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h. Talbot, P. A., <i>Life in Southern Nigeria</i>	211
i. Rivers, W. H., <i>Medicine, magic and religion</i>	213
l.) Excerpts	214
a. Frobenius, L., <i>Dämonen des Sudan, Volksdichtungen aus Ober-Guinea, and Der Kopf als Schicksal</i>	214
b. Horne, G. and Aiston, G., <i>Savage life in Central Australia</i>	215
c. Bennett, C. A., <i>A philosophical study of mysticism</i>	217
d. Shotwell, J. T., <i>The religious revolution of today</i>	218
e. Emmott, F. B., <i>A short history of Quakerism</i>	218
INDEX OF NAMES	221

FOREWORD

Puzzles and Pathways

BILL MAURER

The occasion of a new translation of Marcel Mauss' classic *Essai sur le don*—along with the ancillary material that Jane Guyer argues forms its true corpus and context—provides an opportunity to reflect on how this remarkable work has impacted the discipline of anthropology and how it might continue to do so in the future. The future, of course, singularly occupied Mauss himself, who at the end of the main text put forward tentative reflections on how people could go about continuing to live with one another without repeating the horrors of world war. Horrors, that is, that the human species has continued to repeat. Yet despite the loss that surrounded him, Mauss seemed to invite us to find options, to pick up every text, to pursue every route, to wander and puzzle through alternative pathways—a commitment to persevere in the face of grief and dread.

The afterlives of *The gift* have not been limited to the discipline of anthropology, and compared to Mauss' time, our own contemporary horrors seem at once more prosaic and more profound. Always-online, ubiquitous digital communications drive new marketplaces in a “sharing economy” whose instigators and critics explicitly reference gift economies, if not *The gift* itself.¹ The disastrous

1. From a wide array of examples, I select Leung (2014) for the instigators and Leonard (2014), a widely shared online article, for the critics. Usage of the phrase

effects of climate change, growing economic inequality made visible in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–8, and geopolitical reconfigurations (often technologically driven) breathing life into new forms of terror by state and nonstate actors alike are making the world a dire and dangerous place. Some popular academic writings taking the long view, however, celebrate the overall decline of violence (Pinker 2011). New financial actors operating on a heretofore unprecedented scale see technologically-driven hope just around the corner, often framed with reference to more “social” economies.² Others, in academia and in the streets, decry the entrenchment of inequality (Piketty 2014) and the enduring ties of obligation that persist alongside the rise of impersonal means of exchange brought about by violence (Graeber 2011). At least, in the person of David Graeber, there is an anthropologist in the mix!

These alternately hopeful and critical (even sometimes apocalyptic) assessments seem at odds, of course. One might wish for a new set of rhetorical or analytical tools to cut through them and bring clarity. But Guyer’s translation will not do some brush clearing. No. Instead, it will multiply and ramify new options, alternative perspectives, plural pathways through a rich, fertile thicket. It is almost as if she is engaged in a giant reforestation project, providing the right amount of water and sunlight and fertilizer to precipitate, nurture and sustain whole new organisms, ecosystems, and webs of relations. She is not just expanding the edition. She is reconnecting us to an expansive world.

“gift economy” surged during the 1990s, a trend that seems to be continuing into the early decades of this century, according to Google’s Ngram viewer, which tracks word frequencies in published works over time. (I thank Lana Swartz for this insight.) The *Christian Science Monitor’s* discussion of the concept is typical of media accounts that incorporate the gift economy as a subset of the corporate-driven “sharing economy” (*Christian Science Monitor* 2015). The sharing economy in this sense is that cluster of business ventures that have emerged in the present decade that seek to open up to the market’s so-called excess capacity of workers (who can, for example, offer transportation directly to purchasers without a taxi company or government licensing agent as an intermediary) or property owners (who could rent out unused rooms or entire apartments or houses for short-term rentals). Disclosure: I taught Mauss in 2007 at an informal seminar for members of an information technology company interested in what *The gift* might hold both for new products (can we build stuff that enables people to “share”?) and for new business models (can we create relationships with our suppliers and contractors that are based not just on economic “give and get” but on more enduring relationships of reciprocity?).

2. See, for example, blogs like the Gates Foundation’s Impatient Optimists and “social entrepreneurship” organizations like the Unreasonable Institute, or Facebook.

As she has done with Bantu terms (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 102), Guyer assiduously excavates the multiple meanings of the French in *The gift* that are most central to Mauss’ endeavor—even “essai” and “don” themselves. Readers familiar with her oeuvre will gravitate toward the monetary metaphor she invokes near the beginning of her introduction. Like tests of the purity and weight of gold, she argues, the *Essai* put select materials together in order to compare them to a standard of centuries of scholarship on the nature of exchange. The *Essai* is thus an assay. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the *statistical* metaphor that is embedded here, too: the assay of precious metals is a quantitative process. It involves sampling and averaging and probabilities, as in the famous Trial of the Pyx, which has warranted the content of precious metal coins in England from the 1100s right up to the present day (Stigler 1999: 383). In the hands of Guyer, however, this does not entail dry maths of impossible abstractions or *ceteris paribus* assumptions but the living, breathing number of peoples and practices, the supple handling and manipulation of coin and commodity, as in the petrol line during a shortage in 1997, a story related in her *Marginal gains* (Guyer 2004: 107). Number is an inventive frontier, densely interwoven with and animated by inspirations and sensations of the practical and mystical kind alike (Guyer et al. 2010: 36). The assay is an experimental test, and a quantitative operation, but one shot through with sense and sensibilities.

