

RECONCILING SPIRIT AND CONTRACT?
MARSHALL SAHLINS AND THE *ESSAI SUR LE DON*

PHILIPPE CHANIAL [★]
ILANA F. SILBER ^{★★}

ABSTRACT

This article revisits Sahlins's discussion of Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*, with a focus on its contribution to research on the gift and its broader, social and political implications. Sahlins's reading of the *Essay in Stone Age Economics* (1972), we submit, richly buttressed Mauss's attention to the gift's "total" significance and its "spiritual" dimensions – even as it developed a new interpretation of the famed Maori notion of *hau*, or "spirit" of the gift. But it also offered a Hobbesian-inflected, rational and utilitarian rendering of the gift as a form of social contract, which elided the more complex and contradictory facets of gift-exchange that were underscored by Mauss in the *Essay on the Gift*. No less important, it left the reader wonder how precisely to relate between the gift's spiritual and contractual dimensions.

Recent returns by Sahlins to the topic of the gift indicate a persistent interest in the gift's "spirit", while confirming, even enhancing tendencies found in his early writings. Highlighting the anti-Hobbesian and anti-utilitarian effects of one modality of the gift – 'the gift from everyone to everyone' – in the sphere of kin-like relatedness in particular, they also pose a contrast to the *Essay's* more inclusive vision of the gift's extensions to all parts of social life, including the state. Building upon Mauss and Sahlins, we need pursue the relation between the "spirit" of gift relations and their "contractual" implications as not only a normative and political but also empirical question, equally pertinent across past and present settings.

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[★] Université Caen - Normandie (CERREV). Address for correspondence: philippe.chanial@unicaen.fr.

^{★★} Bar-Ilan University. Address for correspondence: Ilana.Silber@biu.ac.il.

INTRODUCTION

If Marcel Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* is still to be seen to this day as "his own gift to the ages", as Marshall Sahlins phrased it in *Stone Age Economics* [2017 (1972)], it is at least in part due to the mediation of some brilliant commentators who like Sahlins himself became key figures in the social sciences and went on to develop their own gift theory.

Three decades later, in his preface to a new edition of *Stone Age Economics* (herein *SAE*), Sahlins suggested seeing these early writings as a contribution to later developments in the domain of economic anthropology, which he welcomed as amounting to a new era of "cultural economics", correcting for the economicist slant long pervasive in that field (*SAE*: 34). In such hindsight, it is not surprising that he should have felt compelled to return to Mauss's *Essay*, and mobilize it in "opposition to businesslike interpretations of primitive economies and societies" (*SAE*: 49) while shaping his own evolving form of anti-economicist historical and cultural anthropology.

Here however, we shall offer to revisit Sahlins's discussion of Mauss's *Essay* not so much with an eye to its contribution to "cultural economics" in general, nor even the specifics of his agreements or disagreements with Mauss or any of the later commentators of the *Essay* he chose to discuss, but rather what it tells us concerning the gift and its broader, social and political implications.

Sahlins's reading of the *Essay*, we submit, resulted in a very specific and selective, two-pronged approach: fully endorsing Mauss's attention to the gift's "total" significance and its "spiritual" dimensions, but also ending up disconnecting between its "spiritual" and "contractual" dimensions (Sahlins's own terms). Yet it is perhaps precisely by trying to better relate spirit and contract that we may reach for a more comprehensive approach to the gift's significance and far-reaching, if also highly volatile, contradictory and variable, political implications. This may also open up avenues of interpretation better attune to Sahlins's own predilections for a strongly historical cum cultural analysis, and allow us to venture interpretative and political implications not irrelevant to our own days.

But let us open now by first examining Sahlins's revisiting of Mauss's famous *Essay* in *SAE*, in a chapter entitled "The Spirit of the Gift" (therein *SG*). We shall then follow with a consideration of more recent writings which show a persistent interest in the topic of the gift, but tend to confirm, even enhance tendencies and tensions already present in his early writings.

