

CHAPTER FIVE

The Gift Community

In the early 1950s Lorna Marshall and her husband lived with a band of Bushmen in South Africa. When they left they gave each woman in the band enough cowrie shells for a short necklace, one large brown shell and twenty smaller gray ones. (The shells came from a New York dealer, Marshall remarks, "perhaps to the confusion of future archaeologists.") There had been no cowrie shells among the Bushmen before the Marshalls gave their going-away present. When they returned a year later, they were surprised to find hardly a single one left in the band where they had been given. "They appeared, not as whole necklaces, but in ones and twos in people's ornaments to the edges of the region."

This image of the seashells spreading out in a group like water in a pool takes us from the simple, atomic connections between individuals to the more complicated organization of communities. If we take the synthetic power of gifts, which establish and maintain the bonds of affection between friends, lovers, and comrades, and if we add to these a circulation

wider than a binary give-and-take, we shall soon derive society, or at least those societies—family, guild, fraternity, sorority, band, community—that cohere through faithfulness and gratitude. While gifts are marked by motion and momentum at the level of the individual, gift exchange at the level of the group offers equilibrium and coherence, a kind of anarchist stability. We can also say, to put the point conversely, that in a group that derives its cohesion from a circulation of gifts the conversion of gifts to commodities will have the effect of fragmenting the group, or even destroying it.

To take a modern illustration rather than another tribal tale, Carol Stack, in her book *All Our Kin*, presents an instructive description of the commerce of goods in the Flats, an urban ghetto south of Chicago. The Flats is a black neighborhood characterized by networks of cooperating kin. "Kin" in this context are not just blood relations, they are "those you count on," related or not. Each kinship network in the Flats is composed of as many as a hundred individuals, all of whom belong in one way or another to one of several interlocking households.

Stack tells a sad but instructive story about an influx of capital into one of the families she knew. One day Calvin and Magnolia Waters inherited some money. One of Magnolia's uncles in Mississippi had died and left them \$1,500. It was the first time they'd ever had a cash reserve, and their immediate hope was to use the money as a down payment on a house.

Here's what happened to it.

Within a few days the news of their good fortune had spread throughout the kin network. One of Magnolia's nieces soon came to ask if she could borrow \$25 to pay a bill so the phone would not be turned off. Magnolia gave her the money. The welfare office heard about the inheritance and cut off medical coverage and food stamps for Magnolia's children, telling her that she would get no more until the money

was gone. Then Magnolia's uncle in the South became seriously ill, and she and her older sister Augusta were called to sit by his side. Magnolia bought round-trip train tickets for herself, her sister, and three of her children. After they had returned, the uncle died, and she and her sister had to go south again. Soon thereafter Augusta's first "old man" died, leaving no one to pay for his burial. Augusta asked Magnolia if she would help pay for the digging of the grave, and she did. Another sister's rent was two months overdue; the woman was ill and had no source of income. Magnolia paid the rent. It was winter and the children and grandchildren (fifteen in all) were staying home from school because they had neither winter coats nor adequate shoes. Magnolia and Calvin bought all of them coats, hats, and shoes. Magnolia bought herself a winter coat and Calvin bought a pair of work shoes.

The money was gone in six weeks.

The only way this couple could have capitalized on their good fortune would have been to cut themselves off from the group.* To make a down payment on a house, they would have had to cease participating in the sharing and mutual aid of their kin. One of Magnolia's sisters, Lydia, had done just that at one time. She and the man she married both had steady jobs. They bought a house and furniture. Then, for ten years, they cut themselves off from the network of kin cooperation, effectively preventing their friends and relations from draining their resources. In our modern symbology, they "moved to the suburbs." Then the marriage began to break up. Lydia started giving clothes to her sisters and nieces. She gave a couch to her brother and a TV to a niece. By the time her

* A third alternative, besides sharing and separation, is deceit. In Mexican peasant communities, which are marked by similar networks of mutual aid, one finds the opposite of "conspicuous consumption": a family that has become rich will maintain the shabbiest of adobe walls around the house so that their wealth will not be apparent. Magnolia and Calvin could have squirreled away the money, leaving the rent unpaid, the dead unburied, and the children unclothed.

marriage had fallen apart, she had reincorporated herself into the network.

It isn't easy to say which is the "better" sister, the hard-hearted one ("far-hearted," the Bushmen say) who separates herself from a community that would pull her down or the soft-hearted one who dreams of getting ahead but in fact distributes her wealth and stays in the group. There's no simple moral because there's no simple way to resolve the conflict between community and individual advancement, a conflict that accounts for so much of our political and ethical life. But the story nonetheless illustrates our general point, that a group may form, cohere, and endure when property circulates as gift, and that it will begin to fragment when the gift exchange is interrupted or when gifts are converted to commodities.* Both this story and the one about the Bushmen treat people who are so poor that one hesitates to praise the virtues of "community," lest it seem to romanticize oppression and privation. These are groups who adopt a necessary mutual aid, not a voluntary poverty. And the rewards of community lose some of their luster when they are not a matter of choice. I want to turn from the ghetto and the desert, therefore, to see how this vision of "gift community" might be filled out using a less thorny, more subtle case, that of the community of science.

