



## Gifts

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*As one of the oldest forms of social actions that bind people together and as an arresting example of the universality and diversity of humanity, gift exchange has long been a focus of anthropological inquiry. This entry starts with the distinction between individual gifts and collective gifts which explains some cross-cultural misunderstandings, and moves on to review the two basic theoretical models on the engine of gifting—the spirit of the gift and the principle of reciprocity. While revealing that the highly diversified patterns of gift exchange derive from different perceptions of the relationship between culturally-constructed notions of personhood and material objects in the larger social setting, the anthropology of the gift also unpacks the nuances of social life by examining patterns of gift-giving behaviour all over the world.*

### Introduction

When Europeans first arrived in North America and received presents from the Native Americans they encountered, they could not understand why an equivalent return was expected by their hosts. Many Europeans believed they owed nothing in return, because a gift should be free and with no strings attached. They also assumed the Native Americans were merely pretending to be generous; hence the expression of 'Indian gift' or 'Indian giver' for objects and people given merely in hopes of future returns (Wilton 2009: 166-7). The famous American explorers Lewis and Clark, for example, often suspected such motivations to be guiding their Native hosts when being presented with gifts. They even rudely refused to accept them, referring to the Native Americans as impertinent and thievish in their journals (see Slaughter 2004). Yet the Native Americans considered gifts to be initiating cycles of social exchange. They felt insulted by the Europeans who either refused to accept gifts in the first place, or who did accept them but did not want to reciprocate. In their eyes, both stances proved their unfriendliness and untrustworthiness.

Thanks to the anthropological study of gifts and gift-giving, we can now see clearly that beneath the [racist](#) expression 'Indian gift' or 'Indian giver' lies the European settlers' imposition of a culturally specific understanding of gifts onto Native Americans, who saw their function and meaning in a quite different light. To somewhat simplify the matter for the sake of clarity, I hereafter refer to the former as the *individual gift* that is imagined as a token of a person's affection with no strings attached, and to the latter as the *collective gift* that is part and parcel of a series of collective actions with wider and profound social implications. At surface level, they represent two different prototypes of gifts and two different

systems of social exchange, which are often diametrically opposed to each other. The individual gift emerged in the modern West along with the rise of individualism and the expansion of the capitalist market economy, while the collective gift has been a major system of social exchange all over the world that creates sociality through a sense of [indebtedness](#) (see Graeber 2011) and can be found in various forms in different cultures. At a deeper level, their differences are actually more rhetorical than behavioural, and more in degree than in kind. Behind the discourse of the individualised pure gift in modern times, there are still rules of gifting, expectations of returning gifts, and the social function of strengthening social ties through gift-giving, all of which are similar to their counterparts in systems of traditional collective gifts. Yet, without knowing the cross-cultural differences and similarities between the two basic types, we may be biased to place one against the other, or to misunderstand both of them.

In the following pages, this entry briefly introduces two well-known examples of the traditional and collective gift—the Kula ring and yam exchange, which both occur in the Trobriand Islands—highlighting their features in contrast to the widely-held assumption of modern individual gifts. It then introduces two major theoretical models—the spirit of the gift and the reciprocity principle—that emerged out of scholarly efforts to better understand the origin and driving force of gift exchange. The scholarship shows the main commonalities between the two basic types of gifts, as well as some important differences which in turn lead our inquiry to a deeper level: the cultural understanding between persons and things. In the last section, the entry demonstrates the richness and complexity of the world of gifts that has been explored by scholars from different academic disciplines in recent decades.

### **Obligatory gifts**

A striking feature of collective gifts is their obligatory circulation among the same group of givers and recipients, as illustrated in the Kula ring and yam exchange in Melanesian society. Kula is a ritualised form of [intertribal](#) exchange of red shells necklaces (*soulava*) and white shells armbands (*mwali*) carried out among men of influence in the Trobriand Islands, a region now part of Papua New Guinea. Predefined partners exchange these gifts in a closed circle across several islands, and they always circulate the gifts of necklaces clockwise and exchange armbands in the opposite direction. These gifts are made for exchange only and have their own names, identities, and histories. The exchange relationship is a lifelong one, but the gifts of necklaces and armbands always flow among fixed partners. Kula exchange voyages from one island to another customarily take place twice a year, and it will take one or two years for a given Kula object to return to its original owner. More importantly, each Kula voyage is highlighted by the interisland trade of many other objects, and in this sense the Kula ring also reflects the economic system in this region (Malinowski 1984 [1922]; Leach & Leach 1983).

