspondence with the contributions already made. A third form, *risk reciprocity* relates to the provision for the preservation of social minima based upon the logic that society accepts responsibility for social risks not caused by those affected. The fourth sense of reciprocity derives from the idea of the resocialisation of those in need, or a *reciprocity of obligation* found in residualised welfare regimes. Here, the 'deserving poor' are gifted on the basis that they should orient their behaviours to avoiding poverty. This establishes a relationship of debt and expectation on the part of the giver in that it places an onus of redress from the debtor; the recipient is expected to change their values and norms so as they can re-enter the labour market (Adloff and Mau, 2006: 117).

In the *gift to strangers* as articulated by Titmuss's deployment of the theory of the gift the notion of reciprocation is made redundant by the anonymity the exchange. This might be contrasted with staged gifting; a social ritual where the gift giving is rehearsed or stylised into moments that underline the beneficence of the donor. Adloff and Mau (2006) point out that unlike Titmuss's radical conceptualisation of the gift relation, such staged gifting where the benefactor is known, sets of 'chains of reciprocity'. In this latter sense, the gift relationship can be said to involve a process of social stratification between givers and receivers, and between the deserving and non-deserving.

That the gift relation acts as a means of stratifying groups into classes, is central in the work of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. His concern was for the ways in which the gift sets off relations of domination and subordination. Moreover, Bourdieu's sociology is one that seeks to understand actors' strategies in the context of social structures. The gift is a form of cultural practice that as a *symbolic act*

produces an unrecognised effect in shaping the dispositions of the actors involved in the exchange.

In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977) introduces the concept of *symbolic violence* in connection with exchanges of credit, gifts, and domestic labour. From his analysis of the Kabyle society in Algeria, he pointed out that to appropriate the labour of one, a master first had to tie-in or create a bond with the labourer and had to 'win' them personally. These pre-capitalist relations of domination had to be disguised or misrecognised and so personal dependence had to be transfigured for if they were not 'euphemised' they would reveal the inequality and injustices of the situation. Thus the gift acted as a symbolic form of violence because overt violence in pre-capitalist economies was not a sufficient form of domination. Thus the euphemisation of the relations of domination had to take a more invisible form and for Bourdieu, this was exemplified in the relations surrounding credit, hospitality and gifts. Those tied to masters were dominated through codes of honour, debt and gratitude. For Bourdieu, the offer-acceptance of the gift represented a shared denial by master and servant of the objective reality of the exchange relations.

In Bourdieuan theory such practices survive in the contemporary capitalist world because they have become embedded in our contemporary culture and are reproduced by a variety of institutions. The gift relation therefore is a type of practice that is played out in various *fields*: in the education field for instance, this takes the form of the passing-on of knowledge from the teacher to student; Bourdieu's point is that the gift cannot be divorced from the social relations of cultural reproduction. The legitimisation of the master-pupil relationship in schools further legitimises the system of schooling which reproduces class cultures (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Crucial is the content of the exchange and for Bourdieu this is various forms of capital; social and cultural capital are gained by the bearer of gifts; donors and benefactors strategise to maximise cultural capital, the accumulation of which is necessary in order to achieve symbolic power which is a prerequisite for legitimate domination over the receiver of the gift.

Key Issues and Future Directions

Civil society is premised upon a form of social peace reflected in the idea of the social contract. Thomas Hobbes argued that the route out of the state of nature, a war of all against all, was the quelling of individual passions and the surrendering of authority to a sovereign power; a commonwealth that guaranteed the social order so as that civil society could flourish. What Mauss had discovered was a way in which individuals and small groups could avoid the state of nature without the need for a sovereign power. The archaic societies found social peace without formal law. In this way, Mauss had established the gift as a form of political contract underpinning civil society (Sahlins, 1974).

