

ON MARCEL MAUSS: HOW TO ENGAGE WITH HUMANITY, INCLUDING YOUR OWN

Keith Hart

INTRODUCTION

Writing *Self in the World* (Hart, 2022) spoke directly to a book on Mauss and vice versa in retrospect. I would like to explain here why this is so and to outline the main features of the book on Mauss that I now feel compelled to write. I want to make Mauss' large corpus of writings in French and the abundant French commentaries more accessible to Anglophone readers, adding my own contribution to the growing body of work on Mauss.

People have many sides, but I focus in *Self in the World* on two. Each of us is a biological organism with a historical personality that together make us a unique individual. But we cannot live outside society which forms us in mysterious ways. Human beings must learn to be self-reliant (not self-interested); and each must also learn to belong to others, merging personal identity in a plethora of social relations and categories. This proposition is central to Marcel Mauss' vision of humanity.

We embark on two life journeys – one out into the world, the other inward to the self. Modern ideology insists that being individual and mutual is problematic – or worse, a developmental sequence in human evolution. Yet they are inseparable aspects of human nature. As a result, most of us are at best only part-human. We can become more fully human when individual and society reinforce each other. I do not try to tell readers how to achieve this, but offer reflections on my own life history and on what I have learned about the world.

As of now, at the request of the editors of MAUSS International, I believe I can give an outline of what my forthcoming book on Mauss might look like. I have read most of Marcel Fournier's foundational output on him (especially Fournier, 1994, 2006; Mauss, 1997); know all his best-known publications; have co-edited French and English collections from a Mauss conference; published a half dozen academic pieces on Mauss; and read widely the secondary literature in French and English. But I will have to read the 2000 pages of the Éditions de Minuit three-volume *Œuvres* (Mauss, 1968); must

make some limited explorations of the Mauss archives; and I should read more of the last three decades' secondary literature in French.

Marcel Mauss' actual life has been treated with delicacy in print and some aspects could be important for understanding his intellectual priorities and methods. I do not propose to write a biography, however, but will rather explore the relevance of Mauss' example today, while comparing his main public activities and historical circumstances with ours. Marcel Fournier's (1994) biography is long on Mauss' social relations, but short on his significant ideas. Even so, readers who know little of Mauss deserve a short biographical sketch.

THE PROMISE AND FAILURE OF GLOBALIZATIONS 1.0 AND 2.0

The decades before the World War I, the "Gilded Age", saw unbridled financial imperialism and mass movements of people – 50 million Europeans to temperate zone new settlements (3/4 to the United States) and 50 million Chinese and Indians mainly to the tropics – while Russia (the China of its era) grew at 10 % a year from the 1880s. I call this Globalization 1.0. We all know what happened next: world war, revolution and the collapse of the world economy in 1914-1945. The main political paradigm turned inwards to national capitalism, moderated sometimes by socialism, with fascism and communism contending for global hegemony.

Taken together, those years of globalization and their aftermath were animated by much broader intellectual and political horizons than ours. One big difference between the academy now and then is our much narrower human, social and historical scope. Higher education was generally about teaching more than research. Since 1945, universities have massified recruitment and tailored knowledge production to the needs of bureaucracy.

Marcel Mauss was an engaged participant in the first period from start to finish, along with (for some of it) Durkheim, Marshall, G. H. Mead, Pareto, Weber, Lenin, Bakhtin, Veblen, Simmel, Sombart, Polanyi, Hayek, Malinowski, Boas, Parsons and Keynes, not to mention the scientists (Planck, Einstein), artists (Cezanne, Picasso) and writers (Proust, Joyce). Paris was its epicentre (Shattuck, 1955). Yet for several reasons (functioning as his uncle's assistant, unsigned collaborations, few personal publications none long, political activities, academic administration and teaching), Mauss was barely known outside France before his death in 1950.

Since then, Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Sahlins, Firth, Caillé's *Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales* (MAUSS), Fournier, Graeber and others have brought him limited international recognition, while sometimes distorting his original intentions. Lately, however, Mauss' global reputation has taken off, mainly for one essay, *The Gift* which went largely unread when he was alive (Sigaud, 2002). The second period of financial imperialism from the neoliberal counter-revolution against post-war developmental states in 1980 (Globalization 2.0) has recently been unravelling. An artificial economic boom, orchestrated by market fundamentalists, is ending now. Severe consequences are already apparent: western political decadence, xenophobic autocrats, imminent natural catastrophe, major wars (civil and global), inflation and deflation, material scarcity and social breakdown. Sounds familiar? People sometimes ask if the world is reverting to the 1930s, but that is the wrong question. They were the outcome of a historical cycle that began 60 years before.

The universities will find it hard to extend their bureaucratic mission of the last century into this one. Anthropology has been in the doldrums since the anti-colonial revolution. The social sciences, led by orthodox economics, have been rendered complacent and useless by the long post-war boom. The humanities peddle obscure jargons to recruit students. There is no point in advocating revolution since we are already in several that are ignored or covertly stoked up by ruling elites.

Human beings have lived in unequal societies for at least 5 000 years; and the last half-century is a contender for leadership in global inequality (Piketty, 2014, 2022)¹. We can only be fully human if self and society reinforce each other. Achieving this is a real, but largely unconscious need for many. Profound obstacles stand in our way. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon each grappled with the problem. All three believed that unequal society corrupts human nature. Yet human beings have the potential for redemption. We can become whole by tackling the root causes of inequality together. For Rousseau, in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1754), it meant abolishing the arbitrary class divisions of agrarian civilization; for Marx the class structure of early industrial capitalism; and for Fanon the racism of colonial empires. All these made their inhabitants only part-human. Most people were denied the chance to be whole persons in society.

