

Excerpt taken from Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (1925)

It is possible to extend these observations to our own societies. A considerable part of our morality and our lives themselves are still permeated with this same atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle. Fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorized in terms of buying and selling. Things still have sentimental as well as venal value, assuming values merely of this kind exist. We possess more than a tradesman morality. There still remain people and classes that keep to the morality of former times, and we almost all observe it, at least at certain times of the year or on certain occasions.

The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it. We are still in the field of Germanic morality when we recall the curious essay by Emerson entitled 'Gifts'. Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it, and the whole tendency of our morality is to strive to do away with the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver.

The invitation must be returned, just as 'courtesies' must. Surprisingly, here are to be seen traces of the old, traditional, moral basis, that of the ancient aristocratic potlatches. Here we also see come to the surface these fundamental motives for human activity: emulation between individuals of the same sex, that basic 'imperialism' of human beings. On the one hand, it is the social basis, on the other the animal and psychological basis, that appears. In that separate existence that constitutes our social life, we ourselves cannot 'lag behind', as the expression still goes. We must give back more than we have received. The round of drinks is ever dearer and larger in size. Thus, in our childhood, one village family in Lorraine, which normally contented itself with living very frugally, ruined itself for the sake of its guests on saints days, and at weddings, first communions, or funerals. One must act the 'great lord' upon such occasions. It may even be said that one section of our people is constantly behaving like this, and spends with the utmost

extravagance on guests and on feast days, and with New Years gifts.

Things sold still have a soul. They are still followed around by their former owner, and they follow him also. At Cornimont, in a valley of the Vosges, the following custom was common not so long ago and perhaps continues to linger on in certain families: so that animals that had been bought should forget their former master and were not tempted to return 'home', a cross was traced on the lintel of the stable door, the halter belonging to the seller was kept on the animals, and salt was fed to them. At Raonaux-Bois, the animals were given a slice of bread and butter that had been carried three times round the dairy and was held out to them with the right hand. It is true that this was only for the larger livestock that, since the stable was part of the house, were part of the family. But a number of other French customs denote that the thing sold must be detached from the seller, by, for example, striking the thing that is sold, or by whipping the sheep that is sold, etc.

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