Indeed, this perspective on number underscores the nature of the experiment, of the assay, and why it is so important in the world Guyer is expanding for us: it is a test done by recreating, restaging, modeling contexts as best one is able with what one has at hand, as Guyer has done with this translation. Guyer surrounds *The gift* with its archival entailments while regrounding the footnotes back to the bottom of the page, putting the roots back where they belong.³ This, in turn, permits two things at once. On the one hand, it permits the reader to reconnect with the estuaries, byways, and wanderings of Mauss’ intellectual journeys. It restages his own enterprise for us so we can better connect with it. It opens up to us his archive, his library (as my foreword seeks to do, in a smaller way, with Guyer’s). And, on the other hand, it has material and psychic consequences for the human act of reading this text. It physically draws the reader’s eye first here, then there, back up and down again, across and between the traces of ink on the page or pixels on the screen, recreating the pathways, the almost endless pathways, both of Mauss’ journeys and of our own ever-unfolding ones.

3. See Grafton (1997) on the history of the footnote.

Journeys where we meet all kinds of unexpected characters and find all kinds of routes in the roots.

Such is Guyer's (and Mauss') method: a method of "inspirational pathways, meetings, and companionship" (p. 5). The expanded edition creates an expanse—a new (to us), vast, open yet dense territory, which also permits new relations as we explore afresh our existing connections to this foundational text.

And a method of *companionship*. It was central to Mauss' politics. As Keith Hart has summarized, in making sense of Mauss' cooperativism: "Mauss held that there are two prerequisites for being human: we each have to learn to be self-reliant to a high degree and we have to belong to others in order to survive, merging our identities in a bewildering variety of social relationships" (Hart 2000: 192). It strikes me, though, that there is also something very Africanist about Guyer's method, and, indeed, she at least partially intends with this translation to bring forward Mauss' perspective on Africa. Pathways suggest a phenomenology and a politics. The phenomenology is reminiscent of Guyer's retheorization of wealth-in-people, so common a trope in the literature. Guyer looked to studies of *minkisi*, so-called fetish objects containing powers in particular configurations to address illness, conflict, and conciliation. Citing Wyatt MacGaffey's work with such objects, she and Eno Belinga write: "Minkisi were conglomerates of things, each component evocative of different powers which, when put together, played off one another to make allusions, create tensions and invoke spiritual complementarities that were deeply inspiring and intimidating" (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 113).

MacGaffey (1993) had used the term "composition" to describe this powerful conglomeration. Guyer extended it beyond the *minkisi* object to apply more broadly to the "information societies" (Guyer and Eno Belinga 1995: 116) of equatorial Africa. She thus contrasted the classic understanding of wealth-in-people as an accumulation of followers with the idea of a composition or temporary accretion and coming together of knowledges, skills, objects, and people for a specific purpose. Such compositions can disassemble and disaggregate again only later to recombine.

Compositions are fragile: "social life has to be reconfigured after each gain or loss" of persons or knowledges (ibid.: 102). This is so even if—or perhaps because—the information store from which people in equatorial Africa could draw nearly precisely replicated the whole habitat, a map equal, point by point, with its territory (Vansina 1990: 255).

Are we not in a similar forest, seeking pathways, with Mauss? This is the phenomenological experience.

As for the politics: I have been arguing that *The gift—this gift*—is less a book than an expanse. One has to grope one's way through it, as it is a series of dense, interconnected trails where every so often there are meeting places, even dancing grounds (p. 11). *Especially* dancing grounds. But this does not mean the meetings are always joyous, or that the dances are dances of peace.

What are our stakes in the gift? Not just the book, but the abstraction it has created for us through so many particularities, so many wanderings through the archive. If I have set some of Guyer's library alongside her reassembling of Mauss' own library, it is to exploit the formal parallelisms that run throughout each of their writings. In Guyer's hands, we see the gift is just plain weird, a never-completed action involving always more than the transacting parties, a not-seamless coming together of perspectives or worlds or contending abstractions. The text itself is like this, too, of course. That is why so many of us continually return to it. We know the big story. Yet we mine the footnotes for the other stories that lie within.

Most anthropologists who regularly read and teach and write with the book probably have a favorite footnote. Keith Hart's is footnote 29 in Guyer's translation of chapter 2: "NOTE OF PRINCIPLE ON THE USE OF THE NOTION OF MONEY." Here, Mauss chided Malinowski for limiting the concept of money to the impersonal forms found in the contemporary West. From this footnote, Hart launched his program of rehumanizing the economy, starting with recapturing that aspect of money that is always an expression of and infused with personal relations.