In order to proceed within the terms of our wider argument, we will need to ask not just how scientific community emerges and endures, but specifically what happens to it when scientific knowledge circulates as a gift, and what happens when knowledge is treated as a commodity, for sale at a profit. The man who has done the most work on the organization of

* Magnolia could have turned her inheritance into commodity-money by loaning it out at interest. In the long run she would have needed loan collectors, police, and so forth to pull it off, however—the conflicts with the spirit of a kin network should be obvious.

science in the United States is a sociologist from the University of Michigan, Warren Hagstrom. Hagstrom's point of departure is similar to mine. He begins his discussion of the commerce of ideas in science by pointing out that "manuscripts submitted to scientific periodicals are often called 'contributions,' and they are, in fact, gifts." It is unusual for the periodicals that print the work of scientists to pay their contributors; indeed, the authors' institutions are often called upon to help defray the cost of publication. "On the other hand," Hagstrom says, "manuscripts for which the scientific authors do receive financial payments, such as textbooks and popularizations, are, if not despised, certainly held in much lower esteem than articles containing original research results." (The same is true in the literary community. It is the exception, not the rule, to be paid for writing of literary merit, and the fees are rarely in accord with the amount of labor. There is cash in "popular" work—gothic novels, thrillers, and so forth, but their authors do not become bona fide members of the literary community.)

Scientists who give their ideas to the community receive recognition and status in return (a topic to which I shall return below). But there is little recognition to be earned from writing a textbook for money. As one of the scientists in Hagstrom's study puts it, if someone "has written nothing at all but texts, they will have a null value or even a negative value." Because such work brings no *group* reward, it makes sense that it would earn a different sort of remuneration, cash. "Unlike recognition, cash can be used outside the community of pure science," Hagstrom points out. Cash is a medium of foreign exchange, as it were, because unlike a gift (and unlike status) it does not lose its value when it moves beyond the boundary of the community. By the same token, as Hagstrom comments elsewhere, "one reason why the publication of texts tends to be a despised form of scientific communication

[is that] the textbook author appropriates community property for his personal profit." As with the Cubans who say, "literary property cannot be private," when and if we are able to feel the presence of a community, royalties (like usury) seem extractive.

Scientists claim and receive credit for the ideas they have contributed to science, but to the degree that they are members of the scientific community, such credit does not get expressed through fees. To put it conversely, anyone who is not a part of the group does "work for hire"; he is paid a "fee for service," a cash reward that compensates him for his time while simultaneously alienating him from his contribution. A researcher paid by the hour is a technician, a servant, not a member of the scientific community. Similarly, an academic scientist who ventures outside of the community to consult for industry expects to be paid a fee. If the recipients of his ideas are not going to treat them as gifts, he will not give them as gifts. The inverse might be the old institution of "professional courtesy" in which professionals discount their services to each other (an optical physicist visiting an ophthalmologist may find \$15 knocked off his bill when he leaves, for example). The custom is the opposite of a "fee for service" in that it changes what would normally be a market transaction into a gift transaction (removing the profit) as a recognition of the fact that the "buyer and seller" are members of the same community and it is therefore inappropriate to profit from each other's knowledge. We are seeing here the same sort of double economy that characterized tribal groups, from the Old Testament to the Uduk. Any exchange, be it of ideas or of goats, will tend toward gift if it is intended to recognize, establish, and maintain community.

In communities drawn together by gift exchange, "status," "prestige," or "esteem" take the place of cash remuneration. No one will deny that one reason scientists contribute the

results of their research to journals is to earn recognition and status. Sooner or later the question arises: Wouldn't we do better to speak of these contributions in terms of ambition and egotism? Might not a theory of competition better account for scientific publication? To begin with, we should notice that the kind of status we are speaking of is achieved through donation, not through acquisition. The distinction is important. The Indians of the Northwest American coast also give gifts in order "to make a name" for themselves, to earn prestige. But notice: a Kwakiutl name is "raised" by giving property and "flattened" by receiving it. The man who has emptied himself with giving has the highest name. When we say that someone made a name for himself, we think of Onassis or J. P. Morgan or H. L. Hunt, men who got rich. But Kwakiutl names, first of all, are not the names of individuals; they are conferred upon individuals, yes, but they are names on the order of "Prince of Wales," meant to indicate social position. And here are some of them:

- Whose Property Is Eaten in Feasts
- Satiating
- Always Giving Blankets While Walking
- For Whom Property Flows
- The Dance of Throwing Away Property