An equally important form of collective gift exchange in the Trobriand Islands involves yams. Trobriand men spend a great deal of time and energy cultivating yams, but local people normally eat other fresh

produce, including sweet potatoes, greens beans, squash, fruits, and taro. The yams are mainly used by men as gifts to their married-out daughters and sisters who will display them publically in a special yam [house](#). The obligation to participate in gift-giving is in this instance dictated by the local kinship system. People in the Trobriands traditionally adhere to [matrilineal](#) descent and patrilocal post-marital residence. This means that when a woman gets married to a man, she moves to his village but her husband continues to belong to his mother's lineage. The woman who married him will in turn belong to her own mother's lineage. The gift of yams from a man to his sister or daughter brings the woman prestige and status because it shows how many strong supporters she has from her matrilineal kin. The gift of yams thereby recognises the woman as the actual owner of the matrilineal group. In return, her husband, who will receive some of the yams that she is given, will similarly be obligated to produce and send yams to the house of his married-out sister or daughter who, again, will be living in her husband's matrilineal community.

These interlocking exchange relationships between men and their married-out sisters or daughters do not stop at the exchange of yams. By giving yams to one's sister and thereby to her husband, one obligates one's brother-in-law to give a return gift. This must come in a particular form—bundles of banana leaves given by women. When a man dies in a matrilineal village, all female descendants of this matrilineal lineage who are already married must come back to participate in the funeral as the kinswomen of the deceased. More importantly, they return as the true owners of the matrilineal group. During the funerary ritual, these women give away their special wealth—bundled banana leaves or banana-leaf skirts—to funeral guests. They also mourn the deceased and contribute to the ritual with [labour](#). The woman who gives away the largest number of bundles and skirts is recognised as a 'wealthy woman' (Weiner 1992).

Here the links among a woman, her husband, and her brother are made visible and embodied in the flow of yams and banana leaves. The production of yams and banana leaves is in fact so important that it occupies a central place in the local economy, keeping both men and women busy all year around. Importantly, they are not busy for their own consumption needs; rather, they work hard in order to have more gifts for others and expect to receive return gifts as well.

On the surface, gift-giving in both the Kula ring and the exchanges of yam and banana leaves is an obligatory act with specific expectations about the time of return and the volume of the returning gift that takes place between persons as representatives of their own familial/kin groups. These gifts serve socio-political functions while forming an important part of the local economy, motivating economic behaviour and 'making the world go around'. This contrasts sharply with contemporary understandings of individual gifts, which should be non-obligatory and have no strings attached, especially not specific expectations of return gifting.

Yet this difference become less striking in some customary gift exchanges in the modern West, for example

the exchange of holiday greeting cards. More importantly, the expectation to offer gifts but also to receive them and then to make counter-gifts is clearly present in the family tradition of Christmas gift exchanges. This is similar to the yam exchange among Trobriand Islanders, although the value and content of Christmas gifts should be individualised. Truly free gifts seem only to exist in discourse. As Marcel Mauss notes (1967 [1925]), the three obligations of giving, receiving, and returning gifts constitute the foundation of gift-exchange systems all over the world, notwithstanding special cultural and temporal differences.

