

Free gifts and positional gifts: Beyond exchange

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Note: This is a pre-publication version of a paper published in the *European Journal of Social Theory*. It may differ slightly from the published version. Please cite as: Elder-Vass, D. (2015) 'Free gifts and positional gifts: Beyond exchange', *European Journal of Social Theory*, and refer to the published version for the final wording and pagination.

Abstract

Social theories of giving have often been shaped by anthropological accounts that present it as a form of pre-market reciprocal exchange, yet this exchangeist discourse obscures important contemporary giving practices. This paper discusses two types of giving that confound the exchangeist model: sharing practices within the family, and free gifts to strangers. Once we reject understandings of giving derived from analyses of non-modern economies, it becomes possible to see that the gift economy is not a rare survival but rather a central element of contemporary society and indeed the contemporary economy. The task for social theory is not to anachronise giving but to make sense of the variety and complexity of actual contemporary giving practices. This paper offers the categories of free and positional gifts as a contribution to this analysis.

Keywords

Digital economy, economic sociology, giving, Mauss, reciprocity, the gift.

The social theory of the gift is conducted in the shadow of Marcel Mauss. Mauss's famous essay discusses societies in which the economy depends upon cycles of giving. "Gifts circulate" he tells us, "with the certainty that they will be reciprocated..." (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 45). The implication, as Mary Douglas expresses it in her foreword to Mauss's essay, "is that the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding. There should not be any free gifts" (Douglas 2002: ix). But Douglas is wrong, at least when we cross the fault line that divides the anthropology of non-modern societies from the sociology of modern life. There *are* free gifts: gifts that are given with no obligation to reciprocate, and no expectation that they will be reciprocated. The denial of their existence has served to obscure and conceal a vitally important set of contemporary social practices.¹ The purpose of this paper is to reinstate the unreciprocated gift, alongside reciprocal varieties, as a legitimate focus of sociological attention, to demonstrate that we need the concept of free gifts if we are to make sense of a range of important contemporary socio-economic practices and to identify some of the different types of unreciprocated giving practices. Free gifts, however, must be distinguished from the mythical *pure gift*, the idea of a gift that is completely unmotivated by any benefit to the giver and done without being influenced by any sort of normative pressure. There are no such gifts; but this does not entail that all gifts require reciprocation.

For traditional economics, the concept of a gift economy is almost a contradiction in terms – the only part of the gift economy that fits within its view of the world is the 'gift industry' – the business of making commodities to be used as gifts after they have been purchased. But because it restricts its concept of the economy to those processes that are

governed by markets and excludes by definition those other parts of the substantive economy that do not involve commodity exchange, the gift economy proper is largely invisible to economics. What is perhaps more surprising is that sociology too has largely ignored giving. Although there are some honourable exceptions (for example Bourdieu 1977; Cheal 1988; Godbout and Caillé 1998; Komter 2005), even these have mostly taken their lead from anthropology and in particular from Mauss's iconic essay.

Mauss, despite formulating his classic work as a critique of utilitarianism and the discourse of the market, continues to express the idea of the gift as a form of *exchange*.² Mauss clearly has no intention of endorsing utilitarian thinking, yet he employs a discursive form redolent of the very economic discourse he seeks to question: although he distinguishes gift exchange from market exchange, the very concept of exchange nevertheless implies that two parties undertake a transaction with a view to what they will receive from the other (Silber 1998: 145). One unfortunate consequence has been to encourage a view of the gift that both misrepresents and radically underrepresents its social significance in contemporary societies. Although some gifts do conform to the logic of exchange, many others do not, including the most common and most contemporary forms of giving.³ Once we include these forms, giving constitutes a vast but persistently ignored sector of the contemporary substantive economy.

This paper seeks to redress the neglect of giving by identifying varieties that do not take the form of exchange. It proceeds by identifying different categories of giving, then focuses in on two categories in particular that are radically inconsistent with exchange accounts of the gift: positional giving, which is examined through the case of giving in families and similar intimate relationships, and free gifts to strangers, illustrated in

particular by new forms of giving on the Internet. First, however, the paper examines the intellectual context that contributes to the neglect of kinds of giving that do not conform to the model of exchange.

Exchangism and the gift

In the dominant economic discourse *the market* pervades and utterly saturates economic space: the economy, for it, is nothing more nor less than the market, and production that is done for exchange in the market. Sociologists are largely united in their rejection of this discourse, guided for example by Polanyi's work on alternative forms of integration, embeddedness, and the distinction between the substantive and formal economies (Polanyi 2001 [1957]). But until recently sociology has tended to neglect important areas of the substantive economy beyond the market, in particular substantial elements of the gift economy. It has done so, this paper suggests, partly because both anthropologists and sociologists have tended to look beyond *the market* without looking beyond *exchange*. This critique, in other words, is itself still embedded in the very forms of discourse it seeks to reject.