Some names, it is true, are agonistic (Creating Trouble All Around), but the majority refer to the outflow of property. A man makes a name for himself by letting wealth slip through his fingers. He may control the goods, but it is their dispersal he controls. Just as the anthropologist may say of the Indians, "virtue rests in publicly disposing of wealth, not in its mere acquisition . . .," so Hagstrom writes that "in science, the acceptance by scientific journals of contributed manuscripts establishes the donor's status as a scientist—indeed, status as a

scientist can be achieved *only* by such gift-giving—and it assures him of prestige within the scientific community." A scientist *does* contribute his ideas in order to earn status, but if the name he makes for himself is He Whose Ideas Are Eaten in Conferences, we need not call his contributions meretricious. This status is not the status of the egotist.*

It is true that many people in science will scoff if you try to tell them about a scientific community in which ideas are treated as gifts. This has not been their experience at all. They will tell you a story about a stolen idea. So-and-so invented the famous such and such, but the man down the hall hurried out and got the patent. Or so-and-so used to discuss his research with his lab partner but then the sneaky fellow went and published the ideas without giving proper credit. He did it because he's competitive, they say, because he needed to secure his degree, because he had to publish to get tenure—and all of this is to be expected of departmentalized science in capitalist universities dominated by contractual research for industry and the military.

But these stories do not contradict the general point. I am not saying science *is* a community that treats ideas as contributions; I am saying it becomes one *to the degree* that ideas move as gifts. Each of these stories demonstrates the general point, though by way of exception. In each case the personal aggrandizement—the theft of an idea, the profiteering—breaks up the group. No one will talk over nascent ideas with

* A gift economy allows its own form of individualism: to be able to say "I gave that." After he had lived with the Sioux Indians for a while, Erik Erikson commented about their treatment of children: "A parent . . . would not touch a child's possessions, because the value of possessions lay in the owner's right to let go of them when *he* was moved to do so—i.e., when it added prestige to himself and to the person in whose name he might decide to give it away." Individualism in a gift economy inheres in the right to decide when and how to give the gift. The individual controls the flow of property away from him (rather than toward him, a different individualism).

a fellow known to have a hot line to his patent attorney. The man whose ideas were stolen stops talking to his lab partner. Where status is bestowed according to the contribution of original ideas, a thief may survive for a while, but in the long run someone smells a rat, notoriety replaces prestige, ill repute replaces esteem, and the crook is out in the cold.

We should now face the question of exactly why ideas might be treated as gifts in science. To answer it we shall be obliged to speak first of the function of the scientific community. Let us say briefly that the task of science is to describe and explain the physical world, or more generally, to develop an integrated body of theory that can account for the facts, and predict them. Even such a brief prospectus points toward several reasons why ideas might be treated as gifts, the first being that the task of assembling a mass of disparate facts into a coherent whole clearly lies beyond the powers of a single mind or even a single generation. All such broad intellectual undertakings call for a community of scholars, one in which each individual thinker can be awash in the ideas of his comrades so that a sort of "group mind" develops, one that is capable of cognitive tasks beyond the powers of any single person. The commerce of ideas—donated, accepted (or rejected), integrated—constitutes the thinking of such a mind. A Polish theoretical physicist who had once been isolated from science by anti-Semitism testifies to the need to be in the stream of ideas: "Like the Jewish Torah, which was taught from mouth to mouth for generations before being written down, ideas in physics are discussed, presented at meetings, tried out and known to the inner circle of physicists working in the great centers long before they are published in papers and books . . ." A scientist may conduct his research in solitude, but he cannot do it in isolation. The ends of science require coordination. Each individual's work must "fit," and the synthetic nature of gift exchange makes it an appropriate

medium for this integration; it is not just people that must be brought together but the ideas themselves.

These remarks on the scientific community are intended finally to illustrate the general point that a circulation of gifts can produce and maintain a coherent community, or, inversely, that the conversion of gifts to commodities can fragment or destroy such a group. To convert an idea into a commodity means, broadly speaking, to establish a boundary of some sort so that the idea cannot move from person to person without a toll or fee. Its benefit or usefulness must then be reckoned and paid for before it is allowed to cross the boundary. Guilds of artisans, such as stone masons or leather tanners, used to keep their know-how a secret and charge the public for their services. Their knowledge would circulate as a "common" within the guild, but strangers paid a fee. Seen from the outside, trade secrets (commodity ideas) inhibit the advancement and integration of knowledge. Each trade may be its own community, but there will be no "community of science"; there may be pockets of expertise, but there will be no mechanism whereby a group mind might emerge, nor a body of theory be drawn together. A modern industry that patents the discoveries of its research scientists also sets a fee barrier around ideas.* *Within* an industrial research facility there may be a microcosm of gift exchange, but at the company gate it is profit that governs the flow of ideas. An industrial scientist often cannot contribute his ideas to the scientific

* A patent differs from a trade secret in a significant way. Historically a guild or trade could keep its secret for as long as it was able to. Some were kept for centuries. But patents are granted for a limited term (seventeen years in the United States), and as such they are a mechanism for rewarding private invention while slowly moving it into the public domain. Patents belong to a group of property rights, including copyright and usufruct, which grant the right to limited exclusive exploitation. Property rights of this kind are a wise middle ground between gift and commodity; they manage to honor the desire for individual enrichment and at the same time recognize the needs of the community.