### **The engine of gifting: the spirit of the gift or the principle of reciprocity?**

Anthropologists have been debating for many years about what motivates gift-giving around the world. Although not the first to explore the subject, Mauss offered the first theory on various gift-exchange systems in non-Western cultures that continues to provide inspirations for the study of the gift. He highlighted the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of gifts being simultaneously obligatory and free, material and spiritual, with interest and disinterested. He started this intellectual journey by asking the fundamental question, 'What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?' (Mauss 1967 [1925]: 1). Mauss finds his answer in the Maori concept of *hau*—a mystic power that lies in the forest and in the valuables (*taonga*) given by one person to another. According to studies of the Maori that Mauss had access to, the *hau* always wishes to return to its place of origin, but can only do so through the medium of an object given in exchange for an original gift. Failure to return a gift can result in serious trouble, since not returning the *hau* can cause the [death](#) of gift recipients. It is the *hau* in the gift, Mauss asserts, that forces the recipient to make a return, and he calls this 'the spirit of the gift' (1967 [1925]: 8-9). According to the Maori, to receive a gift is also to receive a part of the gift-giver's own spiritual essence. Thus, one must make a return gift to keep the original giver intact.

The Maussian notion of the spirit of the gift, however, did not convince Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founding figures of modern anthropology. Prior to the appearance of Mauss' classic 1925 work, *The gift*, Malinowski had already published the famous [ethnographic](#) account of Kula exchange in Melanesian society (summarised above) and had described in detail the local system of transactions, ranging from 'pure gifts' to 'real barter' (1984 [1922]). Rejecting Mauss' interpretation of the spirit of the gift, Malinowski retracted his category of the 'pure gift' in a later book (1962 [1926]) and articulated the principle of reciprocity to explain the Trobriand system of economic transactions. Malinowski argued that the binding force of economic obligations lies in the sanction, which either side may invoke to sever the bonds of reciprocity. One gives because of the expectation of return, and one returns because of the threat that one's partner may stop giving. He thus concluded that the principle of reciprocity serves as the foundation of the Melanesian social order (Malinowski 1962 [1926]: chapters 3, 4, 8, and 9).

Inspired by Malinowski's work, Raymond Firth argues that among the Maori in New Zealand, exchange is driven by reciprocity (locally called *utu*). The Maori attach great importance to the idea of 'compensation'

or 'equivalent return' (Firth 1959: 412ff). According to Firth, Mauss misinterprets the *hau* by imputing active qualities to its social construction, which Maori people do not recognise; Mauss also allegedly confuses the *hau* of the gift with the *hau* of the gift-giver (Firth 1959: 419-20). In a similar vein, Claude Levi-Strauss went so far as to call the spirit of the gift a mystification:

Mauss strives to construct a whole out of parts; and as that is manifestly not possible, he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is *hau*. Are we not dealing with a mystification, an effect quite often produced in the minds of ethnographers by indigenous people? (1987: 47).

The most effective advocate for the accountability of the principle of reciprocity, however, is Marshall Sahlins, who introduces a tripartite division of exchange phenomena—generalised reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity. He identifies three variables as critical to determining the general nature of gift-giving and exchange: kinship distance, sociability, and generosity (1972:191-210).

The principle of reciprocity was so frequently employed to explain various patterns of gift exchange that it quickly became something of a cliché, as Geoffrey MacCormack warns: 'the description of all types of exchanges as reciprocal easily leads to an obscuring of the significant differences between them' (1976: 101). Ultimately, the principle of reciprocity is nothing more than saying that no one will do anything for nothing. As Annette Weiner commented, such a rational and overly general notion of reciprocity is deeply rooted in Western thought and has been used to justify theories of a free market economy since Thomas Hobbes (1992: 28-30).

To truly understand what motivates various systems of gift exchange in non-Western cultures, therefore, one must go beyond Western assumptions of economic rationality and the notion of *Homo economicus*, which is exactly what Mauss did in 1925 (see also Graeber 2001). The Maussian notion of the spirit of the gift was therefore revitalised from two directions. First, in South Asia studies, anthropologists have explored the Hindu idea of giving without expectation of material return. As early as the 1970s, Ved Prakash Vatuk and Sylvia Vatuk (1971) noted some asymmetric gift-giving relationships in the context of caste hierarchy. Here, people of low castes were generally not expected to return the *dan* gifts they receive from their superiors. Further investigations reveal that the *dan* gifts, which are offered by the dominant caste to lower castes during various [secular](#) and religious rituals, serve to transfer dangerous and inauspicious elements, such as illness, death, and misfortune, from the donor to the recipient. The acceptance of these gifts is intended as a vessel of evil and inauspiciousness, like swallowing poison. The recipients of lower castes are required by caste ideology to receive this type of poisonous gift without returning it. As a result, the institutionalised flow of poisonous gifts from the dominant caste to subordinate castes creates a mode of cultural domination (Raheja 1988). These findings seriously challenge generalised models of reciprocity. They led Jonathan Parry (1986) to interpret the absence of reciprocity in the

