**gift/礼物(Lǐ Wù)**

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| European Perspective | Michel Espagne | 15 Mar 2022 |

A gift is first of all a natural and positive disposition of a personality. We will say of a scientist that he has a gift for mathematics, of a musician that he has a gift for music. By this we mean that an eminent quality is not considered as natural but as a gift, the most traditional presentation striving to define the inherited qualities as a “gift from heaven”. Whoever has a gift has ben chosen by Heaven without any debt to social heritage. In this sense, the gift breaks with any social consideration, whereas most uses of the word situate it, on the contrary, in a social exchange. Some European languages use different words according to various sorts of gift (for instance german which nexpresses more clearly the difference between “Spende”, “Schenkung”, “Begabung” etc).

Feudal society is based on an unequal relationship. The overlord concedes a fiefdom to his vassal servant. It is indeed a gift but the one who receives it is placed in the dependence of the overlord who can moreover take back the gift. In any case, the concession of the fiefdom implies that the vassal servant pays homage to the suzerain. The acceptance of a gift signifies the recognition of a dependency. This dependency is not exclusively specific to feudal society, but it can by extension become a political principle. The recognition of a domination of the Roman Empire was able to ensure the suzerainty of barbarian chiefs over entities which resembled fiefdoms during the period of the great invasions. According to the common opinion of european historians the Chinese empire made extensive use of the principle of according gifts in exchange for the recognition of political domination. Doubtless the gift was not even directly linked to the establishment of an immediate dependence but could prepare a future suzerainty. Thus the use of silk in Central Asia is supposed to have been part of an early Chinese diplomacy. Even before being a commodity, silk was a gift. The situation during the pandemic, with the People's Republic of China sending masks to European regions hit by the pandemic, a donation that has generated the suspicion of a "mask policy", shows how much donations worry those who receives.

The systemic link between multifaceted submissions and the acceptance of a donation often makes the donation to appear as a disturbing reality. We know the famous formula of Laocoön in the Aeneid: “timeo Danaos et dona ferentes” [I am afraid of the Danaans, even if sthe visit us with gifts]. The gift of the Greeks brings destruction to the Trojans. The ruin of Troy comes from the acceptance of a gift of which Laocoön had perceived the dangers. One of the episodes included in the history of European art is rooted in the story of the gift of the Trojan horse. Donations can also, it is true, aim to promote peaceful relations between different societies over the long term, the best example being the giving of women in marriage. In any case, the gift is not necessarily a way of obtaining a significant advantage by exchange. On the contrary, the notion of self-sacrifice, with Christian theological roots, implies a renunciation without reciprocity, with the aim of saving the mankind. The gift is then linked to the notion of sacrifice, as a reply the sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifice may be observed previously, corresponds to a frequent practice in ancient Greece where it results in thanking the Gods or in attracting their benevolence by offering them a part of the harvest or part of the herd. After a period of real sacrifices the ritual became a symbolic gift with the sacrifice of Isaac, supposed to reconcile Abraham and his god but does not lead to the killing of the sacrifices person which remains in the sacrifice of Christ. This sacrifice is staged throughout the history of art. The staging often includes the donor figure appearing as small side figure in depictions of the crucifixion in medieval paintings. The scene of the sacrifice of Christ illustrates a gift of self, but this gift could only be shown thanks to the support that the painter obtained from the donor. The system of donations in the constitution of artistic collections corresponds, like artistic patronage, to a form of extension of these medieval donations. After the death of an artist, the heirs free themselves from their inheritance rights by making a new kind of gift, the dation.

But outside of any aesthetic context, self-sacrifice as a gift can be partial and just govern social behaviors as codified as blood donation or organ donation or the donation of the body to science. At the most simple level of religious life almsgiving belongs to religious duties and the poor box is a part of every church furniture. Since the famous Book *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Ancient Societies* (1923-1924) by Marcel Mauss, supplemented and commented by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Godelier, Philippe Descola, gift has become a central category of anthropological thought. Exchange is indeed the basis of social relations. And gift is linked to exchange. Except that the question of the automaticity of reciprocity arises with the gift. Within the Polynesian societies studied in the essay on the Gift, the gift calls for a counter-gift of greater symbolic importance if possible. Or rather, the counter-gift is not mandatory, but the honor of the one who performs it depends on the value of the counter-gift, thus obeying the pressure of a spiritual force, the “hau”. A spiral of reciprocal gifts takes place in the “potlatch” ceremony which provides a ritual character and the dimension of an almost religious ceremony to the practice of the gift. From this codified practice of giving results in the Polynesian tribes and beyond social positioning. The value of each gift and counter-gift also having a subjective dimension, we also know that the establishment of social relations between colonizers and colonized was based on a practice of highly asymmetrical gifts and counter-gifts. The solidarities implied by gifts and counter-gifts express the very substance of the social and its perpetuation over time.

The introduction of money in colonial societies was often largely sufficient to irreparably destroy colonized cultures by diverting the systems of institutionalized reciprocity through the gift. In representations of Amazonian or Siberian societies, nature itself can make gifts, for example of game or fish, within the framework of an ethic of solidarity that goes beyond the limits of human societies and includes the natural world. Shamanic practices organize between man and nature a system of gift and counter-gift, the traces of which can be still perceived in the representation of a day of the year when humanity has spent more natural resources than the earth can produce in a year. In 2021 it was July 21. The representation of a restitution to be made to the earth guides environmental policies.

The representation of this global solidarity explains the practice of donations without counter-gifts characteristic of evergetism and forms of philanthropy. Evergetism and philanthropy are not directed towards a single person but involve the social whole and if there is no counter-gift provided by a particular person or a community we can estimate that the cohesion of the social whole replaces the counter-gift. It is especially the case when the benefactor or the philanthropist derived a strong symbolic benefit from the donations they have made. Giving also means flaunting one’s wealth, as on the occasion of the reconstruction of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris many well known businessmen showed what they could support. Foundations appear in the West in the broad sense of the term as the symbolic compensation of an accumulated fortune that can be interpreted as the payment of a debt but the foundations insist in most cases on the lack of counter-gift o reciprocity other than a symbolic one.

The investigations of art historians on donors, of anthropologists on the "potlatch", of historians of Antiquity on evergetism or of modernist historians on philanthropy aim apparently to describe either the universality of human societies or remote ethnic groups, or past times. But there is in all of these investigations a strongly reflective moment and we observe actually an attempt to analyse the functioning rules of the contemporary world that the research undertaken on the gift strived to depict since Mauss. So we find the perpetuation of a life debt system through protection and social security mechanisms. Money is not only a neutral intermediary in commercial exchanges but it also represents the result of social relations specific to a particular society. Finance includes forms of gifts and counter-gifts in the most advanced merger and acquisition operations. And we cannot exclude from the public debt of States or private companies any trace of donation, since the moments of renegotiation bring to light the whole structure of underlying social ties.

From theology to economics through anthropology and the organization of scientific life, the gift system structures Western societies.