

Inalienability as Reciprocity: An Essay on Kinship

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ABSTRACT

Reciprocity lies at the heart of the influential theory of gift exchange proposed by Marcel Mauss a century ago. Seventy years later, Annette Weiner's theory of inalienable possessions offered an important critique of the Maussian tradition's emphasis on reciprocity: for Weiner, it was time to pay attention to human efforts to hold back precious objects from the demands of exchange. This essay revisits Weiner's dialogue with Mauss to argue that her contribution is most fruitfully read as a transgenerational extension of his thought rather than its abrogation. This is done through a slow synthetic rereading of aspects of the gift exchange literature, with particular attention to the work of Maurice Godelier, and its application to the itinerary of a family object.

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For the Webers and the Rotenbergs,

by way of the Biedermans

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*They were lovely people. When your mother was born,
they gave her the most beautiful gift. I forget what it was.*

I have a dollar that I keep in a spare wallet. It lives in a clear plastic pouch that someone threaded at the opening with a red string. Folded up as it is, the dollar bill looks like any other. Removed from its refuge and unfolded, it takes an attentive eye to read the tell-tale signs of its age: the distinctive floral curlicues around the border, the notice that it is redeemable in silver, and the series number marked 1935.

Some years ago, when she was well into her 80s, my grandfather's first cousin Blanka gave this little package to me. In her deliberate, lilting French edged with trilled r's, she explained that when she and her husband and her brother arrived in France after the war, my great-grandparents, scouring the New York papers for a sign that any relatives from Poland had survived, wrote them. In their letter, they included this dollar. While my great-grandmother never had the chance to see her brother's two surviving children (there had been six), she and her husband and adult children were able to send money to help them establish new lives. Beginning a few decades later, the cousins came to know one another through visits to Paris and New York. During my own travels, I in turn got to know these relatives, including the subsequent generations born in France. During one visit shortly after my grandfather died, Blanka decided to pass the dollar on to me. And to give it a home, she also gave me a black wallet from her leather goods shop in Boulogne.

I would like to think through this relic and its movements in relation to some classic conversations about the gift that have taken place in and around anthropology. Some would say this is a foolhardy endeavor. The gift is at the root of a huge and unruly literature about exchange that in some respects exemplifies how much of anthropological theory works: there are certain founding texts and thinkers, overlaid with a dense, ragged accumulation of exegesis, overlaid with a deadening uncertainty about what to do with it all. For anthropologists (though less so for sociologists), the topic's "sacred text...treated with reverential awe" (Parry, 1986, p. 455) is Marcel Mauss's 1925 Essay on the Gift. Many have pored over what Mauss was really driving at in this terse, enigmatic study, convinced that some part of something like the truth is found there. A

few have admitted that they find Mauss incoherent or distracting and have sought alternative paradigms (Ekeh, 1974, p. 196; Strathern, 1999, pp. 136-158). Even for anthropologists who pay little attention to Mauss or the gift, traces of the text are strewn about the disciplinary field. The upshot is that the gift and its accompanying vocabulary of reciprocity, hau, potlatch, kula, self-interest, and generosity saturate anthropology, but that it can be daunting to say anything specific about it. Seemingly everywhere, it can also seem to be nowhere. And when a substantial chunk of the debate pokes through the surface, there can be the feeling that it is best to steer clear, as if the protuberance wears a notice reading "do not disturb."

This is a pity, because Mauss and the debates that followed still have much to teach us, including about how processes that we intuitively understand, such as the foregoing transmission of an antique dollar, come to take place in the world. While David Graeber (2011, pp. 405n21, 115) has argued that reciprocity is so ubiquitous a phenomenon and so flexible a concept as to lose its analytic usefulness, one can also follow what Graeber did rather than what Graeber said: we can demand a still more careful thinking through of what reciprocity is and how it works. And as someone who thinks of Mauss's argument as provisional and who imagines that he would have been horrified at the prospect of being frozen in reverential awe, I also think Mauss would want to learn from us.

But if so, how to find a way in? On such well-trodden but tangled terrain, it is sometimes best to approach things obliquely, or even against the grain. My first serious engagement with the classic literature on the gift happened to be by way of a critique of Mauss. Annette Weiner's late work, summed up in her 1992 book *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, was a self-conscious challenge to the Maussian tradition that drew on its author's ethnographic fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands (one of the key locations discussed by Mauss), her reading of the wider ethnographic literature on exchange and kinship in other contexts in Oceania, and broader treatments of exchange in European social thought. Whereas Mauss and his earlier readers emphasized the social bonds built up through reciprocal gift exchange

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