Indian *dan* in terms of an 'evil spirit' of the gift. This denies Mauss' original argument that the spirit of the gift elicits a return gift. Realising this difficulty, Parry writes: 'Where we have the "spirit," reciprocity is denied; where there is reciprocity there is not much evidence of "spirit.'" The two aspects of the model do not hang together' (1986: 463). James Laidlaw argues that the notion of the non-obligatory pure gift exists in all world religions, albeit often in obscured forms, such as the case of the *dan* gift to Shvetambar Jain renouncers in India, and it carries as many important social meanings as the obligatory gifts (2000).

A solution to the tension between motivating spirits and merely secular reciprocity is found in studies of Pacific island societies. One can see both the 'spirit' and the social obligation to return. Rather than accepting Mauss' interpretation of the Maori *hau*, many anthropologists have employed the notion of inalienability to explain the existence of spiritual, non-utilitarian ties between giver and recipient. Frederick Damon discovered that not all Kula objects are in the endless circle of exchange; the Muyuw islanders, for example, separate particular types of conus shell valuables known as *kitoum* from other Kula gifts. They may take the *kitoum* gifts in or out of the circle at their individual choice. This is because they represent the 'congealed labor' of their individual owners and because 'no matter where a *kitoum* is . . . it can be claimed by its owner' (Damon 1980:282). All Kula valuables are brought into exchange by the [labour](#) of specific individuals whereby they constitute one's inalienable *kitoum* (Damon 1980: 284). Similar views are developed by Christopher Gregory in his analysis of the difference between gift-[debt](#) relations and commodity-debt relations, positing that gift-debts involve a transfer of inalienable objects between mutually [dependent](#) persons, whereas commodity debts result from the exchange of alienable objects between independent transactors (Gregory 2015). Interestingly, the inalienability of certain valuables may explain not only the motivation to return but also the original motivation for participating in competitive exchange such as the Kula (Feil 1982).

The inalienability of gifts is at the core of an innovative theory of exchange by Weiner (1992), arguably the sharpest critic of standard anthropological studies of the gift which routinely rely on the principle of reciprocity. She maintains:

[w]hat motivates reciprocity is its reverse—the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give-and-take. This something is a possession that speaks to and for an individual's or a group's social identity and, in so doing, affirms the difference between one person or group and another (1992:43).

It is this principle of keeping-while-giving, rather than the norm of reciprocity, that can explain the obligation to return a gift (Weiner 1992: 46). Weiner also believes that Mauss is right about the Maori *hau*: '[t]he *hau* as a life force embedded in the person is transmitted to the person's possessions and thus adds inalienable value to the objects' (Weiner 1992: 63; see also Godelier 1999; Graeber 2001; Thompson 1987).

Weiner's theory of the inalienable gift may be hard to apply to gift-giving practices in some complex

societies, where most gifts are purchased commodities and where gifts are often individualised. For example, in China, [money](#) plays an important role in ceremonial gift-giving, and most material gifts are consumer goods, such as wine, cigarettes, or canned food. Altogether the monetary expenditure on gifts among Chinese villagers costs about twenty percent of [household](#) income, making it literally a gift economy (Yan 1996). Moreover, in contrast to the Melanesian and Polynesian cases, which involve the endless circulation of valuable shells, fine mats, or cloaks, the commodities-turned-gifts exchanged among the Chinese are rarely recycled as return gifts; instead, it is expected that gifts will be consumed by their recipients soon after their acceptance. In this sense, not only is a gift alienable, it *must* be alienated; to return the same gift would be considered a gesture of insult and rejection (Yan 1996).