1 Occupy Wall Street's "the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent" struck a chord.

Alienation means separation from something that belongs to us (land, personal integrity). It could mean the attribution of agency to forces beyond our control (the gods, the weather or just “them”). Madness is the extreme form of alienation from oneself. In varying degrees, the unity of self and society is weakened. The Enlightenment challenged religious alienation by overcoming inhibitions imposed by spiritual beings or rather by their mediators. Instead of banking on redemption in the afterlife, it focused attention on here and now – “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”.

Rousseau summons men to hear for the first time their history as a species. Man was born free, equal, self-sufficient, unprejudiced, and whole; now, at the end of history, he is in chains (ruled by other men or by laws he did not make), defined by relations of inequality (rich or poor, noble or commoner, master or slave), dependent, full of false opinions or superstitions, and divided between his inclinations and his duties.

Bloom, 1978, p. 344

Rousseau was concerned with conventional inequalities of wealth, honour and the capacity to command obedience that can be changed. The Old Regime of agrarian civilization was on its last legs and would collapse of its own accord. The danger to humanity was the next, bourgeois phase epitomised by English political economy.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx (1867) argued that most people in capitalist societies must work under conditions imposed by big money. They are estranged from their own humanity. To be human is to realize our intentions by producing objects with social value. But capitalism makes that impossible. In a system of private property, a worker is a tool, not a person. Products are designed neither by workers nor consumers, but by the owners who keep most of the market sales. Work consists of repetitive, often meaningless acts. Religious alienation is hard to resist since spirits are our own mental fabrications. But we can do something about capitalist production because it is material. Workers could overcome their servitude by understanding the causes of their alienation. Revolution restores the unity of self and society that we have lost.

Frantz Fanon (1961) approached damaged humanity through the critique of racism. *The Wretched of the Earth* was based on his psychiatric work in Algeria during its war of independence. Race defined two unequal and separate worlds in colonial society. Dehumanization as an inferior race

under capitalism was an explosive combination. Whereas many suppose that the passivity of subordinate classes makes their alienation inevitable, Fanon believed that oppressed peoples could win emancipation. Colonized people possessed a drive for freedom; resistance to alienation can overcome alienation itself. Peoples whose humanity was denied by colonial racism offered proof of the human drive for self-emancipation.

How do we overcome alienation? This question underpins *Self in the World*, where I draw heavily on the anti-colonial intellectuals and on Rousseau since, with Immanuel Kant (1784, 1798), he founded modern anthropology as a support for democratic revolution (see “Afterword”). Saul of Tarsus argued against looking at the world “through a glass darkly” (the cracked mirror of race, class, gender divisions, etc.)². We make do with knowing little about others and guess the rest. It is usually wrong. We don’t understand ourselves and we project our dark side onto others. One day, when we meet face to face, not through the distortions of identity politics, we will recognize the humanity in everyone. Humanity is a historical project for our species. How will we achieve it? Through belief, hope and love of humanity.

This message is universally human. It is also an ethnographer’s charter: when we interact with others, both sides want to see and be seen as they really are, not as a white oppressor or dissembling crook. Perhaps we will all eventually find our way to humanity; but now we are only part-human. Personal connection to world society is currently unthinkable. It was different in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. But unless many of us can identify with humanity as a whole, we will not solve problems that are global in scope. Parts 2-4 and the Afterword examine how Mauss addressed these questions and reflect on what they mean for us today.

THE DURKHEIMIAN SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY (1895-1925)

Marcel Mauss entered academic employment in 1895 as an *agrégé* in philosophy aged 23. He was a serious student, but also a revolutionary socialist who joined the French Workers Party. The socialist students fought the anarchists in the streets. From their student days, Émile Durkheim had been a friend of the Socialist Party leader, Jean Jaurès; but he

2 Acts, 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, *The New Testament* (King James Version).

objected to socialism as class politics. Mauss was then a militant “party man”. The overlap between sociology and belief in the inevitable march of society united uncle and nephew, as did a commitment to intellectual rigour; but their political differences grew in time.

Durkheim thought Mauss diverted his energies from scholarship to politics. Marcel, who loved café conversation, sometimes hid under a sidewalk table when his uncle passed by. Yet Mauss wrote a vast number of reviews for the *Année sociologique* before the war and led its temporary revival afterwards. Durkheim and his sister, Marcel’s mother Rosine, often complained about his reluctance to marry and make a family. Durkheim and Mauss had a tense relationship, despite (or because of) Mauss’ unstinting commitment to the team his uncle headed.

Fournier (2012), in his long biography of Durkheim, lets drop the remark that no-one knows who really wrote *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1912) – Durkheim with or without his nephew, Mauss himself or an *Année Sociologique* collective. In my view, this book still has the most to teach us of all the founders’ works. It doesn’t really matter who wrote it; but it is a neo-Kantian work quite unlike Durkheim’s earlier sociological positivism and consistent with Mauss’ subsequent turn, as we will see.

When responding to a new collection of essays on religion by Mauss and his close friend, Henri Hubert, Durkheim could not restrain his petulance:

Your preface causes me a lot of pain. The beginning in particular seems to me to be perfectly ridiculous. The tone is that of someone who has lost all self-respect. It contains everything that could discredit you. And rightly so. You are your own master and you have the right to publish it if you wish to do so. But not in the *Année* series. I will not take the responsibility.