In the work of Mauss, for example, the gift appears as part of a 'gift economy' that is still an exchange economy. As Mary Douglas says in her interpretation of Mauss's argument, "right across the globe and as far back as we can go in the history of human civilization, the major transfer of goods has been by cycles of obligatory returns of gifts" (Douglas 2002:x). Mauss himself writes that the subject of his book is societies in which "exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily" (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 3). "Gifts circulate" he tells us, "with the certainty that they will be reciprocated..." (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 45). For Mauss, the gift economy is a system that is characterised

above all by *reciprocity*: the idea that every gift is to be followed by an equivalent counter-gift. Giving, in this model, is essentially a form of deferred exchange.⁴ It is, of course, a *different* form of exchange than market exchange, yet it remains a form of exchange. Thus even Mauss's model includes an element of the dominant discourse, an element that we may call *exchangism*: the tendency to treat all transfers of goods as requiring reciprocation, and all production as done for the purpose of exchange (Pyyhtinen 2014: chapter 2). As Graeber argues in his discussion of the anthropological literature on gifts:

almost all this literature concentrates on the exchange of gifts, assuming that whenever one gives a gift, this act incurs a debt, and the recipient must eventually reciprocate in kind... [T]he logic of the marketplace has insinuated itself even into the thinking of those who are most explicitly opposed to it (Graeber 2011: 90)

This paper does not address the question of whether giving necessarily takes a reciprocal form in non-modern societies, but exchangism must be rejected when we seek to understand the many forms of the gift in modern society. Many of these gifts are *not* exchanges because no return from the recipient is required or expected.

Nor is this a problem that is confined to anthropology: often sociologists also see giving as a process of reciprocity and exchange. Komter, for example, tells us that "The principle of reciprocity underlying gift exchange proved to be the fundament of human society" (Komter 2005: 195) (cf. Berking 1999: 26). As Godbout says, there are many ways of thinking about the gift that "give in, subtly, to the temptation of seeing the gift

as a kind of economic exchange” but instead we must “remove it from the shadow cast by modern economics” (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 130).

Exchangism has a tendency to be self-confirming. Consider the following:

Within the system of the gift, ‘to reciprocate’ means, in fact, to give. The distinction between giving and receiving is one of analysis alone... We give, and if analysis shows that we have already received, the label ‘reciprocation’ is affixed to this part of the act (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 95)

Godbout’s point, as I understand it, is that for an analyst with an exchangist mentality, any return following a gift becomes a reciprocation and thus a confirmation of the exchangist view, irrespective of whether it appears this way to the participants (Berking 1999: 40). For such analysts, the return of a further gift at a later point is the completion of an exchange, in a system that requires such completions. But this is not necessarily the spirit of the ‘return’ at all (even in those cases when a return actually does occur) (Godbout 2000: 41). It may merely be, for example, that when two people are in a certain sort of relationship, they give each other gifts. It is at least as plausible to argue that the significant feature of giving in many contemporary Western societies is that one partner should not generally give two successive gifts, since this may unbalance the relationship to one of unequal prestige and dependency. Given such a standard, gifts may alternate, but this is not a matter of exchange, it is a matter of both parties making their contribution to sustaining the relationship (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 7). Concepts of *gift exchange*, *equivalence*, and *reciprocity* may be attached by the observer, but not necessarily by the participant.

Bourdieu has finessed this distinction, seeking to recognise both the subjective denial of reciprocity and the objective fact of it, but positions the subjective denial in much of his work largely as a *misrecognition* of the truth of reciprocity (and thus as an error: see Osteen 2002a: 24),⁵ a misrecognition that plays an important functional part in the process of gift exchange (Bourdieu 1977: 4-6). While this is no doubt true of types of giving that do resemble the exchange model, Bourdieu tends to write as if it applies to gift-giving in general, and thus he too falls prey to the exchangist illusion that *all* giving is a form of exchange.

Derrida, too, finds a conflict between the absence of reciprocity in the *concept* of the gift and its presence in the *practice* of the gift as he understands it (Derrida 1997). While Bourdieu focuses on how this apparent contradiction is carried off in practice, Derrida characteristically turns it into a paradox. Again, however, the problem, and thus the paradox, arises only for gifts where reciprocation is indeed present. Like Mauss and Bourdieu, Derrida's argument is premised on the universality of reciprocity in giving. Unlike them, however, he extends reciprocity radically by suggesting that it is present even in the simple recognition that a gift has occurred (Derrida 1997: 129).

It is tempting to suggest that he found this extension necessary in order to preserve the paradox in cases where a material return does not occur. More charitably, however, one might suggest that Derrida has put his finger on a problem that must be addressed by anyone claiming the existence of free gifts: even when a material return to the giver does not occur, is there not usually (or always) a symbolic return? The best response, I suggest, is to recognise that giving practices are normatively governed, and it is the normative environment, which differs between different giving practices, which determines both whether reciprocation is expected and also what *counts* as

reciprocation. In neither the practices of free giving discussed in this paper nor the practices of reciprocal giving documented by Mauss does symbolic recognition count as reciprocation of a gift. In both the potlatch and the kula ring, real material goods are required as reciprocation. Derrida's argument, in this context, is simply one more case of the exchangeist determination to find ways of reading reciprocity into the gift.

Still, one should not entirely dismiss the relevance of symbolic returns. Thanks may be normatively expected in cases of giving where material reciprocation is not, and such cases are perhaps intermediate between reciprocal giving and the most clear-cut cases of free giving. But even symbolic returns are not always required: the recipients of anonymous digital gifts such as filesharing downloads, for example, rarely acknowledge them, and symbolic returns may even be barred institutionally: it is usually impossible to thank the blood donors from whose gifts we benefit.