While posing a challenge to the notion of inalienability, the Chinese case suggests that the spirit of the gift can be understood at two levels. Inalienability as elaborated by Weiner, among others, can be seen in the Melanesian case, where gifts are believed to contain *hau* or some similar spiritual essence and thus cannot be disposed of freely by the recipient. This is the empirical evidence upon which Mauss bases his argument; but, as an empirical observation, it may not be true in other societies. Therefore, the key issue in any society is to determine what people think about the message conveyed by the gift—love, friendship, caring, obligation, competition, or a supernatural spirit—and the essential implication is that a bond between individuals or groups can be created through the association between persons and things.

### **The person in the gift**

Indeed, the underlying theme in almost all anthropological discussions of the gift and the gift economy is the relationship between persons and material objects. The bonds created by gifts (inalienable objects) are often considered to be the same as the mutually [dependent](#) ties between persons. Here we can see that the fundamental issue in Mauss' analysis of the gift is to determine how people relate to things, and, through things, how people relate to each other. As John Liep notes, both Karl Marx and Mauss are concerned with the alienation of people from the products of their [labour](#), which correlates to the development of a world capitalist market economy (1990: 165). But unlike Marx, who focuses on the system of commodity exchange in modern societies and discovers the secret of surplus value, Mauss concentrates on gift exchange in pre-capitalist societies and seeks answers from indigenous belief systems. To compare the archaic, personalised gift economy with the modern, impersonalised system of commodity exchange, Mauss draws a three-stage, evolutionary scheme: social exchange begins with 'total prestations', in which the materials transferred between groups are only part of a larger range of noneconomic transfers. The second stage is gift exchange between [moral](#) persons who represent groups, leading finally to commodity exchange between independent individuals in market societies (see Mauss 1967: 68-9).

Jonathan Parry (1986) pushes Mauss' thesis further by first showing that the Maori and Hindu ideologies of gift exchange represent fundamentally opposite types: the former requires the reciprocity of every gift

given, while the latter denies reciprocity. However, the Maori gift and the Indian gift share one thing in common: namely, the absence of an absolute disjunction between persons and things. The separation between persons and things is, according to Parry, a product of Christian cosmology: 'Christianity—with its notion that all men are fashioned equally in the image of God—has developed a *universalistic* conception of purely disinterested giving' (Parry 1986: 468, italics in the original). Furthermore, the strong faith in freedom and rational choice also leads to the belief that 'those who make free and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it' (Parry 1986: 469).

In line with Parry's view, James Carrier argues that the ideology of the perfect gift in the West is shaped by the rise of industrial capitalism:

Free and disinterested givers and recipients who transact unobligating expressions of affection come into cultural existence with the shift of production out of the affective and substantial relations that exist in the household to the impersonal relations of wage labor and capital (Carrier 1990: 31).

This ideology, however, does not always guide everyday practice. Instead, modern American gifts are often predictable and socially regulated (see Caplow 1984; Cheal 1988). The obligatory gift relations characterised by Mauss for traditional societies also exist in capitalist societies (for a further discussion of these themes, see Sanchez *et al.* 2017).

One important implication of Parry's and Carrier's works is that, although gift exchange exists in all human societies, the form it takes varies greatly depending on the particular culture within which it is rooted. Hence we may find multiple 'forms' of the gift—the Melanesian gift, the Indian gift, the Japanese gift, the American gift, and so on. At a deeper level, different forms of gifts tend to reflect different customs in the cultural construction of personhood. In Melanesian societies, for example, the person is relationally constructed and in turn represents a set of social [relations](#) in his or her social acts, including gift-giving. A primary feature of relational personhood is that 'persons simply do not have alienable items, that is, property at their disposal; they can only dispose of items by enchainning themselves in relations with others' (Strathern 1988: 161). By contrast, the free, autonomous individual defined in neoclassical economics has nothing intrinsic to his or her personhood but the 'bare undifferentiated free will'; everything else is alienable (Radin 1996: 62). In other words, the differences in personhood provide us with a key to better understanding why the Melanesian pure gift is inalienable and thus obligatory, while the Western perfect gift is free and thus must be unconstraining. Moreover, personhood also explains the idiosyncratic differences between the two prototypes of gifts and gift-exchange systems: the modern individual gift and traditional collective gifts.