Fournier, 2012

This to his junior partner, closest collaborator and *Année* work horse, the team’s religion specialist, chair in the religions of uncivilized peoples and candidate for the Collège de France. No wonder Marcel and Durkheim’s son, André got away to the war in 1914 at the earliest opportunity.

Durkheim earlier co-authored with Mauss an essay, *Primitive Classification* (1903), a reductionist account of how the classification of things in nature, the categories of understanding, replicate the classification of relations between men

in society, whose forms should be considered prior. Mauss, when asked, replied ironically that his contribution was to “provide the facts”.

The World War I was more than a watershed; it was an irreversible fissure in modern European history³. The claim of Western societies to lead the rest of humanity in reason and civilization had been mortally wounded by the senseless slaughter of the trenches. Life after the war was quite unlike what had gone before. Émile Durkheim and numerous colleagues from their team died during the war (Guyer, 2014; Mauss, 2016). Mauss was now responsible for the movement. He delayed coming back to Paris, but the years 1920-1925 were packed and fruitful. His political party and the Left in general had a real shot at winning power in France and did so in 1924. He relaunched *L'Année sociologique*, including *The Gift*. He was optimistic for political and intellectual regeneration on an international scale. Mauss began to compile material for a book on the main political currents of the day, nationalism and socialism.

The Gift approaches the evolution of human exchange as moving through three stages: from a total exchange of services, through competitive gift-exchange involving political leaders to individual contracts. Mauss' essay was an implicit continuation of Durkheim's *Division of Labour in Society* (1893). The programmatic last chapter floats at some remove from the substance of the essay. Hubert did not spare his friend: “It is often rather vague... Are you really sure that the development of social insurance can be attached to your ‘human bedrock’, as you say?” (Fournier, 2006, p. 244).

England was a big part of Mauss' life. He won distinction in the war as a translator for British and Australian troops on the front line. Mauss looked to England's socialist tradition (along with Germany's and Switzerland's)⁴ as a source of inspiration for his own politics: the Rochdale pioneers, the Webbs and their Fabian Society, the Labour Party of Keir Hardie. He admired English anthropologists like Rivers, Seligman, Frazer, Malinowski and Marett; and travelled there to give lectures, attend conferences and meet friends.

If Paris was in ferment during the 1920s, England was hardly quiet. The artistic and literary scene was turbulent and Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* came out in 1922. The *kula* ring of the Trobriand Islanders and their neighbours provided an allegory of the world economy, but without states, money or capitalists and, instead of “buy cheap/sell dear”, the trade ran

3 The rest of this section draws heavily on Hart (2014).

4 See the index of Mauss' *Écrits politiques* (1997).

on an ethic of generosity. Mauss was excited by this, but he felt Malinowski had gone too far. His most important points are in a long footnote on money (Mauss, 2016, p. 91-93, note 29, see “Afterword”).

Mauss (1997) wrote many articles on the exchange rate crisis of 1922-1924 in his party’s newspaper, *Populaire*, and others. The financial turmoil that Keynes (1919) predicted would follow from the Versailles treaty was soon realized. The Left blamed it all on a few rich families. Mauss wrote: “Every socialist is obliged to have a few notions about political economy, or economic sociology as we now say” (27 February, 1924). His general tone in these pieces is that of an expert player in financial markets.

He studied fiduciary inflation and concluded that it was not the cause of exchange rate depreciation, blaming rather market panic. “These are human phenomena at work: collective psychology, imponderables, beliefs, credulity, confidence, all swirling about” (29 February, 1924). Mauss’ vision in these years went far beyond questions of exchange. He embraced internationalism and was pleased that his uncle’s notion of the division of labour was now routinely applied to the growing interdependence of nations. He began writing his book on *The Nation* (Mauss, 2020, p. 41-48).

Mauss’ cooperative socialist movement had much in common with Germany’s economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) after 1945 with its “social market”. The Marxists resisted the idea strongly. Mauss wrote critically about the Russian revolution, condemning the Bolsheviks’ use of violence and their destruction of markets and money, with their accumulated reservoirs of trust (Mauss, 1997). He supported an anti-capitalist revolution fuelled by an “economic movement from below”, based on work associations, cooperatives and mutual insurance. He also shared Sidney and Beatrice Webb’s vision of a “consumer democracy”. Cooperatives were central to his party politics in the early 1920s (and before). He invested an inheritance in a bakery cooperative and lost his stake.

In *The Gift*, Mauss summarily eliminates the two utilitarian ideologies that purport to account for the evolution of contracts: “natural economy”, Adam Smith’s idea that individual barter (in effect, modern markets for private property without money) was an expression of human nature; and Herbert Spencer’s notion that primitive communities are altruistic, giving way eventually to our own regrettably selfish, but more efficient individualism. Against the move to replace markets with communist states, he insisted that the human condition is a complex interplay between individual freedom and social obligation and markets and money are universal, if not in their current impersonal form. He

fleshed out Durkheim's social agenda, but rejected his model of homogeneous ("mechanical") solidarity for stateless societies.

Chapter 2 is the essay's core – its title is important: "The *extension* of this system [of *prestations totales*]: liberality, honour and money" (italics added). Mauss conceived of society as a historical project for humanity whose limits become ever more inclusive. Society cannot be taken for granted as a pre-existent form. It must be made and remade, sometimes from scratch. Early moiety systems were going nowhere. But heroic gift-exchange was designed to push the limits of society outwards. This was "liberal" like the "free market", except that generosity powered the exchange – self-interested for sure, but definitely not *homo economicus*.