Marginalising the gift

One of the most significant consequences of seeing giving as a pre-market form of exchange is the implication that giving in the contemporary economy is a marginal residual, a survival of secondary importance to the market system of exchange that is taken to have replaced it. This perspective is very clear in Mauss's unilinear social evolutionism, in which gift exchange is seen as "a regime that must have been shared by a very large part of humanity during a very long transitional phase" prior to the rise of money and the market (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 59).⁶ This is also the implication, for example, of Polanyi's typology of forms of integration. For Caillé, "the idea of the gift as a mode of exchange offers an almost irresistible temptation to scholars to propose that there is a radical break between premodern and modern cultures, with the gift reserved for the premoderns, while we must deal through the market and the state"

(Preface to Godbout and Caillé 1998: vii). Cheal rightly sees this tendency to think of gift practices as “archaic customs” as a “major barrier to the development of a sociology of gift practices” (1988: 2). Ironically, however, Cheal himself displays one symptom of the mindset that sees modern gifts as residual forms of reciprocity: he sees gifts purely in terms of formal presents, given mostly on ritual occasions such as birthdays and religious festivals (as does Berking 1999) (Adloff and Mau 2006: 96).

This exchange tradition overlooks a vast range of giving that does not take the reciprocal form, and thus a vast range of substantive economic activity that occurs beneath the radar of an economics that is oriented to exchange rather than to the provisioning of human needs.⁷ This includes, perhaps most significantly, work that is done for members of one’s family and one’s friends: growing and preparing food, providing transport, caring work, or providing shelter and clothing – whether through one’s own work (e.g. cooking, knitting, subsistence agriculture) or through giving goods purchased in the market. But it also includes, for example, free and open source software, the creation of user generated digital media content, and volunteering.

It is difficult to estimate the scale of such activity in quantitative terms as by definition it is not measured by the standard we have come to take for granted: exchange value. But we can start to understand the potential scale by stitching together scraps of evidence from a variety of sources. Godbout, for example, tells us that in North America 70-80% of care for the aged is provided by the family (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 26). In 2008, the Linux Foundation estimated that it would cost \$10.8 billion to build the software in a typical distribution of the open source operating system Linux if it was developed commercially (Linux is one of the most successful open source software products but there are many others). Anderson’s “back-of-the-

envelope” calculation of the unpaid effort expended on building free to view web pages suggests that if it was paid at a modest rate it might cost \$260 billion a year (Anderson 2009: 168). And all this merely scratches the surface of contemporary giving. It seems likely that the majority of the world’s population devotes more of its time to unpaid productive labour for the benefit of those close to them than to paid work (Ironmonger 1996). If this is so, and if we can consider such labour as a gift, the contemporary gift economy remains *larger than* the market economy, on some measures at least.⁸

A perspective that ignores this economy not only ignores a substantial amount of economic activity. It also radically understates the role of normativity and of motivations other than rationally calculative self interest in driving economic behaviour, and it obscures a vast non-capitalist economy that exists alongside the politically dominant economic form (Elder-Vass 2014b).

Kinds of giving

While others have rejected the exchangist assumption, there is a temptation to replace the concept of the gift as a form of exchange with some other universal concept of the gift. There is a suggestion of such a strategy, for example, when Osteen writes “to discover the true nature of the gift, we must redirect our gaze from reciprocity toward other principles and motives. When we do, a different set of norms emerges, a set founded upon spontaneity rather than calculation, upon risk instead of reciprocity, upon altruism instead of autonomy” (Osteen 2002b: 7). This paper is founded on the view that it is more productive and enlightening to take a different perspective: that the gift may take many different forms with different implications. We can recognise that *some* giving is founded on reciprocity while rejecting the argument that *all* giving must be, and go on to identify alternative forms with different implications.

We may classify types of giving along many different dimensions, but this paper will focus on just two (see Table 1 and Figure 1 below). First we may classify them on the basis of what, if anything, is expected of the recipient as a consequence of accepting the gift. Giving may be distinguished from market exchange because, unlike market exchange, it is a voluntary transfer of goods or services that does *not* entail an immediate return of agreed benefits of equivalent value that brings the relationship between seller and buyer to a point of balance (and thus potentially to a point of closure: Graeber 2011: 104).⁹ As we have seen, however, classical treatments of giving such as Mauss's have nevertheless considered it as, in effect, a delayed form of exchange, in which the recipient is expected to return a gift of approximately equivalent or greater value after a period of delay. There is considerable evidence that *some* giving takes this form, and we may adopt the terminology of the literature and name this *reciprocal giving*.

However, there are also many cases of what I will call *free giving*, in which it is considered perfectly acceptable if the recipient neither returns an equivalent gift to the donor nor makes similar gifts in a cyclical pattern. Charitable donations are a clear case, and the most interesting contemporary developments in gifting also seem to be concentrated in this space, developments such as the free and open source software movement and the gifting of intellectual work to projects like Wikipedia. Of course, *some* recipients of such gifts may go on to reciprocate directly or to give cyclically themselves, but the issue here is not whether this occurs, but rather whether it is normatively required of the original recipients as a consequence of receiving the original gift, and in free giving this is not the case.