1. "THE SPIRIT OF THE GIFT": A TEXT IN TWO PARTS

To some extent, admittedly, what we address here as Sahlins's two-pronged, or bifurcated approach may simply reflect the division of what became the fourth chapter in *SAE* in two parts, which were originally two separate texts indeed – written in the late sixties at a time when Sahlins was in France and appearing first in French publications:¹ the first one revolving around the Maori notion of *hau* or spirit of the gift, the second centering on the idea of the gift as social contract. Significantly, Sahlins himself takes pain to justify combining these two sections in the introduction to that chapter: "Yet in thinking the particular thesis of the Maori *hau* and the general theme of social contract reiterated throughout the *Essay*, one appreciates in another light certain fundamental qualities of primitive economy and polity, mention of which may forgive the following overextended commentary" (SG: 322).

At first glance, although these two articles both deal with and pay homage to the famous *Essay on the Gift* (herein *EG*), they seem to be based on two different approaches. The first is a rather technical anthropological analysis of the meaning of the famous *hau*, particularly in the wake of criticisms addressed to Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, and using ethnographic data that Mauss had neglected or that were not available to him at the time. The second aims at questioning the political meaning of this text through a philosophical confrontation of the *Essay* with Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Moreover, the *explication de texte*, or close reading of the first – less of Mauss's text than of the account of his Maori informant Tamata Ranapiri and its translation by Elsdon Best – seems to propose a solution to the "enigma" of the gift (Godelier 1999) – at least that of the famous obligation to give back – by re-actualizing, with and against Mauss, the hypothesis of a spirit of the gift; while the second part of the chapter seems to shift the resolution of this enigma by analyzing the gift as "the primitive analogue of social contract". As if the Maussian gift was not so much a matter of the "obscure forces of *hau*" but of Reason, of "the triumph of human rationality over the folly of war" (SG: 342).

But maybe the interest of this hybrid chapter is precisely to bring into relief, as Mauss already started (*EG*: 427), the hybrid character of the gift itself. Moreover, does not Sahlins's refusal to put an end to the "spiritual"

¹ Part 2 of chapter 4, "Political Philosophy of the Essay on the Gift", was published first in French as "Philosophie politique de l'*Essai sur le don*", in *L'Homme* [vol. 8 (4), 1968: 5-17]. Part 1 actually appeared a year later and not in French as "The Spirit of the Gift" in *Echanges et communications* (Jean Pouillon and P. Maranda, eds., The Hague: Mouton, 1969).

dimension of the gift, as we shall see, at the same time as he reopens the question of its contractual dimensions, constitute an invitation to overcome the pitfalls of utilitarian reason (Sahlins 2013b) as well as those of state reason?² So let us now try to first distil each part's key contribution separately.

2. PART 1: A TALE OF FECUNDITY AND MORALITY

True enough, this first part of the chapter may well seem to constitute a scholarly *explication de texte*, as its title states, devoted to intricate matters of textual and semantic interpretation centering on the Maori notion of the *hau* in particular.

Yet Sahlins is also quick to stress that the *hau*, for Mauss, was not only a native concept that helped explain why one ought to return a gift among the Maoris, but also a more general principle, applicable in many other settings (SG: 248). Moreover, while deliberating on the precise meaning given to the *hau* by Mauss and later commentators, Sahlins himself appears to reach for an original interpretation that remains culturally bound on the one hand, rooted in the Maori context specifically, but also leads to a more general insight on the other.

He thus opted to build upon ethnographic accounts indicating the need to replace the circulation of objects – valuable objects more precisely, such as the *Maori taonga* – within the context of specific priestly practices and sacrificial rites. Relatedly, he exposes a similar pattern, or structure emerging across a range of such Maori rites and practices: one that requires the presence or mediation of a third party, rather than simple reciprocity between two parties but also deeply associates the *hau*, or spirit of the gift, with fundamental notions of yield, fecundity and abundance.