Mauss knew that no society has ever been economically self-sufficient, least of all Melanesian islands. To the need to establish local limits on social action must be added extending a community's reach abroad. This is why markets and money in many different forms are universal and any attempt to abolish them must end in catastrophe. He takes Malinowski to task for reproducing the Victorian bourgeois opposition between commercial self-interest and the free gift, a dichotomy that many Anglophones have subsequently attributed to Mauss.

Mauss' chief ethical conclusion is that the attempt to create a free market for private contracts is utopian and just as unrealizable as its antithesis, a collective based solely on altruism. Modern capitalism rests on an unsustainable attachment to one pole; it will take a social revolution to restore a humane balance. The pure types of selfish and generous economic action obscure the complex interplay between individuality and belonging to others in subtle ways.

The economic movement from below of Mauss' political journalism was a secular version of what he found in archaic and exotic societies. Gift-exchange and cooperative socialism are both founded on "total social facts"; they bring into play the whole of society and all its institutions – legal, economic, religious, and aesthetic. *The Gift* should never be represented as a charter for the English contrast between "gift and commodity" (Gregory, 1982, see Part 4 below). Mauss showed that the foundations of human exchange are universal. Capitalism was an unsustainable and extreme version. Other economic mechanisms in our societies were hidden from view and marginalized by the dominant form. We must expose the obscure elements and insert a new moral emphasis into economic life and law.

Mauss' financial journalism is not essential to understand his great essay. But they are both indispensable to understanding the man. Mauss himself is, for

our purposes, a “total social fact” (Hart, 2007); but his dynamic analysis of the exchange rate crisis can help us understand his ambivalence towards Malinowski’s account of the *kula*. Placing *The Gift* alongside his political engagements and journalism should also help us understand our own times better.

In 1899-1905 Mauss published five major essays: on sacrifice (with Hubert), on magic (also with Hubert), on sociology (with Fauconnet), on primitive forms of classification (with Durkheim) and on seasonal variations among the Eskimos (with Beuchat). The last offers a precocious environmentalism and identifies a seasonal dialectic of communism and individualism (Kwon, 2014). This theme of the unity of individual and society emerged more strongly in Mauss’ thinking after the war.

THE INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY (1925-1950)

The *Institut d’ethnologie* was formed in 1925 with Paul Rivet, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss as directors. Mauss was now celebrated as both Durkheim’s heir and the *de facto* guru of the new discipline of ethnology. Apart from two weeks in Morocco, he did no fieldwork, but was an engaging teacher with a dialectical style of improvisation who also enjoyed café conversation with his students. He had his detractors, don’t we all? A rival for Rockefeller funding dismissed Mauss as “essentially a politician who produces nothing on his own” (Fournier, 2006).

Things began to unravel for Mauss from the mid-1920s. His personal standing as a *savant* grew inexorably; but his party suffered the fallout from the socialist coalition government’s failure; its newspaper and journal folded; the cooperative movement foundered; the *Année sociologique*’s second series ended; and his best friend, Henri Hubert, died in 1927. Soon, after several unsuccessful attempts, Mauss won a long and tight struggle to be admitted to a chair in sociology at the *Collège de France* in 1930. He and his backers considered a chair in ethnology, but he didn’t want to be restricted to “primitive societies” and sociology evoked his incarnation of the Durkheim school. His mother died at the same moment. In 1934, when he was 62, he married a much younger woman; next year, she almost died, “poisoned by a gas leak”. Accident or attempted suicide?

Mauss wanted to:

...counter the Durkheimian image of a society functioning as a “homogenous mass” with the image of a more complex collectivity, groups and subgroups that overlap, intersect and fuse together.

Fournier, 2006, p. 245

For *The Gift*, he studied archaic societies in their dynamic integrity, not as congealed states to be decomposed into analytical instances of rules pertaining to law, myth, or value and price:

It is by considering the whole entity that we could perceive what is essential, the way everything moves, the living aspect, the fleeting moment when society, or men, become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation in relation to others. In this concrete observation of social life lies the means of discovering new facts... Nothing is more urgent or more fruitful than this study of total social facts.

Mauss, 2016, p. 194

Mauss' *agrégation* and his knowledge of ancient languages gave him the confidence to span world history, comparative ethnography and the study of contemporary society. There was a gap in his academic publications from 1905 to 1925, not counting the 10 000 octavo pages of reviews that he wrote for *L'Année sociologique* before the war.

After *The Gift* he produced only two essays, the magisterial “A category of the human mind; the notion of the person; the notion of the self” (Mauss, 1936) and “Techniques of the body” (Mauss, 1938), a more muddled affair. Much later, his student, Denise Paulme, helped to produce Mauss' *Manual of Ethnography* (1949) whose topics reveal the range of his interests, if not the analytical rigour he set out with. Despite his omnivorous intellectual tastes, most people have only heard of *The Gift*.

Mauss suffered many bereavements in the second half of his life. He was forced out of his job and spacious apartment by the German occupation of Paris (but escaped being sent to Buchenwald). After the war, he remained socially isolated and his mind failed (having perhaps weakened earlier). A new school of French ethnographers was happy to claim him as their inspiration. *The Gift* was now offered as a provisional fragment of a more comprehensive study that never appeared. The essay's greatness lies in Mauss' aspiration to embrace the human condition by exploring the moral relationship between concrete persons

and society as a whole. He claimed that wholeness is better approached through concrete description, as in the humanities, than as scientific abstraction.