community because he has to wait, sometimes years, while the company secures the patent. Even then, the discovery emerges not as a contribution but as a proprietary idea whose users must pay a fee, a usury, for its use. (There will always be exceptions, but as a rule, scientists who treat ideas as gifts thereby enjoy higher repute in the community, they are more apt to be engaged in theoretical ["pure," "basic"] research, and they are less well remunerated. Those who hire out to proprietary concerns are more anonymous and less a part of the community, they tend to be working in applied science, and they are better paid.)*

The remarkable commercial potential of recombinant DNA technology has recently prompted a debate within the scientific community over precisely the issues of gifts, commodities, and the goals of science. Not only have many academic biochemists been drawn into the marketplace and ceased to treat their ideas as gifts, but several academic institutions have considered following suit. In the fall of 1980, for example, Harvard University announced a proposal to found a university-related corporation to exploit the gene-splicing technology developed by its faculty. The idea was opposed (and eventually rejected) on several grounds, a primary one being the conflict between the need for secrecy in commercial ventures and the free exchange of ideas to which the academy is dedicated. As a geneticist at MIT, Dr. Jonathan Kind, remarked: "In the past one of the strengths of American bio-medical science was the free exchange of materials, strains of organisms and information . . . But now, if you

* An exception that seems to prove the rule is the case of the "academic" scientist installed in an industrial research facility. "Industrial research organizations whose goals are only in the area of applied research," Hagstrom notes, "often appoint distinguished men to do basic research, give a small amount of time to other scientists for this purpose, and publicize their research results, solely to make themselves attractive to superior scientists. If they do not permit pure research, their applied research and development efforts suffer."

sanction and institutionalize private gain and patenting of microorganisms, then you don't send out your strains because you don't want them in the public sector. That's already happening now. People are no longer sharing their strains of bacteria and their results as freely as they did in the past."

Here we may revise my remarks on the connection between freedom and the marketplace. Free-market ideology addresses itself to the freedom of individuals, and from the point of view of the individual there often is a connection between freedom and commodities. But the story changes when approached from the point of view of the group. A gift community puts certain constraints on its members, yes, but these constraints assure the freedom of the gift. "Academic freedom," as the term is used in the debate over commercial science, refers to the freedom of ideas, not to the freedom of individuals. Or perhaps we should say that it refers to the freedom of individuals to have their ideas treated as gifts contributed to the group mind and therefore the freedom to participate in that mind. The issue arises because when all ideas carry a price, then all discussion, the cognition of the group mind, must be conducted through the mechanisms of the market which—in this case, at least—is a very inefficient way to hold a discussion. Ideas do not circulate freely when they are treated as commodities. The magazine *Science* reported on a case in California in which one DNA research group sought to patent a technique that other local researchers had treated as common property, as "under discussion." An academic scientist who felt his contribution had been exploited commented, "There used to be a good, healthy exchange of ideas and information among [local] researchers . . . Now we are locking our doors." In a free market the people are free, the ideas are locked up.

There are forms of organization other than the one that follows a circulation of gifts. The military is highly organized. So

is General Motors. One could develop a "contractual" theory of the organization of science which would assert that scientists are motivated by the desire for power and money, that they do research and publish in order to attract these rewards from whoever it is—the company, the consumer, the government—that hands out the jobs and the cash. Such a reward system leads to its own sort of group. But in science, at least, as Hagstrom points out, it is precisely when people work with no goal other than that of attracting a better job, or getting tenure or higher rank, that one finds specious and trivial research, not contributions to knowledge. When there is a marked competition for jobs and money, when such supposedly secondary goals become primary, more and more scientists will be pulled into the race to hurry "original" work into print, no matter how extraneous to the wider goals of the community. (In the literary community, at least in the last few decades, the need to secure a job has certainly accounted for a fair amount of the useless material that's been published, both as literature and as criticism.) A contractual theory of the organization of science, Hagstrom concludes, "accounts not so much for its *organization* as for its *disorganization*."

I have not tried here to cover all the ways in which one might speak of science as a community. There is competition in science, of course, as well as gift exchange, and there is individualism as well as teamwork. But I think it right to begin, as Hagstrom does, with the emergence of community through the circulation of knowledge as gift. *After* community has appeared, we may speak of dissent, segmentation, differentiation, dispute, and all the other nuances of intellectual life. But it would be difficult to work in the other direction—to begin with ideas exchanged in a way that stressed particularity, individuality, and personal profit—and then move toward a coordination of effort and a harmony of theory. A contractual theory may well account for effective