In a second dimension, we may also distinguish between types of giving in terms of the expectations placed upon *donors*: is there, or is there not, a normative pressure to give in the first place, and if so what form does it take? In some cases, I suggest, there is no such pressure, but in others there is, and the case I wish to examine is what we may call *positional giving*. In positional giving there is a normative expectation that people in certain social positions will give gifts to certain other people. There is no necessary expectation incumbent on the recipient to make a return to the original donor but on the other hand they too, like anyone else, will be expected to make similar gifts if and when they find themselves in the equivalent social position. Although the experience of receiving such gifts no doubt helps to socialise their recipients into the norms concerned, the social expectation that they will follow this norm is not derived from the initial act of gift giving itself, but pre-exists it (on normative pressures see Elder-Vass 2010: chapter 6; Elder-Vass 2012: chapters 2 and 3). The central cases here occur in the family: in particular, there is an expectation that parents will give to their children, and that those children will not return those gifts but rather will make similar gifts of their own if they become parents themselves. All children depend upon giving from their parents or carers until they are able to contribute more than the cost of their upkeep to the family's consumption needs. While in some societies there may be a reciprocal obligation to care for the parents in their old age (a rather uncertain one given the timescales involved), the more taxing obligation is usually for children to sustain their own offspring later in the lifecycle. This is not a cycle of reciprocity but a "serial flow" (Cheal 1988: 58).

Some thinkers have nevertheless sought to represent such obligations as a form of reciprocity: Sahlins called it "generalized reciprocity" (1974) and Mauss "alternating

reciprocity” (2007 [1967]: 103). But this makes *reciprocity* into a term of art that departs substantially from common usage, in which reciprocity entails a *return* from B to A in response to some gift, favour, or interaction that has flowed from A to B. In cases of “generalized” reciprocity, not only is the ‘return’ made to a different person, but the ‘return’ is a type of gift that we are expected to make *irrespective* of whether we ever receive an equivalent gift: in other words, it is not a return at all. As Graeber points out, this labelling strategy merely “demonstrates that if one has already decided that all relations are based on reciprocity, one can always define the term so broadly as to make it true” (Graeber 2011: 405).

Type of gift	Expectations	Examples (culturally specific)
Reciprocal	The recipient should provide a return gift to the giver at some future time	Birthday presents between friends; labour contributed to neighbours’ building projects
Positional	Anyone in the relevant position and circumstances should give such gifts	Feeding and clothing one’s children
Free	No expectation of a return gift or obligation to make similar gifts	Most gifts to charity; contributing to open source software projects

Table 1: Three types of gifts

A gift, then, may be reciprocal or free, and it may also be positional or non-positional. These are two different dimensions of difference, and may be represented graphically, as in Figure 1.

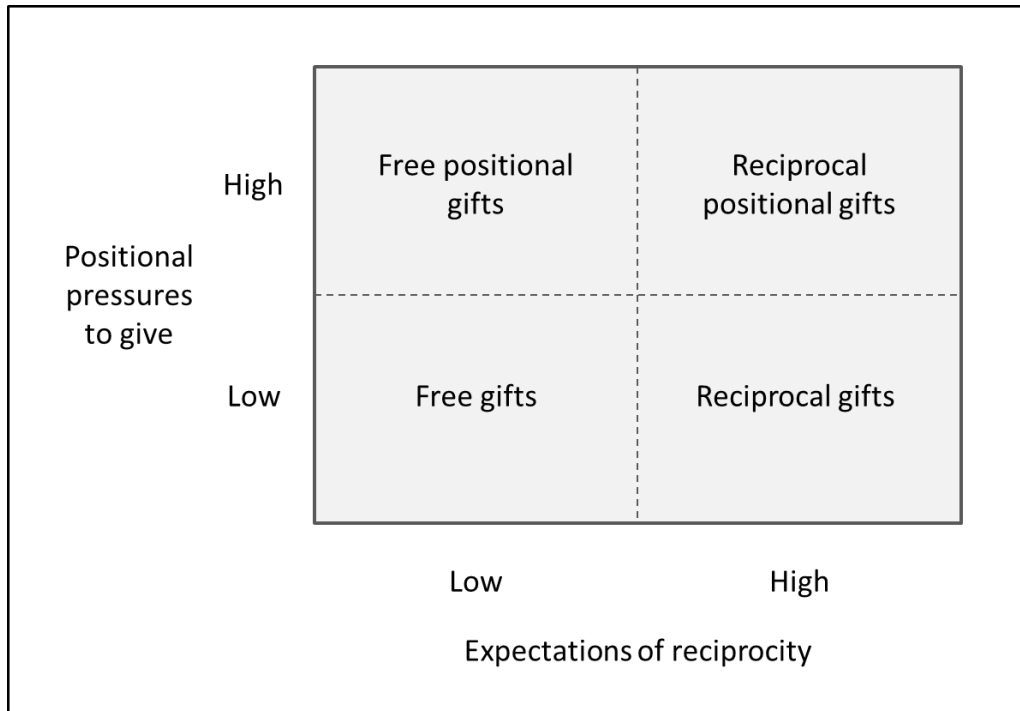


Figure 1: Two dimensions of giving

Thus some positional gifts are also free gifts, for example the sharing of scientific knowledge by those who have developed it. As Merton makes clear in his analysis of the normative system of modern science, scientists are expected to share their results freely with others through the mechanism of academic publishing: this is positional giving (Merton 1973). They do not expect to receive reciprocal value from each and every reader of their work, nor is there any obligation on those readers to make equivalent gifts to others – unless, of course, they too are academic scientists. Hence these are also free gifts. Free riders, in utter contrast to exchange theory, are welcome.

