

2007 *Critique du don : Etudes sur la circulation non marchande* [Critique of the Gift : Studies on the non-mercantile circulation]. Paris : Syllepse, 268 p.

The book is about the concept of gift and pertaining to social anthropology in general. The starting point is a critique of the well-known *Essay on the gift* of Marcel Mauss. It's aim is to show that there were many misconceptions in social anthropology about what gift really is and that the importance of this practice has currently been overestimated in French and English anthropology. It starts with a precise definition of what is to be conceived by gift, as opposed to exchange and a third kind of transaction, the prototype of which is tax or imposition. It includes up to date and critical views on the Potlatch and the Kula, which are major topics in the discipline when considering gift and counter-gift.

Summary

Chapter 1 (WHAT IS A GIFT?) introduces the subject in an ironical way, imagining Martian Anthropologists making fieldwork among terrestrial human beings, hearing so many times the verb "to give" (for instance "giving" money to pay in a shop, or to pay taxes) and concluding to the importance of the gift in modern human society.

Such a fiction serves to show that "to give" is not the same as "to make a gift". It can also be shown from Latin etymology. Finally the chapter ends by a precise definition of what a gift is, and insists on the notion of requirement to pay. What marks the exchange is the requirement to repay by an appropriate counterpart each of the transfers. In a gift, on the contrary, the counterpart (counter-gift) may be given, but cannot be required.

Chapter 2 (THREE TRANSFER MODES) pursues this line of thinking by showing formal differences, especially on the question of the nature of obligation involved, between gift, exchange and a third kind of transfer akin to taxation or imposition. It is shown that in the Kula (Trobriands Islanders, East of New Guinea) the counterpart is required, eventually by force, according to Malinowski, and so, that it has nothing to do with gift and counter-gift.

Chapter 3 (POTLATCH BETWEEN LUSTER AND USURY) deals with the potlatch as it was and still is practised among Amerindian peoples of the North West Coast of North America and shows that it is really a succession of gifts and counter-gifts.

Chapter 4 (PARADOXES OF "OBLIGATION TO GIVE": CRITIQUE OF MAUSS) is a systematic critic of Mauss' notion of obligation, where it is shown that he failed to make sufficient distinctions.

Chapter 5 (MARKET EXCHANGE, NON-MARKET EXCHANGE) tackles a different subject, asking why exchange or trade has been so many times misconceived as giving in preliterate societies. The answer is that trade is currently practised in a very different form compared to the one we know in Europe or Asia, and the chapter develops an opposition between two kinds of exchange, market exchange (or mercantile exchange) and exchange between what anthropologists have called "friends of trade".

Chapter 6 (REASONS FOR GIVING) presents a little classification of the different social forms of gifts. It stresses the difference between what Paul Veyne called "evergetism", gift of rich people in Antiquity to the City, and charity towards the poor, as practiced in medieval times. It recalls that some forms of gifts may be motivated by self-interest, like bribe or baksheesh. It presents the thesis that in history, up to now, giving has been the practice of upper classes and that these classes got prestige in this way.

Chapter 7 (THE KULA FILE) deals systematically of the Kula as an exchange, with its specific rules. The difficult question of ownership of prestige goods while they are circulating is tried to be solved.

Chapter 8 (THE *Hau* IN LIGHT OF THE KULA, WITHOUT SPIRIT OR MYSTERY) is again a critic of Mauss on the subject of the *Hau* (in Polynesian societies). Much has been said – in a critical way – already by several scholars, including Marshall Sahlins. It is suggested that the *Hau*, instead of being something spiritual or pertaining to religion (Mauss' thesis), is perhaps nothing more than the jural strength of the legal obligation to retribute when the appropriate good is back in the hands of the one in debt.

Chapter 9 (CRITICAL NOTES ON LÉVI-STRAUSS, BOURDIEU, AND OTHER SCHOLARS) ends by systematic critics of outstanding scholars about gift, among whom Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Christopher Gregory, etc.

Online appreciation (translated from the French):

"Undoubtedly we are dealing with one of the most important books in social anthropology published in recent decades [...] He is one of the great contemporary thinkers in the discipline, and often stands at the doors of others like comparative sociology, comparative technology, epistemology and history, archaeology..."

Pierre Le Roux about Testart's first book on the gift, *Des dons et des dieux [On Gifts and Gods]*

Anthropologie et Sociétés, vol. 32, n° 3, 2008, p. 263-265.

<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/029745ar>

"Reading Alain Testart's *Critique du don* for his study of the various circulations of goods as they were once practiced, which are often more rich, more diversified and more complex than they are today [...] may be a source of inspiration able to invent a new form of circulation."

Steeve

<http://sortirdeleconomie.ouvaton.org/sde-n2.pdf>

Sortir de l'économie, bulletin critique de la machine-travail planétaire n°2, 2008

"Alain Testart [...] adopts a key distinction between gift and exchange, whether market or non-market. The fundamental point in his eyes is that a gift is not an exchange. [...] The whole sphere of the gift as circumscribed by Mauss must be modified, in its extent as well as in its moral implications."

Nicolet Journet, "Le don aujourd'hui"

http://www.scienceshumaines.com/le-don-aujourd-hui_fr_22869.html

"Any discussion of Marcel Mauss' *Essay on the Gift* must be measured against the dual critique [by Alain Testart]."

Carlo Ginzburg, Lectures de Mauss, l'Essai sur le don.

<http://cmb.ehess.fr/326>

"Alain Testart questions Mauss' binary opposition between gift and market exchange by introducing another category within exchange: the *non-market exchange*. For Testart as for Marx, market exchange implies that it is the relation to things that governs the relation among persons [...] – and even a dual relation to things: the repudiation of the thing put up for sale and the desire for what the seller may draw from it."

Bernard Pasobrola, Remarques sur le procès d'objectivation marchand, *Temps critiques*, janvier 2010

<http://tempscritiques.free.fr/spip.php?article209>

"The book by Alain Testart, *Critique du don*, is a valuable clarification of the very notion of gift."

Jean-Pierre Albert, Don, échange, argent, *Empan* 2011 (2) n° 82