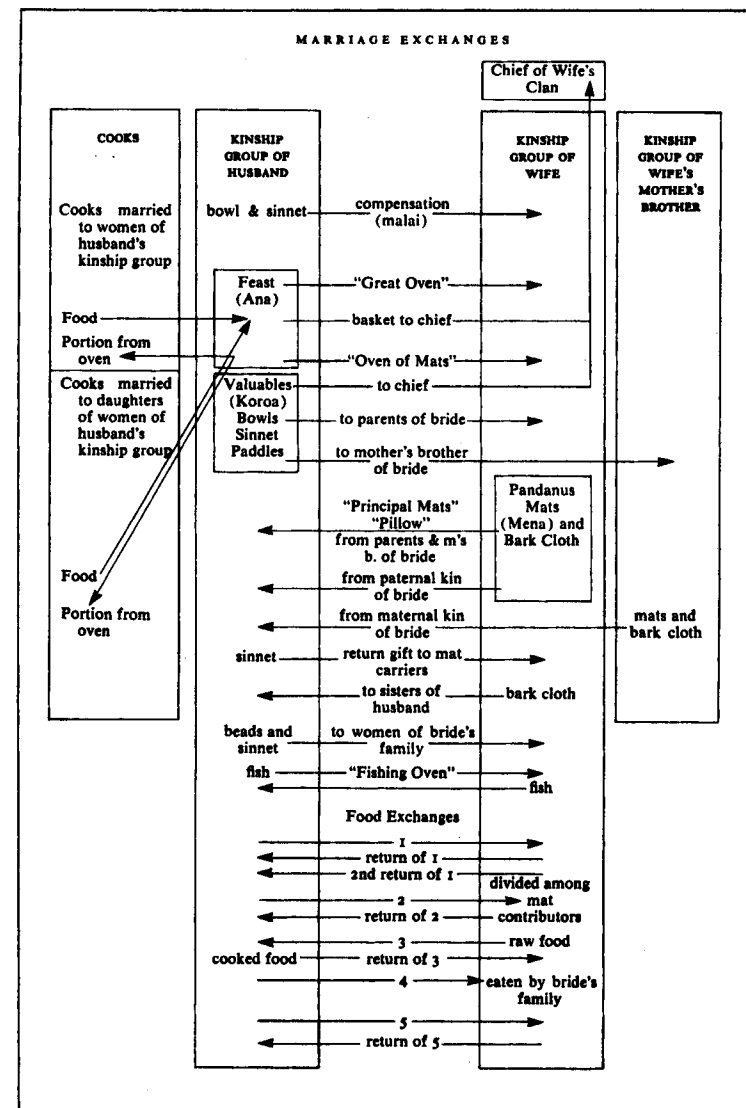
organization in business, even in businesses that hire scientists. But as long as the goals of science require an intellectual community congenial to discourse and capable of integrating a coherent body of theory, gift exchange will be a part of its commerce.

Science makes for a somewhat anomalous example of community emerging through a circulation of gifts because ideas exchanged between intellectuals are "cool" gifts. Not that there aren't passionate scientists, but ideas printed in journals can never really have the emotional immediacy of most gifts. Moreover, the fragmentation that results from the conversion of ideas to commodities doesn't seem as marked as that which follows in less abstract and specialized groups, such as a family or kin network. To take one of innumerable examples, the gifts given in marriage on one Polynesian island are shown in the chart reproduced below. There is no need at this point to go into the exchanges in detail; the sheer complexity of the chart is what I want to present. There are nine major transfers of goods between the kin of the groom and those of the bride, with more than that number of subsidiary transfers. After a marriage like this, everyone is connected to everyone else in one way or another. Imagine what it must be like after half a dozen marriages and as many initiation ceremonies and funerals (whose exchanges are even more complicated than those of marriage). There will be an ongoing and generalized indebtedness, gratitude, expectation, memory, sentiment—in short, lively social feeling. As with the simple exchange of wine in the restaurant, constant and long-term exchanges between many people may have no ultimate "economic" benefit, but through them society emerges where there was none before. And now imagine what would happen were all the gifts in this chart to be converted to cash purchase. There would be no wedding, of course, but more than that, as with the Bushmen, the residents of the Flats, or scientists doing

research, if every exchange were to separate or free the participants from one another there would also be no community.

To close this discussion of community, I want to add a brief suggestion as to what might be the political form of a gift economy. Gifts are best described, I think, as anarchist property. The connections, the "contracts," established by their circulation differ in kind from the ties that bind in groups organized through centralized power and top-down authority. Marcel Mauss's original "Essay on the Gift" was in part a speculation on the origins of modern contract and will serve, therefore, as a useful entry to the point I have in mind. Is gift exchange, Mauss wondered, a primitive form of ensuring those unions that are today made secure by legal, written agreement? He gives two replies. On the one hand, it seems correct to see the felt bond of gift exchange—"the obligation to return"—as an archaic form of the legal *nexum*. But in tracing the shift from primitive to modern, Mauss underscores a loss as well. As I mentioned in the introduction, his essay focuses on gift exchange as a "total social phenomenon," one in which religious, legal, moral, economic, and aesthetic institutions appear simultaneously. And it is only as these several threads are differentiated that legal contract develops as a discrete institution.