Other positional gifts, however, may require reciprocation. The North American potlatch described by Mauss is a kind of ritual feast, at which the host also gives away or even destroys a variety of material goods. There is a positional expectation that “A chief must give potlatches for himself, his son, his son-in-law, or his daughter, and for his dead” (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 50) hence these are positional gifts – only chiefs give

them – but there is also an expectation that “the potlatch must be reciprocated with interest” (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 53). Reciprocation takes varying forms of which two are notable: the individual who receives, for example, a blanket, must return blankets on some future occasion, but other chiefs who attend the potlatch must give potlatches of their own. Even the form of reciprocation, then, is positional.¹⁰

Whatever the expectations placed upon the recipient of a gift may be, donors always have reasons for giving, reasons that typically involve receiving some benefit, whether from the recipient, from others, or internally as a product of the act of giving itself (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 93-4; Komter 2005: 46-50). However, I immediately reject two connotations that exchangeist thinkers might be tempted to impute to this statement. First, this by no means implies that all giving is an act of exchange after all. If for example a charitable donor makes a gift that has life changing benefits for many people, she may achieve admiration and prestige in the eyes of other people as a result, but this is not an exchange: it is not an immediate return; it is not on the whole a return from the recipients themselves; it is not a return of an agreed benefit; and only by accident might it represent an equivalent value. Second, it does not imply that acts of giving are selfishly motivated. There is nothing selfish in an act of giving, for example, that is motivated by pleasure in other people’s happiness (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 184). This question of altruism in giving is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

The remainder of the paper considers two types of non-reciprocal giving in a little more depth: sharing within the household, and free gifts to strangers.

Sharing/caring within intimate relationships

Caring is so taken for granted that we may not even think of it as giving. It may seem odd, for example, to say that parents are giving to their children when we are talking about the meals, shelter, clothing, and other facilities that they share with them. One reason for our sense of doubt may be that within the context of the family and similar intimate relationships we may not think of the goods involved as things that belong to one particular person but rather as things that belong to the household as a whole and thus are shared *rather than* given (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 29). The institution of property, in a sense, ends at the front door, and if giving is a matter of transferring ownership rights it only has meaning within the institution of property.

We might dispute this on the grounds that the law sees property rights everywhere, or on the grounds that ownership practices do continue within the family – particular pieces of clothing, or food, or books, or electronic gadgets, for example, might be regarded as belonging to one particular member of the family, irrespective of legal property rights. But perhaps the most fruitful way to dispute it would be to recognise that typically children are unable to provide these things for themselves and hence they only obtain them as a result of their parents or carers bringing them into the household. In this sense, at least, sharing is a kind of giving, a transfer of what is obtained outside the household into the sharing economy of the family. But there is also another variety of sharing, which is what we might call giving of oneself: doing work for the benefit of others in the household, whether directly caring work, housework, or, particularly in the case of children, teaching and mentoring.

Sharing, then, may be defined as a kind of giving in which goods and labour are provided by one member of an interactional group for the benefit of others within the

group, without any expectation of reciprocal material return, and it is therefore a variety of free giving. The paradigmatic cases of sharing occur in the family-based household: caring for children and caring for aged or infirm relatives, and these are also cases of positional giving since they are normatively expected of those *in loco parentis* (there is also, of course, a gendered element to this positionality). Positional giving to children who are too young to fend for themselves is about as close as we will find to a universal human social practice, although clearly the form and the duration of it vary considerably (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 24). Indeed, parental generosity (free positional giving) often continues towards adult children (Cheal 1988: 8; Heath and Calvert 2013).

Caring for the aged is arguably more contested, particularly in societies where the issue is complicated by extended lifespans and the commercialisation of elder care, but even in North America, as noted earlier, 70-80% of care for the aged has been provided by the family (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 26). The structure of family obligations is also rather variable between cultures, and this may affect how we should classify the gifts concerned. In cultures where there is a strong normative expectation that any surviving children will care for their parents in their old age, we may consider that their original gift of childcare was a kind of positional reciprocal giving, with the required reciprocation taking the form of elder care. In cultures where children are not expected to care for their parents (even if some do), the original gift of childcare would be free positional giving. Recognising both cases also creates the need to recognise that there are many shades of intermediate variation, and thus that gifts may lie along a continuum between the fully free and the strongly reciprocal, rather than dividing unambiguously into binary categories.

Sharing is perhaps done primarily for love, out of concern and care for those with whom we feel close emotional bonds. Daniel Miller's ethnographic work on shopping in North London argues, for example, that "shopping is primarily an act of love", in that most shopping is directed at meeting the needs of other family members, as part of a process of constituting "relationships of love and care" with other members of the household (Miller 1998: 18). Other factors, notably relationship building and normative pressures, may also be significant, though Miller argues that "Love as a practice is quite compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility" (Miller 1998: 19).

Yet the family household is also the site of powerful normative systems – primarily gender structures – that may make such giving more or less compulsory for certain groups of people. Clearly some domestic labour is forced rather than given voluntarily, but not all. The most plausible way to understand the contemporary Western household is as the site of a mixed economy of practices (Elder-Vass 2014b). Whatever other practices may sometimes be present, some of the transfers of goods and services made to partners and many or most of those made to children and dependent elders are gifts.