In contemporary civil society considerable attention has returned to the network as an organisational form. Networks take many shapes ranging from the role of local networks in producing social capital, to networks of firms in achieving economies of scale and scope (see Piore and Sabel, 1984 for a discussion), and from online communities (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) to *global networks* of commercial interests and a global civil society (Holton, 2008). Over the last two decades also, there has been a growing interest the role of policy networks in governance (see for instance Rhodes and Marsh, 1992). In this context the gift relation has been crucial to expanding our understanding of the distinct properties of networks as they operate alongside market and state organisations.

Networks might be seen as an emergent form of governance and co-ordination and a means of dealing with the social order outside of rational calculation and rational legalism. Markets operate on the basis of price and competition (rational calculation) that generates competition; states of the basis of command, rules and authority (rational-legalism) that generates complicity; and networks on the basis of trust and co-operation that generates co-operative behaviour. In this sense, the network form is premised upon an economy of good-will resources. However, networks are not devoid of strategy on the part of actors who engage by virtue of the temporal dimension of gift relations; they operate on the edge of the reciprocated and non-reciprocated gift. The deferral of the return obligates one person to the other setting off a relation of social debt; non-reciprocation relates to a blurred sense of the future

prior to the closure of a gift transaction, between which trust acts as the cement that holds the relationship together (Thompson, 2003). The gift relation is central in civil society for it is the basis of social engagement in networks regardless of the market and the state.

Despite multiple social, economic and political transformations the archaic practice of the gift has survived and is seen in everyday practice and social ritual. A key lesson here is the extent to which cultural practices are resilient and so social transformation can only ever be partial. The rise of late modern consumer societies, rather than replacing gifting with pure utility, has facilitated the expansion and deepening of the gift relation in terms of the type of gifts exchanged, the level of expense which parties go to purchase gifts, and the commercialisation of gifting festivals and practices such as weddings or religious festivals such as Christmas. Such consumption reproduces the practice of gifting and only alters the medium through which social obligations are expressed and social ties secured (see Caplow, 1984).

References and Further Reading

- Adloff, F. (2006). "Beyond Interests and Norms: Toward a Theory of Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern Societies." *Constellations* 13(3): 407-427.
- Adloff, F. and S. Mau (2006). "Giving Social Ties: Reciprocity in Modern Society." *European Journal of Sociology* 47(1): 93-123.
- Bourdieu, P. and R. Nice (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London, Sage.
- Caplow, T. (1984). "Rule Enforcement Without Visible Means: Christmas Gift Giving in Middletown." *American Journal of Sociology* 89(6): 1306.
- Carrier, J. (1991). "Gifts, commodities, and social relations: A Maussian view of exchange." *Sociological Forum* 6(1): 119-136.
- Holton, R. J. (2008). *Global Networks*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Mauss, M. (1950[1990]). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London, Routledge.

- Piore, M. and C. Sabel (1984). *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperities*. New York, Basic Books.
- Rhodes, R. A. W. and D. Marsh (1992). *Policy Networks in British Government*. Oxford, Clarendon.
- Sahlins, M. (1974). *Stone Age Economics*. London, Tavistock.
- Schrift, A. D., Ed. (1997). *The Logic of the Gift: Towards and Ethic of Generosity*. London, Routledge.
- Shaw, R. (2003). "Theorizing Breastfeeding: Body Ethics, Maternal Generosity and the Gift Relation." *Body Society* 9(2): 55-73.
- Thompson, G. F. (2003). *Between Hierarchies and Markets: The Logic and Limits of Network Forms of Organization*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, G. F., J. Frances, et al., Eds. (1991). *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks: The Co-ordination of Social Life*. London, Sage and Open University Press.
- Titmuss, R. (1970). *The Gift Relationship: From Blood Donation to Social Policy*. London, Allen and Unwin.
- Wellman, B. and M. Gulia (1999). Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone. *Communities in Cyber Space*. M. A. Smith and P. Kollock. London, Routledge: 167-194.

See also entries on

Altruism

Reciprocity

Social Capital

Networks

Bourdieu, Pierre

Mauss, Marcel

Titmuss, Richard

Hobbes, Thomas