To take one of Mauss's own examples, a time of such differentiation was marked by the development of the distinction between "real" and "personal" law—between, that is, a law of things and a law of persons. In a gift economy, as we have amply seen, such a distinction is blurred, for things are treated in some degree as persons and vice versa. Person and thing, the quick and the dead, are distinguished spiritually, not rationally. Such was the case, Mauss surmises, in ancient Italy. In the very oldest Roman and Italic law, he contends,



Marriage gifts among the Tikopia. From Primitive Polynesian Economy by Raymond Firth (London, 1939).

“things had a personality and a virtue of their own. Things are not the inert objects which the laws of Justinian and ourselves imply. They are a part of the family . . .” In antiquity the Roman *familia* was not simply people but the entire “household,” including the objects in the home down to the food and the means of livelihood. Later Roman law, however, increasingly distinguished economic and ritual interest; it divided the *familia* into *res* and *personae*, into things and persons, and in so doing, “passed beyond that antiquated and dangerous gift economy, encumbered by personal considerations, incompatible with the development of the market, trade and productivity—which was, in a word, uneconomic.” The distinction between thing and person is as much a feature of the modern world as it was of later Roman law, of course. As Mauss comments elsewhere, “This distinction is fundamental; it is the very condition of part of our system of property, alienation and exchange. Yet it is foreign to the customs we have been studying.”

Legal contract bears a vestige of the gift “contract,” but gift exchange must be placed in a separate sphere because, while contract sanctioned by law may formalize the union of gift exchange, it does so by disengaging it from the other components of a “total social phenomenon.” It sheds the emotional and spiritual content. Indebtedness and obligation become simply economic and legal relationships. Contract in law is a rationalization of the gift bond, just as usury (or interest), as I shall argue later, is a rationalization of the increase of gift exchange. Both contract and usury imitate the structure of a gift economy, but both drop the feeling, the “uneconomic” feeling.

If we are to speak of gift exchange politically, we must derive the politics from the nature of the gift contract. I have opened with Mauss’s story of Roman law because it sets the terms for a group of political tales with a similar theme. We

may begin, as historians of anarchism commonly do, with the story of the Anabaptists’ brief tenure over the Westphalian city of Münster in the early sixteenth century. The various religious movements that emerged in Europe during the Reformation were a reaction not only against the papacy but against a new (and Roman) concept of property that allowed, for example, local princes, through the invisible magic of statutory law, to turn the “commons”—common fields, woods, and streams—into private preserves.

Of the many movements that rose in opposition to such “Roman” ideas, the Anabaptists are usually taken as antecedents to the political revolutionaries of later centuries. There were many Anabaptist factions, but all agreed in denying power to civil authority. Since the baptized were in direct contact with the Lord, any intermediary (state or church) was not only unnecessary but frankly faithless. Nothing should stand between a person and the inner light which informs his actions.

The town of Münster had suffered a series of tribulations (the plague, an economic recession, heavy state taxes), and a good portion of its citizens converted to the new Anabaptist creed and took control of the town. They expelled both Catholics and Lutherans. The bishop of Westphalia, the town’s nominal ruler, laid siege to it with an army of mercenaries. The citizens held the bishop off for almost a year, surviving on communal stores of food and clothing. To the faithful it seemed clear that Münster would soon become the new Jerusalem. As an initial ceremonial act, marking their control of the town and the start of the new age, the Anabaptists burned all written records of contracts and debts.

In 1842, more than three hundred years later, the German anarchist Wilhelm Weitling took the Anabaptist leaders as his inspiration in writing a proclamation: “A time will come when . . . we shall light a vast fire with banknotes, bills of

exchange, wills, tax registers, rent contracts and IOUs, and everyone will throw his purse into the fire . . .”^{*} Thirty years later we find the Italian anarchist Enrico Malatesta acting on Weitling’s idea. In 1877 he and a band of compatriots took to the woods near Naples and began to move from town to town, abolishing the state as best they could. As the historian James Joll describes it,

At the village of Lentino the column arrived on a Sunday morning, declared King Victor Emanuel deposed and carried out the anarchist ritual of burning the archives which contained the record of property holdings, debts and taxes.

We do not know if they also threw their purses into the fire.

These are all stories of a struggle between legal contract and what might be called “contracts of the heart.” Anarchists, like the Anabaptists before them, have always sought to declare null and void those unions that do not carry with them a felt cohesiveness and therefore tend toward coercion. It is a rare society that can be sustained by bonds of affection alone; most, and particularly mass societies, must have as well those unions which are sanctioned and enforced by law that is detached from feeling. But just as the Roman saw the *familia* divided into *res* and *personae*, the modern world has seen the extension of law further and further into what was earlier the exclusive realm of the heart. Law has sought to strengthen those bonds that in former times were secured through faithfulness and gratitude, however indeterminate these may have been. But the law is limited in its ability to

^{*} Weitling adds the abolition of money to the older abolition of contract and debt instruments. The idea became a standard part of the program of European anarchists, who usually, like Weitling, called for cash exchange to be replaced by barter (not gift).

bring people together and secure order. Not only does law tend to shed the emotional and spiritual content of a total social phenomenon, but the process of law requires a particular kind of society—it requires, to begin with, adversaries and reckoning, both of which are excluded by the spirit of gift exchange. Because the spirit of the gift shuns exactness and because gifts do not necessarily move reciprocally (and therefore do not produce the adversary roles of creditor and debtor), courts of law would be rightly perplexed as to how to adjudicate a case of ingratitude. Contracts of the heart lie outside the law, and the circle of gift is narrowed, therefore, whenever such contracts are converted to legal relationships.