In the longer term the recipients of child care may in turn give care to their former carers when they become old and infirm. They may do so from love, or they may do so out of a sense of obligation, or some mixture of the two. Such a sense of obligation may arise from social norms: there may be a norm, for example, that children (or more specifically, in some cultures at least, daughters) should care for their parents when they become old. Or it may come from a sense that it is only fair, having been cared for oneself by this person, that one should care for them when they themselves need it. There is, then, an element of reciprocation in the return gift, but again this is very different from the model of gift-as-exchange. Typically the return gift occurs many

decades after the original gift; there is no calculation of equivalence of the size of the return gift vis-à-vis the size of the original gift; and at the time of the original gift it is more or less impossible to calculate whether there might be any such return: for example either party might fail to live long enough, the relationship may break down, or the parent may be fit and well enough in old age that they do not need significant care. While in some cultures it may be possible to see elder care as a reciprocal gift that is normatively expected, in many cases these uncertainties make it difficult to see child care as a gift that is made in the expectation of reciprocation. These are only tenuously connected gifts.

Sharing within the household is ignored by exchange theory, but it is enormously important. No doubt one could estimate its scale by examining the time that is devoted to caring within the family, and the portion of income that is devoted to shared consumption. But that would still underestimate its significance: this is a kind of giving without which the human species as we know it would not exist.

Free gifts to strangers

It is not only positional giving, however, that refuses to conform to the exchange model of giving as reciprocity. This section considers what has sometimes been regarded as the uniquely modern form of giving, identified by Titmuss in his book on blood donation as *giving to strangers* (1997: 226). While there may be some gentle normative encouragement in some countries to give blood, there is no *obligation* to do so,¹¹ nor is there any significant material return in countries that rely on donations for blood supplies, indeed it may be positively inconvenient and disruptive to give blood. In these giving practices the donor offers gifts to unknown or distant others with no hope or expectation of material return. These, then, are free gifts, and they provide us with

the clearest possible contradiction of Douglas's argument that such gifts should not occur.

Perhaps the most obvious group of such practices is charitable giving, whether of money or of labour (volunteering). Charitable donors do not expect a material return from the recipients of their gifts nor do they expect charity from others at some future point. Charitable giving is often wrapped in institutional structures that serve, among other things, to distance the gifts involved from the idea of reciprocity. Thus, for example, the Jewish charitable practice *tzedekah* is constructed as “a double-blind procedure – givers are not supposed to know to whom they are giving and the receivers should not know their benefactors” (Lainer-Vos 2013: 179). Hence reciprocity is ruled out institutionally. Contemporary charitable organisations perform a similar function; indeed there may be several layers of organisation separating the initial donor from the eventual recipient (Barman 2007). By eliminating not only reciprocation itself but also any sense that reciprocation might be required, such institutions also ease or eliminate the status degradation incurred in systems of reciprocal giving by those who are unable to reciprocate (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 83). The sense that the unreciprocated gift signals inferiority and dishonour is a product of specific giving practices, and not of giving as such (as we shall see again in connection with digital gifts). One of the most interesting features of recent writing on giving has been the increasing recognition that organisations actively manage these meanings with the intention of encouraging giving (e.g. Healy 2006; Lainer-Vos 2013); as a result they have arguably helped to construct less socially onerous practices for the receipt of gifts.¹²

Also within this cluster, however, we find what is arguably the most dynamic set of giving practices in the contemporary period: what we may call *digital giving*. When, for

example, people write or improve articles on Wikipedia, when they contribute to the development of free open source software, or when they post advice on web forums, they create digital goods and give them away freely to anyone who cares to look them up on the Internet. This is not charity: there is no sense that those strangers to whom we give digital gifts are necessarily worse off than ourselves, and there is no stigma associated with accepting such gifts. When we give such digital gifts we are giving to strangers as equals, but also without expectation of reciprocation. Again, there is no sense of dishonour arising from failure to reciprocate such gifts.

Digital giving is giving *without sacrifice*: when we give a digital product we give without giving up, without losing the thing that we are giving away. Digital goods are, to put the point more technically, *nonrival*. To some extent this was true already for scientific knowledge, and indeed this too is now a digital product, but before the Internet, giving away copies of scientific knowledge was not a cost-free activity: paper had to be produced and distributed, introducing costs into the process, the need for a funding model to finance those costs, and thus the intrusion of commercial activities that monetised the distribution of such knowledge. The Internet has transformed this situation, and the marginal cost of distributing copies of digital goods has fallen so close to zero that it is often effectively free. This transforms the economics of information economies. For example, free riders are now much less of an issue. If a million people consume a digital product and only a tiny fraction of them contribute to its further development this may be enough to sustain a vibrant information economy. Communities generating information goods can survive when only a small proportion of members contribute, and those few that do can have the satisfaction of knowing that their work has helped an enormous number of other people.

In economies of scarcity, we give up what we give, and there is therefore a limit to how much we can give. We must therefore limit our giving, and ensure that our gifts reap rewards – whether in terms of reciprocity, social relationships, a sense of satisfaction in caring for our family, or standing in the community – that justify the personal costs of giving. In economies of abundance, like the digital information economy, there is no longer a need for every receipt of a gift to generate a benefit for the giver, as long as a few of them generate enough benefit in total for the practice to be sustainable. Reciprocity, at the level of the individual recipient, is essentially obsolete in such economies, and the meanings of giving practices have developed accordingly. In the case of the digital economy, I suggest, it is not organisations but our recognition of abundance, of the trivial marginal cost of the digital gift, that has eliminated any sense of dishonour in accepting it without reciprocation.