My own favorite footnote has always been footnote 54 in chapter 3. It is in Mauss' preface on his use of Hindu texts. Mauss is struggling with this material, and with his own argument. The footnote is a series of hedges before he even begins: I'm not saying the ancient Aryans had no concept of market or price, or that the *dānadharma* applied to everyone, or was the sole origin of the sort of gift I am about to describe, or that India has no tradition of contract of its own, nor again that there are not other forms of obligation besides those embedded in the gift or in contract, etc., etc. All I want to say, he writes, is that the material demonstrates . . . well, what exactly does it demonstrate? Translation is tricky.

The Cunnison translation goes like this: "We seek only to show the existence, beside these laws, of another system" (Mauss 1967: 123). This is pretty good, but not quite good enough. The original French is: "Nous ne cherchons à démontrer que ceci: la subsistance, à côté de ces droits, d'un autre droit, d'une autre économie et d'une autre mentalité." Here is how Guyer translates it: "We

are looking only to show this: survival, beside these laws, of another law, another economy, and another mentality" (p. 160, n. 54).

We are looking. We are in the forest, we are wandering through the library, we are thrown into the messiness of human activity and relationality and we are looking. We are looking to show (we have a point to demonstrate, after all) but we can do it by showing. By showing there is an empirical thing evident to the human senses capable of being shown if I can just direct your attention to it. We are looking to show *you*, after all, you who think that the world goes along in a certain way or that, to temper it somewhat, the world mostly goes along that way, or that there is a dominant tendency. We are looking to show you only this. (*Only this!* Yet the "this" is huge.) There is a survival, there is a persistence. There is something else, still there, enduring, persevering. And continuing "à côté de," alongside, laterally adjacent. Not underneath, not beyond, not "over there" somewhere far away or on another planet, but right next to. *Right there!* What is it that is right there? "Another law, another economy and another mentality."

This footnote has helped me to orient my own perspective on the gift, and on *The gift* as illuminating a particular notion of the alternative. An alternative in a plural, ramifying economy, an alternative that is just there, *à côté de*, alongside, if out of phase or oscillating among, various alternatives. This, and only this. It is a modest claim for plurality, deferring any grander stance on cosmology or otherness if only because people sometimes move into and out of those plural perspectives and pathways, sometimes in the same instance, or in the very next clause or action, much as does Mauss' text. So I have long sought to counter arguments about the dominance of something called capitalism when alongside, next to, I am looking to show other abstractions, other relations, rents and tribute, for example, or alternative modes of counting and accounting, not wholly "other," not "over there," but right here.

Everyone knows that one of Mauss' big points was that the gift is agonistic. Guyer's translation brings out the struggle in the text itself. The linking words are always buts, however, nevertheless. Moving through this forest, one has to bring along the capacity to entertain and to follow opposites and paradoxes that are also right here, just beside us. Reason as such might fail in such an expanded context. So, Guyer advocates a shift to *sense*, and retranslates the subtitle of the book: the form and sense of exchange. Guyer invites us to read, to wander, to achieve a sense of the puzzle . . . and a puzzling sense, too, for this is not a completely unlimited, free-play kind of open expanse. Puzzles

are pattern-recognition problems, and there are different ways of completing them—if completion is your game. You can either use pictorial clues to reassemble the puzzle, or you can look at the shapes and edges, ignoring the picture altogether.⁴ Still, there is only one way it can go back together again. There are, thus, trails, channels, and games of joint attention that Mauss/Guyer invite us to play when we meet on those dancing grounds. "We are looking only to show." It's a book, after all, with a beginning and an end, even if there are ancillary texts and footnotes. It's not an anything-goes sort of place, even as it asks us to examine every seed, seek out every path, cultivate and dance together so that we may persevere, survive.

And yet: Is it a book? What is the abstract of which the concrete is a book, especially now? One could go on about hypertexts and such, and Mauss links us backward and forward to the disciplinary archive and, today, the corporate imagination, as I indicated at the outset of this foreword. Yet there's something very old school about putting the footnotes where Mauss had placed them, placing the Essay inside its original surround, the recontextualization of the words inside others' words, even as Mauss himself embedded others' words inside his own. For me, this leads down a path I've walked before but encourages me to think anew about the fact that always alongside the gift are other forms, other mentalities or dispositions, other creatures in that forest each pursuing their own paths. Keith Hart wrote that Mauss was trying to solve the puzzle of how "to define our individuality while belonging in subtle ways to others" (Hart 2000: 195). Guyer's translation gives us the good sense to do just that.⁵

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4. This observation is inspired by watching a particular child assemble puzzles.
5. The reference is to Gramsci, refracted through feminist anthropology (see Collier and Yanagisako 1989). The debt to J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) throughout this foreword should also be made explicit.

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