These stories, at any rate, from Anabaptist to anarchist, reflect a felt and acted-upon belief that life is somehow diminished by the codification of contract and debt. The opposition has been not only to those codified debts that secure the position of class, but to any codification that encourages the separation of thing and spirit by abandoning total social phenomena to a supposedly primitive past and thereby enervating felt contract. The burning of written debt instruments is a move to preserve the ambiguity and inexactness that make gift exchange social. Seen in this way, their destruction is not an antisocial act. It is a move to free gratitude as a spiritual feeling and social binder. If gratitude is, as Georg Simmel once put it, “the moral memory of mankind,” then it is a move to refreshen that memory which grows dull whenever our debts are transformed into obligations and servitudes, whenever the palpable and embodied unions of the heart—entered into out of desire, preserved in gratitude, and quit at will—are replaced by an invisible government of merely statutory connections.

I should now state directly a limitation that has been implicit for some time, that is, that gift exchange is an economy of small groups. When emotional ties are the glue that holds a

community together, its size has an upper limit. The kinship network Carol Stack describes in the Flats numbered about a hundred people. A group formed on ties of affection could, perhaps, be as large as a thousand people, but one thousand must begin to approach the limit. Our feelings close down when the numbers get too big. Strangers passing on the street in big cities avoid each other's eyes not to show disdain but to keep from being overwhelmed by excessive human contact. When we speak of communities developed and maintained through an emotional commerce like that of gifts, we are therefore speaking of something of limited size.* It remains an unsolved dilemma of the modern world, one to which anarchists have repeatedly addressed themselves, as to how we are to preserve true community in a mass society, one whose dominant value is exchange value and whose morality has been codified into law.

By the time that anarchism emerged as a political philosophy, the idea of contract had been significantly enlarged. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, theorists of "social contract" had extrapolated from the atomic unit of individual bond to that urcontract in which individuals join together to form the state. In Thomas Hobbes's version—to take the most striking example and the strongest opposite pole to anarchist theory—before there was "society" there was a "state of nature" in which separate persons knocked about like flies in a hot room—only worse, as they tended to kill one another. In Hobbes's natural history, man was driven by egocentric desires (chiefly, ambition, avarice, pride, and the fear of death—any apparent altruism being quickly traced back to

* The exceptions to this rule are those communities which, like the community of science, are organized around quite specific concerns. The group that does not pretend to support the wider social life of its members—feeding them, healing them, getting them married, and so forth—can be connected through gift exchange and still be quite large.

self-interest). Luckily, these disparate individuals found a shared value in their fear of death, and reason led them away from the state of nature toward the securities of social life. Unluckily, reason was not as strong as human passion, and because the passions were antisocial, the social life that reason suggested had to include an absolute authority with sufficient power to keep men "in awe." Hobbes set his state on these four legs: selfishness and the fear of death, reason and the awe inspired by authority.

A recurrent feature of social contract theory was an imagined gap between the primitive and the civilized man. Hobbes's primitive isn't someone you'd want to live with. Dominated by brutish aggression and the "perpetual and restless desire of Power after power," he lives in a condition of constant war, knowing no orderly social life and neither shared nor private property, only theft. He is different in *kind* from the civilized man, and that difference leaves a mark on Hobbes's politics because it simultaneously requires contract to join men together and dictates the form of that contract. Hobbes begins his politics with a fantasy about history in which a chaotic aboriginal past is replaced by civilization, the shift being marked by an imaginary moment in which men agree to give up their right to exercise private force in favor of instituting public power. Through this essential clause, social contract brings man out of nature and into civilization. But note that the contract is required precisely because man cannot be trusted to behave without it. So there is always, at least in Hobbes, this mixture of distrust and law which leads, as Marshall Sahlins has pointed out, to a paradoxical politics in which "the laws of nature cannot succeed outside the frame of contrived organization . . . Natural law is established only by artificial Power, and Reason enfranchised only by Authority."