In the process, Sahlins touched on a string of issues which are all still key themes of research on the gift, such as: whether the spirit (or identity) of the donor remains attached to the object given; what is the precise rela-

² As such, this chapter is intelligible only in the activist context of the 1960s in the United States, in which Sahlins was an engaged participant, as well as that of the French “*Mai 1968*”, which he witnessed in Paris. Indeed, not unlike the first chapter of *SAE*, “The Original Affluent Society” (also published first in French as an article for the journal directed by Sartre, *Les Temps modernes* in October 1968), which ridiculed the illusions of modern Western capitalist societies to embody “societies of abundance”, chapter 4 can legitimately be interpreted as a challenge to the claims of the state to be the sole bulwark against war, as if coercion, the monopoly of violence and force by the State was the necessary price to pay for peace, order and social stability. It is therefore not by chance that the preface to the French translation of *SAE* was written by Pierre Clastres, the author of *La société contre l'État* [Clastres 1989 (1974): ch. 11 in particular].

tion between the *hau* of the donor, of the objects given, and of the “foyer d’origine”, or source of all goods; what importance accrues to a third party (and which such third party) in gift transactions, and last but not least, how to relate to the idea of dangers or threat associated with receiving or not properly returning a gift.

On that last score in particular, Sahlins was certainly keenly aware of Mauss’s attention to the threatening hold the giver has on the recipient, which he reminds us of from the very outstart with the following, famed sentences by which Mauss conveyed what stood for him as the central question in the Essay:

What is the principle of right and interest which, in societies of primitive or archaic type, requires that the gift received must be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return? The *hau* is that force. Not only is it the spirit of the foyer, but of the donor of the gift; so that even as it seeks to return to its origin unless replaced, it gives the donor a mystic and *dangerous* hold over the recipient (*emphasis added*) (SG: 323).

By and large, however, it is not clear if Sahlins gives any special importance to the dangerous, or risky facets of gift exchange as such. Moreover, the threatening facets of gift relationships, which he refers to in other citations from the *Essay* later in the chapter, are not those which Mauss went on forcefully associating with “agonistic”, competitive potlatch dynamics of status and hierarchy. Rather, what Sahlins is more attentive to is the recipient’s fear of possible supernatural sanctions or else when doing wrong, failing to return a gift and unduly keeping the yield of the first gift. These are also dangers which he ends up subsuming under a general notion of morality (his term), explicitly counterpoising, precisely, the idea of dangers one might fear when failing to return a gift, and reaching beyond matters of mere reciprocity. In his own words:

Taken together, the different texts on the *hau* of gifts suggest something else entirely: not that the goods withheld are dangerous, but that withholding goods is *immoral* (our emphasis) – and therefore dangerous in the sense the deceiver is open to justifiable attack. “It would not be correct to keep it for myself”, said Ranapiri, “I will become (ill, or die)”. We have to deal with a society in which freedom to gain at others’ expense is not envisioned by the relations and forms of exchange. Therein lies the moral of the old Maori’s economic fable (SG: 345).

We need remember that the *hau* at stake, at least as attached to objects, is the *hau* of *taonga*, or as Sahlins notes, i.e. goods of the higher spheres of exchange, valuables. This cannot fail to open the question of how relevant it is, if at all, to “lower” spheres of exchange or gift exchange, and

the moral sphere of more ordinary social interactions. It is noteworthy, at any rate, that Sahlins does switch at this point to a vocabulary of morality, making use of the term “moral” – and a score of related terms alluding to justice, fairness as well as duty or obligation – rather than those of “spirit”, “mystic” or “spiritual”, which had starred earlier in the text.

To conclude, two major and distinct ideas, or themes emerge in this first part of the chapter. First, the importance of native, “emic” concepts of fertility, vitality or abundance in shaping the meaning of what the *hau* or spirit of the gift is about. Second, the part played by a dimension of fairness and morality, also as culturally accepted in the specific, Maori setting, if perhaps resonating for us as less clearly limited to it, intimating a more general human moral sense. To what extent are these themes carried on into the second part of the chapter, or perhaps help explain and connect between the two parts, i.e. between understanding the spirit of the gift on the one hand, and conceptualizing the operation of the gift as a form of social contract on the other?

