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GIFT EXCHANGE: THE TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF A POLITICAL IDEA

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Grégoire Mallard's monograph *Giftexchange: The Transnational History of a Political Idea* adds to scholarly work that reinterprets Marcel Mauss' seminal essay *The Gift* (2011 [1925]) in the light of his political writings. Mallard's interpretation goes against the grain of what has become a consensus among anthropologists, i.e. the idea that in *The Gift* Mauss investigated non-contractual and ambiguously disinterested yet constraining intra-group socio-economic solidarity. Instead, Mallard argues that for Mauss gift exchange provided a blueprint for building inter-group or international solidarity. Mallard abundantly demonstrates that in the context of widespread colonialization – contemporaneous with Mauss and his essay – such a theory had a dangerous colonial underbelly. Mallard's book, however, does not stop at pointing to the pro-colonial ends to which the theory of gift exchange could be used. He tries to decolonize the gift exchange as a doctrine for constructing international relations by exploring how it has been employed and could be employed in debates around national sovereignty and international socio-economic interdependency. This brings Mallard to his second central argument: Mauss-inspired gift exchange theory reminds us that – contrary to the present-day doxa – illegitimate sovereign debts can be forgiven, if debt forgiveness serves to increase inter-societal cooperation.

Grégoire Mallard is a sociology professor who works on global governance, law and expert knowledge regimes. His interest in Mauss' work and political engagements was sparked almost accidentally, when he and his wife rented the apartment of Mauss' biographer Marcel Fournier in Montreal. Mallard's findings on Mauss' involvement in interwar politics was first translated in a 2011 article and now in this monograph. The seven chapters that compose the book do not draw only on Mauss' political writings made widely available by Fournier, but also on extensive archival work, writings of Mauss' contemporaries and more recent secondary sources and analysis.

Mallard opens the book by reminding the readers that throughout the late 18th and early 19th century, colonial administrators- turned-ethnologists believed that gift exchange was an efficient way to extract resources from the colonized without political revolts. If the gift exchange theory fell under the critique of 19th-century utilitarian thinkers, in the early 20th century the model of gift exchange came back to theories of good government through the work of anthropologists such as Boas, Thurnwald, Malinowski, and Mauss. Mallard notes that they tried to show that there was nothing premodern or irrational in the governance through gifts.

In chapter two, Mallard reconstructs Mauss' position in the French academic and political fields. In 1925, when *The Gift* was published, Mauss was already academically recognized in France and abroad. However, because of his Jewish origins, he belonged to the French elite only precariously. Mauss was actively engaged in establishing ethnology – that he called “descriptive sociology” aimed at studying peoples of “inferior rank” (p. 5) – as a recognized academic discipline in France. To do this, Mauss promoted ethnography as useful for colonialization: ethnography could help to translate the French colonial law acceptably to the colonized. In 1926, he won support for his cause and got the resources for founding an independent Institute of Ethnology. To raise the prestige of his institution, Mauss was teaching ethnography also at the Colonial School that prepared colonial administrators. He also collaborated with bankers and art collectors who financially supported ethnographic and “Negro art” – at the time extremely popular in Paris – collection missions of his institute's students.

In the next chapter, Mallard situates the *Gift* in the interwar political debates around the sovereign debt crisis. After WWI, Mauss and other Durkheimians were curious whether wartime industrial cooperation and financial solidarity among allies would endure and whether this solidarity would also be extended to Germany. Without German reparations the French debt to the allies was unsustainable. Yet, according to Mallard, Mauss believed that it was necessary to give a moratorium to German reparations so that Germany could first recover and then pay for the damages that it had caused. Mallard argues that Mauss used anthropological records in *The Gift* to back up his arguments for debt rescheduling, aimed at proving that over time the gift would be paid back and suggesting that a delay in time between gifts would create solidarity. Mallard underlines that many of the terms employed in *The Gift* – quasi-contracts, obligations, reparations – were used in the debates around interwar sovereign debt crisis.