The anarchist begins his politics on a different note and comes to a different resolution. Anarchism did not become ar-

ticated as a political philosophy until the modern state had become a political reality in the nineteenth century. Even then anarchism was not a politics per se but more of an application of ethics to political thought. Anarchist theory is like an aqua regia applied to the state and its machinery to see how much might be stripped away before people begin to suffer more than they do under law and authority. The anarchist begins with the assumption of man's good nature, contending that law itself is a "cause" of crime. He feels a kinship, not a gap, between the modern man and his predecessor "in nature." The Russian Peter Kropotkin makes a good example here because he had actually visited tribal groups. Born into a noble family and educated at military schools, Kropotkin was a confirmed rationalist and serious scientist, recognized as a geographer in scientific circles. In his early twenties he had participated in an expedition to Central Asia. James Joll's remarks on the trip touch the same points we are addressing here:

The primitive tribes he observed seemed to have customs and instincts which regulated their social life without the need of government or laws. For Kropotkin, primitive society, so far from providing an example of Hobbesian conflict and of the war of all against all, showed rather that cooperation and "mutual aid" were the natural state of man if left uncorrupted by government and by laws which result from the "desire of the ruling class to give permanence to customs imposed by themselves for their own advantage," whereas all that is necessary for harmonious living are "those customs useful for society . . . which have no need of law to insure respect."

We need not decide whether it is Hobbes or Kropotkin who sees the real primitive. Kropotkin is arguably closer, if

only because he'd actually been in the field (while Hobbes never got farther than France), but his reports do give off a slightly romantic air. A fully shaded view of tribal life had to wait for the emergence of ethnography as an empirical science.* These early pictures of primitives are better described as expressions of temperament rather than political science or ethnology. One temperament feels kinship with the aborigine while the other feels distance; one temperament assumes generosity while the other assumes a lust for power; for one our passions are social, for the other they are selfish (by the nineteenth century the Hobbesian temperament was reading Darwin for his accounts of conflict, while what Kropotkin remembered out of Darwin was the story of the blind pelican whose comrades kept him supplied with fish). One temperament assumes that goodwill underlies social life, while the other assumes egotism (and so must add reason and authority to derive society).

The two temperaments diverge at their base over the roles

* Marcel Mauss's essay is one of the first syntheses of true ethnography. It follows the established tradition of seeking the roots of the modern in the archaic, and its conclusions are a mixture of Hobbes and Kropotkin. On the one hand, Mauss's explication of the spirit of the gift (the *hau*) makes it clear that gift contract requires the spirit, and that the spirit of the gift is not well reproduced in law or derived from reason. On the other hand, like Hobbes, Mauss is not at ease with emotion as a social force, and in a pinch, he will submit it to reason. Thus he can write that "by opposing reason to emotion . . . peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gift and commerce for war, isolation and stagnation." Or he will speak of "total presentation"—by which he means constant, large-scale gift exchanges—saying, "although [they] take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare."

As with his phrase "the obligation to return," the emphasis falls on "oblige" and the motive is fear, not desire. Pure Hobbes. Obviously many gift exchanges in practice are a mixture of fear (or guilt) and desire, but we should at least note that it is just as logical to invert Mauss's premises and say, "It is by opposing *eros* to reason . . . that peoples succeed in substituting gift for war," or that "wars are undertaken in seemingly voluntary guise . . . but really out of fear of private or open friendship." Otherwise the ground emotions are fear and self-interest, the *hau* is lost, and we are back with reason suggesting law and authority.

of passion and reason. Hobbes knew no *social* passions. He speaks of his declaration that life in nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" as an "inference from the passions" against which "reason suggests convenient articles of peace . . . called the laws of nature." For this temperament, reason derives law as a check to passion, and social life emerges only as each man is somehow convinced to inhibit a part of himself. So Hobbes is led to base social life on restraint, to separate the governed from their governors, and to rely on law (with all of its functionaries, the police, the courts, the jails) to ensure order.

It is this double conceit—first, that passion will undo social life and, second, that coercion will preserve it—that anarchist theory and the traditions of gift exchange call into question. The former imagines and the latter stand witness to a social life motivated by feeling and nonetheless marked by structure, durability, and cohesion. There are many connections between anarchist theory and gift exchange as an economy—both assume that man is generous, or at least cooperative, "in nature"; both shun centralized power; both are best fitted to small groups and loose federations; both rely on contracts of the heart over codified contract, and so on. But, above all, it seems correct to speak of the gift as anarchist property because both anarchism and gift exchange share the assumption that it is not when a part of the self is inhibited and restrained, but when a part of the self is given away, that community appears.

CHAPTER SIX

A Female Property

I • The Woman Given in Marriage

As they used to say in our grammar-school workbooks, one of these things is not like the others: "And at the great festival they gave away canoes, whale oil, stone ax blades, women, blankets, and food." Margaret Mead records an Arapesh aphorism with the same disconcerting note: "Your own mother, your own sister, your own pigs, your own yams that you have piled up, you may not eat. Other people's mothers, other people's sisters, other people's pigs, other people's yams that they have piled up, you may eat." And in the Old Testament we read how one tribe hopes to make peace with another: "Let us take their daughters to us for wives and let us give them our daughters."

Of all of the cases in which women are treated as gifts, this last, the woman given in marriage, is primary. We still preserve the custom in the Protestant wedding ceremony, the minister asking the gathered families, "Who giveth this woman to be married?" and the father of the bride replying, "I do." The

The Gift

Creativity and the Artist

in the

Modern World

Lewis Hyde



VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York