Particularly noteworthy is that a Western-centric understanding of personhood may easily contribute to the misunderstanding of the gift in non-Western societies. At the core of the debate about the nature of the gift



is its essential ambiguity; that is, gifts are at once free and constraining, self-interested and disinterested, and are motivated by both generosity and calculation or expectation of return. Although Mauss initiated the anthropological discourse on the gift by taking a both/and approach in examining its ambiguous nature, most subsequent studies focus on one side or another. As a result, the principle of reciprocity, the inalienability of the gift, and the dichotomy of gifts vs. commodities have taken turns dominating the study of the topic. Underneath all these theories, there is a Western notion of a pure gift based on the belief of the autonomous and free individual that has been used as the ultimate measurement to examine gift-giving activities all over the world. As Mark Ostern points out:

We have met the enemy and he is us: the perfect altruist is nothing more than the obverse face of *Homo economicus*...[w]e will achieve no deeper understanding of gift exchange and their relationships to economic and social behavior until we discard or at least modify the notion of persons as free, unconstrained transactors (2002: 240, italics in the original).

The inability to think beyond Western economic rationality is precisely what caused cultural misunderstandings between the early European settlers and Native Americans, discussed at the outset of this essay.

### **The multifaceted gift in the real world**

Anthropologists have explored a great number of social functions of gifts as well as the explicit and implicit rules governing gift exchange, which in turn help us to better understand a wide range of social phenomena. The enigma of the gift continues to draw more scholars to such an intellectual endeavour, and the study of gifts has gone far beyond anthropology to become an interdisciplinary enterprise in its own right. This section can only make a few brief observations thereof, barely scratching the surface.

Gifts are commonly exchanged in ritualised contexts and can even constitute a rite in and of themselves, such as the presentation of a wedding ring. Thus we can make a distinction between ceremonial and non-ceremonial gifts. The most common examples of the former include gift-giving activities in rites of passage and holidays, such as weddings, funerals, and the Christmas holiday. An occasional gift offered to a helper to express gratitude or some regular exchange of presents among family members or friends may be considered as the latter.

Yet, one possible classification is to see the social identity symbolised by the gifts. Do two persons exchange gifts on behalf of the respective group that they belong to, such as family, lineage, or village community? Or is the gift exchanged between two autonomous individuals? The custom of bridewealth and dowry constitutes a good example of collectivist gift-giving; by contrast, most gift-giving activities in contemporary Western societies occur between two autonomous individuals.

In general, most collective gift-giving activities are institutionalised and ceremonial because collective identities and group interests are at stake, while most individualistic gifts occur in non-ceremonial occasions. But there are exceptions. The exchange of Kula valuables is an institutionalised ceremonial activity but remains a highly competitive enterprise whereby individuals act as free [agents](#). On the other hand, the offer of an engagement ring in contemporary Western societies is a highly ritualised and institutionalised act of individual gift-giving.

Once we place gift exchange in the larger social context, we can see the difference between horizontal and vertical gift exchanges. Horizontal gift exchange occurs among social equals, while vertical exchange cuts across the boundaries of social status. Both types of gift-giving activities may coexist on some occasions. Taking Christmas gift-giving as an example, the horizontal exchange of gifts among friends, classmates, or coworkers goes side by side with vertical exchange of gifts between employers and employees, patrons and clients, hosts and service providers, and to a lesser degree, between senior and junior generations in a family or kin group. Because the obligation to return a gift places its recipient in the inferior position of being [indebted](#), gift-giving is often used as a way to create political authority and dominance, such as in cases of the Melanesian big-man and the Polynesian chieftainship (Sahlins 1972). It may even become a weapon to fight against one's political opponents, such as in the cases of potlatch among Native Americans on the Northwest Pacific coast.