His method was eclectic and encyclopedic, relying on knowledge of dead and extant languages like the great classical philologists. He read ethnographic reports on Polynesia, Melanesia and the American Northwest, plus documentary sources on western legal traditions, always seeking to preserve local colour and the original context.

Mauss' guiding question in *The Gift* was:

What is the principle of right and interest in backward or archaic societies that makes it obligatory to return a present one has received? What force is there in the thing given that makes the recipient give something back?

Mauss, 2016, p. 58

He only twice uses the word “reciprocity” in the essay. His answer is that human beings everywhere find the personal character of the gift compelling and are susceptible to how it evokes diffuse social and spiritual ties. Potlatch provides a clear instance of this in action. Mauss traces its appearance in sacrifice (*do ut des*), early Roman law and the Germanic *wadium*.

Mauss' key term for archaic contracts is untranslatable into English and a feudal relic in French today. *Prestation* is a service performed out of obligation, something like “community service” instead of imprisonment today. He thought that the earliest forms of exchange, a *système de prestations totales*, took place between whole social groups and involved the range of things people can do for each other. If we were not blinded by capitalist ideology, we would recognize their survival in our societies – in weddings and at Christmas, in friendly societies and more bureaucratic forms of insurance, even in wage, rental and loan contracts and the welfare state⁵.

We must follow the historians and observe what is given, rather than split up social phenomena into separate abstractions. The reality is always a concrete person acting in society: “the middle-class Frenchman, the Melanesian of this or that island” (*ibid.*). Then sociologists will furnish psychologists with material they can use. This is why he is now seen as a founder of modern anthropology more than as a sociologist.

5 In France today *prestation* means, for example, maintenance contracts for domestic heating systems, an obligation to be called out when needed.

Why did Mauss tend to separate his academic and political writing? His relationship with Durkheim is a good enough reason. But one aimed to stimulate reflection in individual readers, the other collective action. Mauss didn't like being told what to do or think. His concrete exotic descriptions were food for personal thought, not prescriptions. He wanted his readers to find their own true beliefs in his academic works, knowing that they would be more likely to act on them socially than if politburos and professors told them what to think.

In the 1930s he gave well-attended public lectures that attracted a fair number of Paris' glitterati. A trio of Surrealist philosophers, led by André Breton, liked them, but could not agree on their meaning afterwards. As an experiment, they took notes separately and compared them later. They were indeed quite different, which they found irritating. The Surrealists then asked Mauss whether he cared about getting his message across to "the audience". He replied: "It was never my intention to impose my thoughts on you, gentlemen. I hoped to help you discover your own."

Mauss knew that we each take something to heart only if it is already inside us, at least in parts, perhaps incoherent until given form dialectically. "Belief" in Old English meant held dear, beloved. Others help us to find what we feel is intrinsically our own. When that happens, we might do something – like join a political movement. This is how religion instils collective beliefs that inform individual actions (Durkheim, 1912). Mauss was a "concrete dialectician" who wanted to stimulate original thinking and perhaps social action in receptive readers⁶.

To sum up, why did Mauss pull out of organizing the Durkheim school, party politics and public writing to become a teacher of ethnographers and a largely oral communicator? Why did this icon of European sociology look for his personal synthesis in teaching ethnography to join Malinowski in Britain and Boas in the US as the founder of French ethnology? This story is likely to evolve after I immerse myself in his and his commentators' abundant writings in French.

Before the World War I, leaving aside his part in writing *The Elementary Forms*, Mauss was a polemical scribe reviewing other people's work. His party, the French Section of the Workers' International⁷, led him to engage with cooperative socialism at home and abroad. His participation in the war was rewarding as well

6 The phrase is Nicolas Adell's (personal communication).

7 *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO).

as dangerous. *The Gift*, Mauss' first such publication in two decades, allowed him a temporary excuse to break down his firewall between the academy and politics. When their post-war synthesis broke down, he was appointed director of the Institute of Ethnology and then to the *Collège de France*.

Top-down social organization and writing did not suit Mauss. His instincts were for the bottom-up principles of academic collaboration, "consumer democracy" and the "economic movement from below". Apart from *The Gift*, his public performances in 1920-1925 were formally hierarchical, telling people what to do and think. Boas' and Malinowski's discovery of the potlatch (gift-exchange) offered him a bridge between exotic ethnography and European ancient history. It also set him thinking deeply about his own approach to academic work and cooperative socialism.

The first lesson he took from this was that these societies were personal from top to bottom. The big challenge in French capitalism was to persuade people that they could make a personal difference to an impersonal society. Maybe reading ethnography would help. The second lesson was that ethnography doesn't tell you what to think. Its concrete holism leaves readers free to choose what is meaningful to them, merging descriptions of society with their own individuality. Finally, if social science's analytical reductionism should give way to totalizing concrete descriptions of life in society, the only method remotely up to the task is ethnography, conceived of as an end not a means – as writing and reading (its ancient Greek meaning), not just as individual fieldwork (British social anthropology).

Contemplating Mauss' evolution allowed me to revisit an earlier conundrum. After my doctorate, I abandoned fieldwork-based ethnography and reverted to my classicist's *modus operandi* of reading old books and writing about them, supplemented by globetrotting auto-ethnography. Several times I tried to offer lecture courses on world history. They usually failed and I blamed the students for lacking historical knowledge and perspective. But for my small-group teaching, I often recommended ethnographic monographs. *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) threw critical light on "the politics and poetics of ethnography"; but I couldn't help noticing that students readily accepted the ethnographers' implausible methodological claims and made important personal discoveries from their reading. Thinking about Mauss' trajectory clarifies why this was so. They were realistic social fictions and, like many novels, that engaged the subjectivity of individual readers.