Chapter four transposes the Maussian theory of gift exchange to the colonial context by exploring Mauss' unfinished manuscript *The Nation* (2013). In *The Nation*, Mauss lays out a theory of “integration”, where poly-segmentary societies were the least “integrated” while the “nation” – a society ruled by organization, law, and justice – represented the highest level of “integration”. Mauss believed that high levels of integration were necessary to bring about world peace and that intersocietal exchanges

– not Durkheimian internal division of labor – were the real drivers of history. Hence, although Mauss was critical of colonialism administrated by chartered private companies, he held that state-managed colonialism – with the right type of gift exchanges that increase solidarity – could have a civilizing mission.

Chapter five follows Mauss’ students, such as Jacques Soustelle and Germaine Tillion, in post-WWII colonial Algeria to see how Mauss’ theory of integration and gift exchange after his death was tested by decolonization struggles. Mauss’ followers – faithful to the ideas espoused in *The Gift* and “The Nation” – believed that Algeria did not deserve independence because it had not reached the required level of integration. Besides, they held that the current state of disarray was not due to French overinvestment, but French underinvestment in Algeria. According to Mauss’ students, French were not being enough generous to Algerians, hence the discontent with French colonisation.

A competing use of the gift exchange theory came from Pierre Bourdieu who was first brought to Algeria as part of the French army. Based on fieldwork data, he, contrary to the Maussians, argued that there was an Algerian nation which functioned according to the “logic of the gift”. Moreover, this local solidarity, according to Bourdieu, was being destroyed by French colonialism. With Bourdieu’s critique that found gift exchange in intra-societal not inter-societal relations and the emerging academic discipline of political science, anthropology was pushed out of international matters and retreated to the local.

In chapter six, Mallard considers the potential continuing relevance of gift exchange theory as a doctrine for international relations. He resurrects the spirit of the gift exchange theory in the work of Algerian jurist Mohammed Bedjaoui, one of the key architects of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) doctrine. Within the UN International Law Committee (ILC), Bedjaoui worked to change the international economic law of decolonization, particularly the financial obligations of successor states to former colonial metropolises and – in case of nationalizations – to private property owners. After 20 years of work, the 1983 Vienna Convention attempted to enshrine internationally recognized rules that laid out the procedures for the succession of rights on property and debts, but it never went into force because it lacked the signatures of key UN member states. Mallard argues that the NIEO doctrine laid out in the convention inherited the spirit of the model of the gift exchange because it attempted to put longterm international relations based on trust and reciprocity above short-term interests of private multinational companies that held important investments and concessions in the former colonies. However, this time the model of gift exchange was applied to independent nation-states to regulate international economic interdependency and was not used to justify colonial relations.

Chapter seven explores the pertinence of gift exchange theory to the Eurozone recently put under the test of the European sovereign debt crisis. Mallard concludes that European citizens should “decolonize”

the principles of financial responsibility, understand whose interests are served by debt accumulation, and envisage forgiving illegitimately acquired debts if they increase inter-societal solidarity.

Mallard's innovation hides in situating *The Gift* in Mauss' political writings on the sovereign debt crisis during the inter war period. Other approaches instead situate *The Gift* in the genealogy of Mauss' academic thought or consider it in the light of his political writings on cooperatives. This shift enables Mallard to argue that Mauss' *The Gift* was about inter-group and not intragroup solidarity, which is clearly against the grain of the mainstream anthropological theory on the gift exchange.

The reader remains wondering whether it is possible or useful to try to find the most truthful interpretation of Mauss' oeuvre. Between 1920 and 1925, Mauss' political writings were prolific and at the time cooperatives – not only sovereign debts and monetary stability – continued to shape Mauss' interests. Could it not be simply the case that Mauss was transposing his ideas from one field to another, even when they were not fully elaborated and researched? Does Mauss' interest in inter-societal solidarity during the interwar sovereign debt crisis or his pro-colonial sentiments make the gift exchange theory as an exploration of various socio-economic rationalities among group members irrelevant?

Regardless of what was Mauss' real intention behind *The Gift*, Mallard's monograph opens refreshing – if underexplored – perspectives on international solidarity and the present-day neoliberal international governance, where it has become impossible not to honor one's debts, no matter how unjustly acquired. It provides a dense and stimulating read that brings to the fore events, theoretical and political engagements that are insightful not only for those interested in the history of anthropology but also the history of France and the NIEO.

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