Free gifts need not be disinterested gifts

Why do people make digital gifts? Let us consider just one of the examples given above: the contributions that many people make to improving articles on Wikipedia. Clay Shirky provides a fascinating account of his own reasons (as far as he can tell by introspection) for making his first Wikipedia edit. These include, notably, the sheer pleasure of exercising our creative powers and the desire to do something for the benefit of humanity at large (Shirky 2009: 132-3). O’Sullivan suggests that although these motivations may indeed be significant, for many contributors to Wikipedia there are also others that Shirky misses, notably

the attractions of belonging to a community, and of being recognized and valued by that community, especially one which offers a non-hierarchical and collaborative form of organization. Membership gives participants a sense of

belonging, a common purpose, and offers mutual support in achieving the aims of the group (O'Sullivan 2009: 87).

These givers, in other words, are motivated by the desire to build social relationships and symbolic capital. There is not one exclusive motivation for contributing to Wikipedia and projects like it, but a range of motivations, and different contributors may be driven by different mixes of them.

Wikipedia is unusual (and important) in being organised in a way that makes it difficult to use it to pursue more self-interested goals. But elsewhere in the digital economy we find complex entanglements between giving and the commodity economy. Those who contribute to the development of open source software, for example, sometimes see this work as a way of establishing a reputation that will later help them to find paid work – what Lerner and Tirole call the *career concern incentive* (Lerner and Tirole 2002: 213). Indeed some commercial companies fund the development of open source software and make a profit from related business (Weber 2004: 195-207), and this is only one of the many ways in which commercial companies hope to make money indirectly by offering gifts over the Internet (Elder-Vass 2014a). Google, for example, has become so profitable that in mid-2014 it was the third most highly valued company in the world, almost entirely on the basis of advertising revenues that it can earn because it gives away search results, email services, maps, and a vast range of other services as digital gifts. There is, as Fuchs puts it, “an entanglement of gifts within the commodity form” (Fuchs 2008: 171-2). And this is not only a digital phenomenon. Bird-David and Darr, for example, have documented the use of gifts in the sales process in Israeli retail shops, and McClain and Mears have examined the use of gifts to attract

models to U.S. nightclubs in order to also attract paying customers (Bird-David and Darr 2009; McClain and Mears 2012).

There is some ambiguity about the role of reciprocation in some of these gifts, and indeed some of them verge on barter and thus commodity exchange. Google, for example, originally supplied free search results without appearing to receive anything in return, but subsequently found ways to monetise search by using the search terms entered by users to leverage the sale of advertising. We might say that when they did so their search was transformed from a gift to a form of barter, in which search was given in exchange for exploitable information about the user's interests. The most productive way of understanding such cases, as Dan Lainer-Vos argues, is as grey areas, where these different forms of transaction blur into each other, and indeed where the same transaction may be understood differently by different parties (Lainer-Vos 2013: 23). Another such grey area is the case of loans that are given partly from a desire to support the recipient. Both Lainer-Vos, in discussing loans by members of the Irish and Israeli diasporas to the governments (or aspiring governments) of their respective homelands, and Heath and Calvert, in discussing loans from parents to adult children, have suggested that such loans may also have an element of gift, and indeed a gift where the potential for reciprocation was quite deliberately left uncertain (Heath and Calvert 2013; Lainer-Vos 2013).

Giving, then, is the site of a vast range of differing motives and meanings, which cross-cut the varying forms of giving diversely. At one extreme, we have motives of generosity, which may be described as altruism when the gift is given out of a concern for the benefit of others. Godbout approaches this issue through the concept of disinterestedness. The disinterested gift is the gift that "expects nothing in return"

(Godbout and Caillé 1998: 176). It may gratify the giver simply through the pleasure she receives from giving; it may even turn out to be reciprocated, but for the giver “the act is entirely satisfying in itself and requires no return on the part of the donor”

(Godbout and Caillé 1998: 184). Thus we may find generosity and altruism in the reciprocated gift as well as in the free gift. And we need not insist that altruism is so pure that the giver receives no pleasure from their generosity: a gift that is done out of an intention to benefit the recipient does not cease to be generous when giving is a pleasure.

Equally, we may find that more selfish motives lie behind both reciprocal gifts and free gifts. Mauss, for example, reads the potlatch custom practiced by certain groups of Native Americans as driven by the desire to achieve status at the expense of others, particularly by giving so much that they are unable to reciprocate (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 50-54). And free gifts may be equally selfishly motivated, such as the coding donated to open source projects by software companies who hope to earn consultancy and technical support fees on the back of the reputation they acquire from their gifts (Elder-Vass 2014a).

We will never make sense of the motives for giving, however, if we insist on dividing gifts into the altruistic gift and the selfish gift. Just as Clay Shirky was driven by a mixture of motives in making his first Wikipedia edit, *all* human actions are multiply determined by a variety of interacting causes, some of them operating as mental properties that motivate their actions (Elder-Vass 2007). One consequence is that there may be *both* altruistic and self-interested reasons that interact to produce acts of giving. The simplest case is the one we have already encountered, the giver who enjoys doing things for the benefit of others, but there are also others.