MAUSS' POSTHUMOUS RECEPTION (1950-2025)

This section is currently what Wikipedia calls a “stub”; in it I say something about Anglophones’ reading of Mauss today and much less about French commentary on him, since my own exposure is as yet inchoate. See Hart and James (2014) for more on Oxford anthropology’s relationship to Mauss.

Lygia Sigaud (2002) provides a trenchant account of *The Gift*’s subsequent trajectory. It became famous from the 1950s in a version that privileges economic exchange against Mauss’ with main concern social obligation. The chief culprit was Lévi-Strauss’ introduction to the posthumous essay collection (Mauss 1950). There he harnessed Mauss’ reputation to his own theory of reciprocity in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss, 1949). But *The Gift* really took off following Sahlins’ (1972) article, “The spirit of the gift”. This entrenched Lévi-Strauss’ claim, following Firth (1929), that Mauss’ essay hinged on a faulty understanding of the Maori concept of *hau*.

Sigaud notes that the idea of gift – and commodity – economies being opposed as a metaphor for the West *versus* the Rest began to take root in the 1980s and was consolidated by Carrier (1995). But he sought to subvert the dichotomy, calling it “Maussian occidentalism”. Sigaud makes no connection between Mauss’ essay and his politics. Her focus is purely academic. When accounting for the remarkable discontinuity between what Mauss wrote and what he is now thought to have written, she chooses the cult of personality in academia and the power of gossip in small-scale oral communities.

Chris Gregory is supposed to have launched the modern trend with *Gifts and Commodities* (1982), an attribution he would dearly like to refute:

I have never used the distinction between gifts and commodities to classify societies nor have I ever suggested that “we” are to commodities as “they” are to gifts. Such an approach is anathema to me. My problem was to explain the paradox, brought about by colonization, of the efflorescence of gift exchange in a world dominated by commodity production and exchange. I characterized Papua New Guinea as an “ambiguous” economy where some things are now gifts, now commodities, depending on the social context (1982, p. 117). Thus, I developed the logical opposition between gifts and commodities in order to try to understand the ambiguity of the historically specific situation of colonial Papua New Guinea [...]

Ethnographic classification is quite distinct from conceptual division by the logical principle of dichotomy (Gregory, 1997, p. 47-49).

It did no good. The “fictions” employed ingeniously by Marilyn Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) – that “we” (Euroamerica) are opposed to “them” (Melanesia) and the gift is the negation of the commodity – are now routinely reproduced in introductory anthropology courses everywhere in the Anglophone world. Mauss’ essay was intended to refute this ideology. But who reads anything closely now?

There are honourable exceptions in the English-speaking tradition, among whom I would include myself (Hart, 2000, p. 191-96, 2007, 2014) and Jonathan Parry’s article on the Indian gift (Parry, 1986). He correctly claims there that the purely altruistic gift was for Mauss the inverse of the market conceived of as a sphere of pure self-interest, whereas the archaic gift was a synthesis of the two ideas. Market ideology leads us to think of Christmas presents as pure gifts, an idea that we then project onto Mauss’ text. Sophie Chevalier (2014) writes persuasively about the use in contemporary Britain and France of purchases as presents and occasionally *vice versa*.

But chief among the exceptions must be counted David Graeber (2001, p. 151-228) who offers a full-length reanalysis of *The Gift*, complete with detailed attribution of Mauss’ socialist views and the continuation of his intellectual politics by the MAUSS group, among others. This will not stop the wholesale adoption of bourgeois ideology by Anglophone anthropologists who affect disaffection from it, while representing Mauss in their classrooms as being also opposed to the market. But an international alliance could reduce its plausibility. John Locke (1690) has a lot to answer for.

AFTERWORD

Marcel Mauss saw money and credit as the engine of an expanded society and, more indirectly, the basis of human identity (Hart and Ortiz, 2014). In *The Gift* he showed how freedom, justice and the person are mainly understood within the specific monetary arrangements that give us our various social identities. Émile Durkheim (1893) concluded that an emphasis on making private contracts in markets obscured the social glue of “the non-contractual element in the contract” that made the economy

possible – a combination of law, state, custom, morals and shared history that sociologists must try to make more visible in modern societies. The valuation of persons and things through money is never for Mauss just technical, but also moral, religious and political, placing everyone symbolically in society according to various orders of reckoning. The concept of *persona* evolved over time (Mauss, 1936) and society with it: the latter's inner rules and external boundaries were reshaped by monetary relations.

Malinowski (1921) was adamant that the Trobriand *kula* valuables were *not* money since they did not function as a medium of exchange and standard of value. But, in a long footnote, Mauss held out for a broader conception:

On this reasoning... there has only been money when precious things... have been really made into currency – namely have been inscribed and impersonalized, and detached from any relationship with any legal entity, whether collective or individual, other than the state that mints them... One only defines in this way a second type of money – our own.

Mauss, 2016, p. 91, note 29

He suggests there that “primitive” valuables are like money in that they “have purchasing power and this power has a figure set on it” (*ibid.*). Gift-exchange pushes the limits of society outwards.

The whole intertribal *kula* is merely the extreme case... of a more general system. This takes the tribe itself in its entirety out of the narrow sphere of its physical boundaries and even of its interests and rights.