Clearly, while agonistic/antagonistic pulsions were noted but left marginal to the argument in the first part, they become on the contrary utterly central to the second part, devoted to “The Political Philosophy of the Essay on the Gift”. Yet they do so, as we shall see, in a very different way, partaking of Sahlins’s a detailed comparison of Mauss and Hobbes concerning the dangers of a presumed human primordial state of “Warre”, but with no further reference to the dangers and darker pulsions of the gift itself that were integral to Mauss’s argument and certainly acknowledged, if also ultimately “moralized”, “ethicized”, in the first part of the chapter. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the moral interpretation which Sahlins appeared to favor toward the end of the first part is to be related in any way to his conception of the gift as social contract in the second. Rather, the gift we shall see emerging now is one morphing into a peaceful, irenic solution to a perennial, underlying threat of violence and chaos, while itself devoid of, or at least not shown to carry, its very own inner risks, tensions or contradictions – be these “moral” or spiritual.

3. PART 2. THE GIFT AS SOCIAL CONTRACT?

Let us forget, for a moment at least, the “obscure forces of *hau*” (SG: 282)? Such seems to be the surprising invitation that opens this second part. After all, “the *hau*, spirit of the donor in the gift, was not the ultimate explanation of reciprocity, only a special proposition set in the context of a historic conception” (*ibid.*). In order to better grasp the enigma of the gift, it would be necessary, therefore, to get rid of its alleged spirit, to go hunting

elsewhere, to leave “the mystic forests of Polynesia”, to swap the irrational narrative of the Maori, for the cold, resolutely modern and Western analysis of the political philosophies of the social contract.³ As if the *Essay on the Gift* was above all “a kind of social contract for the primitives” or otherwise stated: “the primitive analogue of social contract is not the State, but the gift” (SG: 272).

This provocative hypothesis invites us not only to draw out the political philosophy implicit in an anthropological text but also to read the anthropology implicit in the modern philosophies of the social contract, principally that of the author of *Leviathan*. For what is striking here is that what is advanced is both a Hobbesian reading of Mauss and, at least in part, a Maussian, anthropological reading of Hobbes. If Mauss is “akin to Hobbes” (SG: 275), this “close correspondence between the two philosophers” (SG: 287) can be summed up in a strong, all-Hobbesian thesis: “the understructure of society is war” (SG: 276). The famous “war of all against all” is not a philosophical fiction but an anthropological reality. But anthropological in what sense? Although Sahlins acknowledges that the Hobbesian negative conception of human nature (greed, thirst for power, inclination to violence) does not seem to be Mauss’s, he does not linger on this anthropological dispute. Indeed, if he grants Hobbes some anthropological insight, it is with regard to his conception not of “human nature” but of “social nature”. “The state of nature is already a kind of society”, writes Sahlins, in which “the right to give battle is retained by the people in severalty” (SG: 277). The famous “war of all against all” defines a “politie” – *Warre*, War rather than war – a political form, characteristic of the segmentary societies studied by Mauss. Divided into groups with distinct interests and equal forces, without “common power”, where everyone can virtually make one’s own law, the archaic political order not only facilitates but legitimizes confrontations and the free use of force.

³ Very few authors ventured, before Sahlins, to question the political philosophy of the *Essay on the Gift*, with the notable exception of Claude Lefort (1951). In a major article published in *Les temps modernes*, he sought to respond to and discuss the famous preface published a year earlier by Lévi-Strauss (1987) to Mauss’s *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Without evoking Hobbes, Lefort, like Sahlins, emphasized how much Mauss’s “critical question” was above all that of modern political philosophy, especially in its contractualist tradition: the conditions of the possibility of peace between men and, through it, of society itself. However, this contractualist reading was not foreign to Lévi-Strauss, who might very well have inspired Sahlins on this point. In *Tristes Tropiques*, he wrote: “Rousseau and his contemporaries showed a deep sociological intuition when they understood that cultural attitudes and elements such as ‘contract’ and ‘consent’ are not secondary formations, as their opponents, and particularly Hume, claimed: they are the raw materials of social life, and it is impossible to imagine a form of political organization in which they would not be present” [LÉVI-STRAUSS (1984) 1955: 374].