This superiority of the gift-giver, however, may not work in complex societies with a clearly defined class hierarchy and/or a centralised state authority. For example, in her study of the repayment of Japanese *on* gifts (benevolent favours from superiors), Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1969) demonstrates that, given the hierarchical context of Japanese society, the gift-donor who is in a subordinate position can never balance what has previously been received from a superior. In Chinese society, a particular type of gift known as *xiaojing*, which is rooted in the cultural promise of filial piety, unilaterally flows *up* the ladder of social status and no equivalent return is expected. Recipients remain socially superior because their acceptance is already regarded as a favour to the gift-giver, showing that the principle of hierarchy overshadows the principle of reciprocity in this context (Yan 2002).

Gender constitutes another important dimension in the world of gifts. Many earlier studies of gift-giving in non-Western societies seemed to be gender-blind because they tended to focus on institutions of ceremonial exchanges in public life where women were thought to play only a trivial role. Annette Weiner's 1976 book, *Women of value, men of renown: new perspectives in Trobriand exchange*, represents one of the first significant breakthroughs in this regard. Weiner argues that women in the Trobriand Islands are by no means the object of gift exchange by men; on the contrary, women play an autonomous and crucial role in certain ceremonial gift exchanges in public, such as the mortuary exchange described above. In it women reclaim their unique role in the [matrilineage](#) and restate matrilineal solidarity (Weiner 1976, 1992). Marilyn Strathern pushes the theme further by pointing out that, in Melanesian culture, women and men

not only have their own domain in gift exchange but also separate realms of power and domination which are gendered by the gendering of gift exchange (Strathern 1988, see chapters 2, 4, 5 and 11). In contemporary Western societies, women not only give more but also receive more gifts than their male counterparts, and gift-giving is regarded as an essential part of a feminised ideology of love (Cheal 1988; Caplow 1984). How to assess women's dominant role in gift-giving, however, remains to date a debatable issue (Komter 1996).

If we look at the purpose of gift-giving, we can see that a gift may serve an expressive or an instrumental function, or both. In expressive gifts, the existing status relationship between the giver and the receiver determines the conditions of gift exchange (the kind and value of gifts to be given), and gift-giving supports the status relationship. By contrast, if the conditions of exchange (the nature and value of the gift) determine or alter the respective statuses of a giver and recipient, we are likely dealing with instrumental gifts. In other words, expressive gifts are ends in themselves and thus often reflect a long-term relationship between a giver and a recipient; instrumental gifts are a means to some utilitarian end and ordinarily indicate a short-term relationship. Nevertheless, in practice, the pure types of expressive and instrumental gifts never exist; rather, elements of expressivity and instrumentality coexist in almost all gift-giving activities, but in different ratios and combinations. In [post-socialist](#) Ukraine, for instance, a small payment of [cash](#) presented to a doctor is regarded as a gift instead of bribery, as long as the recipient did not explicitly demand it (Polese 2008).

In a broader sense, the exchanges of greetings, assistance, and moral support are often regarded as gifts from one party to another. Their nonmaterial nature often makes the giving a more disinterested act and thus closer to the idealism of the pure gift. In this connection, donations, [charities](#), and especially online gifting to strangers are particularly noteworthy gifts that build impersonalised ties between the givers and the often-unknown recipients. The best example is the donation of human blood, tissues, organs and bodies, which are more often than not transacted from anonymous donors to unknown recipients. These altruistic yet unconventional gifts also raise new [ethical](#) issues in both Western and non-Western societies (Bolt 2012; Simpson 2004).

The economic implications of gift-giving are enormously far-reaching in post-modern and developed countries, as well as in small-scale and pre-industrial societies. Malinowski had long argued that the work incentives of the Trobriand Islanders could not be explained in terms of materialistic self-interest. Instead, they produce extra yams so that the harvest may be given to exchange partners and chiefs and eventually rot in storehouses for the sake of earning prestige. Similarly, they actively participate in the inter-island Kula exchange primarily to obtain the armbands and necklaces that have no practical value except to become renowned (Malinowski 1984 [1922]; Weiner 1992; Graeber 2001). The exchange of Kula valuables therefore constitutes the very foundation of this prestige economy in Trobriand society. The cattle complex in Africa is another example in which the production and exchange of cattle mostly serve social, political,

and ritual purposes, and people have an exaggerated and emotional personal attachment to their [animals](#) (Evens-Pritchard 1940). Gift exchange may be seen as a different type of economy even in the narrowest sense of the term: Christmas gifts alone amount to a multi-billion-dollar business in contemporary American society (Waits 1993). The global expansion of the capitalist market economy and consumerist ideology has pushed the gift economy to a higher level, leading to new ceremonial occasions like Mother's Day and more convenient ways of gift-giving like gift cards (Otnes & Beltramini 1996). The most intriguing and perhaps excessively individualistic invention is the gift given to oneself, known as self-gifts (Mick 1996).