Ibid., p. 102

Mauss held that money and markets were human universals, whereas Malinowski opposed the *kula* ring to both. The impersonal economic forms found in capitalist societies were a recent invention, according to Mauss. They shared the modern world with many other ways to use money, even in Europe and North America, and were bound to be transformed in the future. For him, the socialist movement from below and the development of social protection in Europe were part of this process.

An unpublished paper, “A means of overhauling society: the manipulation of currencies” (Fournier, 2006, p. 212 and p. 390, note 105; Hart, 2009) provides a strong example of how far Mauss was prepared to go politically. He claims

there, with an echo of Keynes, that the great economic revolutions are “monetary in nature” and the manipulation of currencies and credit could be a “method of social revolution... without pain or suffering”:

It suffices to create new monetary methods within the firmest, the narrowest bounds of prudence. It will then suffice to manage them with the most cautious rules of economics to make them bear fruit among the new entitled beneficiaries. And that is revolution. In this way the common people of different nations would be allowed to know how they can have control over themselves – *without the use of words, formulas or myths*.

Mauss, *ibid.*, italics added

Mauss argued for a pragmatic understanding of the human economy that would be of use to people in their daily lives. A century later, we draw inspiration from him for a similar argument (Hart, Laville and Cattani, 2010).

What does it take to rethink the world, never mind change it? The circuit of money today is global and lawless. Politics is still national, but cannot handle world finance. Not long ago several models of humanity and society circulated together, but now there is only one made by and for money. We need to refresh our thinking. The anti-colonial intellectuals not only had to imagine a new kind of world and persuade the masses to fight for it. Each follower had to educate him or herself to participate actively. Pan-Africanists like W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James and Frantz Fanon offered a vision of the world to replace racial empire. M. K. Gandhi developed the most original version of this strategy as India’s inspirational leader (Hart, 2015, 2022). There are mutually clarifying parallels between him and Mauss, allowing for the fact that Mauss was an academic, not the leader of a mass liberation movement.

Mohandas K. Gandhi’s critique of the modern state was devastating (Parekh, 1989). It disabled citizens, subjecting mind and body to the control of professional experts. A civilization should enhance its members’ self-reliance. Instead, we are patients, students, taxpayers and prisoners under doctors, teachers, bureaucrats and jailers. Home rule started with personal realization of the self. Self-rule was *swaraj*⁸, focusing on political decentralization. His method for achieving self-rule was *satyagraha*⁹, “insistence on truth”. His autobiography,

8 See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swaraj>

9 See: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyagraha>

The Story of My Experiments with Truth (Gandhi, 1927) is a revealing source for his politics and ethics. The pursuit of truth is related to non-violence (*ahimsa*). Politics alone cannot mobilize the masses to fight for a new society.

Gandhi's religious politics were humanist. Each of us is a unique personality and belongs to humanity as a whole. Many divisions, categories and associations mediate these extremes. We each feel small, isolated and vulnerable in a meaningless world governed by remote impersonal forces known only to experts. Yet modern cultures tell us that we are personalities with significance. How do we bridge the gap? His philosophy aimed to build up the spiritual resources of individuals. How do human beings span the chasm between self and world? Do divisions of race, class, nationality, religion, gender, time and place mediate the poles or exaggerate them?

Traditional religion helps devotees make a meaningful connection between self and world (Hart, 2022). Society's rulers once acknowledged the value of this public role. The link has been broken in the leading modern societies. The classical means for uniting self and world was prayer (Mauss, 1909). He chose to study prayer, he said, because "speech is the unity of thought and action". Religion links something personal inside us to the impersonal world of objects that we all share (Durkheim, 1912). But for two centuries works of fiction – plays, novels and movies – have been where subject and object meet on more equal terms. Contemplating little things makes it easier to think about the big things (Nabokov, 1951). This process is essentially artistic. The last century elevated impersonal society above the person. Digital communications offer us new solutions, however. They spawn new kinds of person in a world society whose time and space dimensions are collapsing (Hart, 2022).

Impersonal society is no longer an extension of individual personality. It is at odds with it. Licenced professionals were trained *en masse* to replace families in social reproduction. The humanities have lost their human impulse. Corporate universities have now finished off this process. We must widen our horizons without losing sight of how each of us lives.

I have learned a lot from France, South Africa and the world since 1997. But when I ask what the concrete results of this education have been, getting to know Marcel Mauss much better comes first. I couldn't make much sense of *The Gift* as an undergraduate nor of Marx's *Capital*; I tried reading each several times. At Yale in my mid-30s I finally cracked Marx, then read *The Gift* the next weekend and made 25 pages of notes on it. Marx and Mauss have been joined at the hip in my memory and working imagination ever since.

That is why I responded so avidly to David Graeber's long chapter on Mauss in *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value* (Graeber, 2001). It was and still is the only sustained account in English of the importance of politics for Mauss' intellectual worldview. We then developed an intense and uniquely rewarding exchange for 15 years, much of it at distance, but also when we both taught in London.

This attempt to separate individual and society as a developmental sequence just will not do. Mauss held that there are two prerequisites for being human: self-reliance and belonging to others. Managing to be both at once is difficult and this accounts for how few truly successful human beings there are. Even so, we must try and this means that we all carry around in our head knowledge of the principles of exchange, whether or not we succeed in practicing them.