Nor need we locate the sources of giving purely at the individualistic level. Altruism, and indeed other kinds of motives, are encouraged or inhibited by a variety of social factors. One of the significant contributions of recent economic sociology to our understanding of giving has been the recognition that altruism is in part produced by the discursive and organisational strategies of various agencies. Kieran Healy shows this particularly clearly in his analysis of why blood and organ donation rates vary between territories, but we can find similar messages in, for example, the work of Emily Barman on charitable giving and that of Dan Lainer-Vos on diasporic giving (Barman 2007; Healy 2006; Lainer-Vos 2013). All giving is embedded in a context of institutions and relationships that affects both how and when it occurs, and also how it is understood.

Conclusion

Despite the exchangeist paradigm that has dominated anthropological and sociological thinking about gifts, a vast amount of giving is *not* exchange, not even deferred and uncertain exchange. Even more important, giving is not all the same: there are many different kinds of giving, with radically different social and political implications. Positional giving, for example, which is free in the sense that no return is expected from the recipient to the initial donor, is fundamental to family life. Free gifts to strangers have become a widespread phenomenon on the Internet and one that has generated conflict over the appropriate form of the digital economy.

These implications are significant. The gift economy ceases to be a marginal survival from a non-modern form of life and instead must be recognised as a central element of the contemporary economy. This in turn implies that capitalism, despite its more-or-less global extensive reach, remains much less than the total form of the contemporary

economy. Alongside it, and interpenetrating it, there remains a form of economy that still has space for tradition, generosity, creativity and unalienated labour.

Yet we must avoid romanticising the gift economy. First, the gift is not a purely progressive phenomenon. Some forms of it are arguably disguised forms of exchange; some giving is used to sustain positions of social power; and some forms of it exist on the back of repressive systems of power such as the patriarchy that tends to compel women to be caregivers. Second, the gift itself is not immune to being coopted by the commodity economy: much of the giving in the digital economy in particular is thoroughly entangled with the sale of commodities (Fuchs 2008: 171, 185). Third, there are continuing struggles over the viability of many forms of giving, such as the many attempts by the media industry to prevent gifts of copyrighted material, and it is an open question how these struggles will turn out (Gillespie 2007; Goldsmith and Wu 2006: chapter 7; Strangelove 2005: chapter 1).

The contemporary gift economy may be as large as, or larger than, the market economy. It is perhaps to be expected that economists, with their market-centred doctrine, generally ignore it. And the central political roles of market power and market discourse in the contemporary world certainly justify considerable attention to the market from sociologists. But it would be disappointing if social theorists *also* continued to accept the exchangeist assumptions that have led them to treat the gift economy as marginal. Giving, in all its forms, should be a major focus for sociology and social theory.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Karen O'Reilly, Sandy Ross, and the anonymous reviewers for their very useful challenges and comments, and all those who commented on my related papers presented at the 'Embeddedness and Beyond' conference in Moscow, October 2012, the BSA annual conference in London, April 2013, and the ISA World Congress of Sociology in Yokohama, July 2014.

Notes

¹ Although Mirowski has already criticised Douglas's claim that there are no free gifts as "bizarre", he continues to talk of gifts as exchanges, thus contributing to the concealment criticised here (Mirowski 2001: 439). Testart gets much closer to my argument: he has described the idea of a universal obligation to reciprocate as "manifestly false" because "we know of gift giving practices... from which this obligation is absent": such practices are the focus of this paper (Testart 1998: 98).

² This is arguably one aspect of what Mirowski calls the "radical undecidability" of Mauss's work: the tensions between different arguments that remain unreconciled in it (Mirowski 2001: 440).

³ In sociology, Jacques Godbout has made by far the most important contribution to opening up these questions (Godbout and Caillé 1998); and in anthropology, similar arguments have been introduced by David Graeber (Graeber 2011: chapter 5).

⁴ Perhaps some of the problem is linguistic: Mauss uses the somewhat archaic French term *prestation*, which shares some connotations with the English term *loan*, rather than *cadeau*, which would be more straightforwardly translatable as *gift* (Sandy Ross, 2014, personal communication). So he may not intend his analysis to apply to *all* gifts, though he is often read as if he does.

⁵ Although later he shifts towards expressing this as the 'twofold truth' of the gift (Bourdieu 2000: 191).

⁶ While Mauss did recognise that the gift survives in the modern economy, he nevertheless tended to see it as a "marginal vestige of what it had once been" (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 11).

⁷ There are of course heterodox economists and sociologists who recognise this point. See, for example, Nelson (2005: 18) and Sayer (2004: 9).

⁸ Similarly, Gibson-Graham asks why we should call an economy capitalist "when more hours of labour (over the life course of individuals) are spent in noncapitalist activity" (Gibson-Graham 2006: 13).

⁹ The actual return of a good or service, or of money, may be deferred in a market exchange, but there is always an immediate binding legal commitment to make a specified return.

¹⁰ Ashley Mears has documented a modern parallel (2014). By contrast, the kula ring appears to be a non-positional form of reciprocal giving (Mauss 2002 [1950]: 27-36).

¹¹ For a brilliant account of the role of obligation in giving, see Testart (1998).

¹² My thanks to the anonymous reviewer whose comments inspired much of this paragraph.

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