Riding the tidal wave of global consumerism, self-gifts can be found all over the world and are more popular among millennials. In the village community where I conducted a systematic study of gift exchange (Yan 1996), I found that the emergence of self-gifts is part of the much larger and important trend among young villagers to embrace the modern individual gift in their practice of gift exchange. Most of these individual gifts are not offered through ritualised family ceremonies; neither do many of them lead to long-lasting cycles of giving-receiving-returning between the donor and recipient. The occasions of individual gift-giving are not only personal but often ad hoc or situational, such as celebrating a friend's promotion in the workplace or bringing something nice or exotic to family members from a trip back home. More intriguingly, the motivation of offering such a personal gift is also highly personal—as villagers put it, they did it because they had good feelings toward the recipient and they felt good after offering the gift as a token of their fondness toward the recipient. The influence of consumer individualism is obvious here, as all kinds of commercials and products of pop culture promote the importance of affection and emotional ties in the context of commodification. An emphasis on feeling good may have replaced past requirements of being or doing good; hence, personal gifts for feeling good replace obligatory gifts for being good. The implication here is that the two prototypes of gifts that we examined at the outset of this essay not only coexist in our time, but also influence and transform each other, creating new possibilities in the world of gifts.

The give-and-take of gifts in everyday life creates, maintains, and strengthens social bonds—be they cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic—which in turn define the identities of persons. Scrutinising gifts and gift economies may therefore provide us with an effective and unique means of understanding the formation of personhood and the structure of social [relations](#) in a given society. Lastly, although gifts are given and received among peoples all over the world and throughout human [history](#), the specific rules of gift exchange vary from one culture to another. Gift exchange thereby crystallises the universality and diversity of human cultures.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the anthropology of the gift is particularly important for understanding social life for several

reasons. Gift-giving has long been one of the major forms of social exchange, along with redistribution and market exchange. Yet, unlike the other two, it encompasses multiple domains of social life and carries rich meanings above and beyond the economy. Moreover, the study of gift-giving reveals the social origins of economic institutions and provides insights about the value of human [labour](#) that have long been obscured by modern economic theories. They include the relationship between persons and things, or what drives people to work beyond their basic consumption needs. Gift-giving basically debunks the cornerstone assumption in [neoliberal](#) economics that human beings only aim to maximise individual utility, and thus has greatly enriched social theories. Additionally, the give-and-take of gifts in everyday life creates, maintains, and strengthens various social bonds—cooperative, competitive, or antagonistic—which in turn define personal identities. An examination of the gift and the gift economy, therefore, will provide us with an effective and unique means of understanding the formation of personhood and the structure of social [relations](#). Furthermore, although gifts are universal and are given and have been received throughout human history, the specific rules of gift exchange vary from one culture to another. Therefore, gifts represent a crystallization of the universality and diversity of human cultures.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the gift is no longer the preserved subject of anthropology. Scholars of humanities and social sciences alike have joined forces to explore the dynamic, complicated world of gifts from different disciplinary perspectives and approaches, such as antiquity study, [history](#), literary critics, philosophy, sociology, law, economics, and marketing research (see Cheal 1988; Davis 2000; Davies 2010; Hyland 2009; Kolm & Ythier 2006; Marion 2011; Osteen 2002; Otnes & Peltramini 1996; Satlow 2013). The growing literature also shows that, as the human interest in and capacity of doing gift exchange are consistently changing in response to a rapidly shifting environment of social life at large, the enigmatic gift will likely remain to be an attractive subject in anthropology and beyond.

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