Hart, 2000, p. 191

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BLOOM A. (1978), "The education of democratic man: Emile", *Daedalus*, 107(3), p. 135-153.
- CAILLÉ A., HART K. & CHANIAL P. (eds.) (2010), "Marcel Mauss vivant", *Revue du MAUSS*, n° 36, Paris, La Découverte.
- CHEVALIER S. (2014), "Turning commodities into presents", *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14(1), p. 54-64.
- CLIFFORD J. & Marcus G. (eds.) (2010 [1986]), *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- DURKHEIM E. :
 - (2001 [1912]), *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
 - (2013 [1893]), *The Division of Labour in Society*, London, Palgrave.
- DURKHEIM E. & MAUSS M. (1963 [1903]), *Primitive Classification*, Needham R. (ed.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- FANON F. (2001 [1961]), *The Wretched of the Earth*, London, Penguin.
- FIRTH R. (2012 [1929]), *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori*, London, Routledge.
- FOURNIER M. :
 - (1994), *Marcel Mauss*, Paris, Fayard.
 - (2006), *Marcel Mauss: A Biography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

- GANDHI M. K. (2001 [1927]), *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, London, Penguin.
- GRAEBER D. (2001), *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, London, Palgrave.
- GREGORY C. :
 - (1982), *Gifts and Commodities*, New York, Academic Press.
 - (1997), *Savage Money*, London, Routledge.
- GUYER J. (2014), “The true gift: Thoughts on *L'Année sociologique* 1923-1924”, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14(1), p. 11-21.
- HART K. :
 - (2000), *The Memory Bank: Money in an unequal world*, London, Profile Books. URL : https://www.academia.edu/43704787/The_memory_bank_book_on_money
 - (2007), “Marcel Mauss in pursuit of the whole: A review essay”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49(2), p. 473-485.
 - (2009), “‘The great economic revolutions are monetary in nature’: Mauss, Polanyi and the breakdown of the neoliberal world economy”, *Storicamente*, 5. URL : <https://storicamente.org/hart>
 - (2014), “Marcel Mauss’ economic vision, 1920-1925: anthropology, politics, journalism”, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14(1), p. 34-44.
 - (2015), “Gandhi as a global thinker: Anthropological legacies of the anti-colonial revolution”, *Contributions to Contemporary Knowledge* (lecture series), Delhi, Sociology, South Asian University.
 - (2017), “Introduction”, *Money in a Human Economy*, New York, Berghahn.
 - (2022), *Self in the World: Connecting Life’s Extremes*, New York/Oxford, Berghahn. URL : <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/HartSelf>
- HART K. & James W. (eds.) (2014), “Special issue, Marcel Mauss: A Living Inspiration”, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14(1).
- HART K., LAVILLE J. & CATTANI A. (eds.) (2010), *The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide*, Cambridge, Polity.
- HART K. & ORTIZ H. (2014), “The anthropology of money and finance: between ethnography and world history”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43, p. 465-482.
- HEGEL G. W. F. (1967 [1821]), *The Philosophy of Right*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- KANT I. :
 - (1993 [1784]), The idea of a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose, *The Philosophy of Kant: Moral and Political Writings*, New York, Modern Library.
 - (2006 [1798]), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- KEYNES J. M. (1919), *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (Kindle format, 2017).

- KWON H. (2014), “Spirits in the work of Durkheim, Hertz and Mauss: Reflections on post-war Vietnam”, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14(1), p. 122-131.
- LOCKE J. (1990 [1690]), *Two Treatises of Government*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MALINOWSKI B. :
 - (1921), “Primitive economics of the Trobriand Islands”, *The Economic Journal*, 31(121), p. 1-16.
 - (2014 [1922]), *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in New Guinea*, Oxford, Benediction.
- MARX K. (1970 [1867]), *Capital: The Critique of Political Economy*, London, Lawrence and Wishart.
- MAUSS M. :
 - (1950), *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Lévi-Strauss C. (ed.), Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
 - (1968), *Cœuvres* (3 vols). 1. *Les fonctions sociales du sacré*; 2. *Représentations collectives et diversité des civilisations*; 3. *Cohésion sociale et divisions de la sociologie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit.
 - (1997), *Écrits politiques*, Fournier M. (éd.), Paris, Fayard.
 - (1985 [1936]), “Essay on the person”, in Carrithers M., Collins S. and Lukes S., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
 - (2003 [1909]), *On Prayer*, Oxford, Berghahn.
 - (2009 [1949]), *The Manual of Ethnography*, Oxford, Berghahn.
 - (2016 [1925]), *The Gift: Expanded Edition*, Guyer J. (ed.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
 - (2020 [1938]), “Techniques of the body”, in Schlanger N. (ed.), *Mauss: Technology, Techniques and Civilisation*, Oxford, Berghahn.
- NABOKOV V. (2000 [1951]), *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, London, Penguin.
- PAREKH B. (1989), *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, London, Palgrave.
- PARRY J. (1986), “The Gift, the Indian Gift and the ‘Indian Gift’”, *Man*, 21(3), p. 453-473.
- PIKETTY T. :
 - (2014), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA, Belknap.
 - (2022), *A Brief History of Equality*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- ROUSSEAU J.-J. (1984 [1754]), *Discourse on Inequality*, London, Penguin.
- SAHLINS M. & GRAEBER D. (1972), “The spirit of the gift”, in *Stone-age Economics*, Chicago, Aldine, p. 149-183.
- SHATTUCK R. (1968 [1955]), *The Banquet Years: The origins of the avant garde in France, 1885-1914*, New York, Random House.

- SIGAUD L. (2002), “The Vicissitudes of The Gift”, *Social Anthropology*, 10(3), p. 335-358.
- STRATHERN M. (1988), *The Gender of the Gift*, Berkeley, University of California Press.