It is therefore against this backdrop of violence that is always latent, this permanent threat of war, that we must understand how the primitive order manages to overcome its constitutive fragility. In this Hobbesian reading of Mauss, however, it does so by denying this fragility. This War (*Warre*) is repressed, transfigured into its opposite in and through gift and exchange. Is the potlatch anything else but a “sort of sublimated warfare”? Is one not giving “on pain of private or open warfare”? “To refuse to give or to fail to invite is, like refusing to accept, equivalent to a declaration of war; it is to refuse alliance and communion” (Mauss, cited in *SG*: 280). “The exchange of everything between everybody” certainly substitutes for the “war of all against all”, but by mimicking it. If “primitive society is at war with *Warre*”, it is by symbolically replaying it, containing it and diverting it. Thus, the materiality and utility of the goods exchanged is less important than the alliance formed through reciprocal exchange. Through the gift, “the force of attraction in things thus dominates the attraction of force among men” (*ibid.*). The negative reciprocity of War (blow for blow, evil for evil) is transformed into positive reciprocity (gift for gift, good for good). The spirit of the thing given, the *hau* then appears for what it is, the rationalization of a demand for reciprocity whose principle is precisely in this continuous threat of war: “the compulsion to reciprocate built into the *hau* responds to the repulsion of groups built into society” (*ibid.*).

It is for this reason that the gift can be thought of “as a form of political contract”, a total gift-contract, alike to a total social fact, by which men mutually commit themselves to overcoming this pristine, “original condition of disorder”, manifesting to each other mutually, by the generosity they display, that they renounce the use of force, lay down their spears, thus sealing a peace treaty, an alliance. Moreover, as in classical theories of the social contract, it is Reason that guides their steps. Triumph of human rationality over the folly of war, “the gift is Reason” (*SG*: 282).⁴

But what Reason? For Hobbes, it is obviously an individual and utilitarian rationality, geared to self-preservation against the threat of death. And it is this natural interest in self-preservation, Sahlins points out, that requires, according to Hobbes’s Laws of Nature, to seek Peace and to hold on to it. But does this mean that Mauss also believes that it is because man

⁴ It is also, like the State for Hobbes, a source of “progress” and “civilization”: “Composing society, the gift was the liberation of culture”, it emancipated it from the “brutish and static” state of nature peculiar to segmented societies (*SG*: 282). Sahlins nevertheless emphasizes how much more subtle Mauss’s analysis is and “had historic merit: it corrected just this simplified progression from chaos to commonwealth, savagery to civilization, that had been the work of classical contract theory” (*SG*: 289).

has an interest in peace that he is interested in playing the game of gifts – in other words, that savages are also unrepentant utilitarians? Moreover, what then guarantees the respect of the pact once “signed”? Hobbes’s solution is well known: “covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (*Leviathan* 17.2). The State and coercion are therefore the price to pay for order and social stability. This is why, Sahlins points out, for Hobbes Reason – the Laws of Nature – comes to be actualized through the non-natural, the artificial. But then, in the absence of the state, as in the societies studied by Mauss, what guarantee commitments, especially the obligation to give back? As Sahlins emphasizes, the primitive social pact is not a *pact of submission*, of “incorporation” of all into a “superperson” symbolized by the figure of Leviathan (SG: 331). It is a *pact of reciprocity* by which the units do not dissolve into a superior entity. The guarantor of reciprocity and of the pact is then another force, the magical force of the *hau*, which would allow savage people to “make society” by saving the state. If for Hobbes reciprocity is impossible without the constraint of the state, for Mauss, reminds Sahlins, it would be impossible without the constraint of the *hau*.

After this detour via Hobbes, is not this a return to the initial question of the chapter, the one that he seemed to dismiss at the beginning of this second part: the question of the spirit of the gift? Sahlins underlines this paradox of a rationality of the gift that takes the form of the irrational.⁵ But is it then an illusion, which would dissimulate, in the manner of Levi-Strauss, the unconscious work of the principle of reciprocity or, in line with Bourdieu, a ploy of utilitarian reason, concealing the objectively self-interested character of the generosity manifested in the exchange? Clearly Sahlins refutes both structuralist and utilitarian reason. Do not we encounter here again rather, through the spirit of giving, the moral and cultural dimension that was suggested in the previous section? Does not the *hau* symbolize above all this “coefficient of sociability [which] cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms” (SG: 293)?⁶ Irreducible to both utilitarian and state reason, the primitive gift-contract, as Sahlins himself acknowledges, evokes then much more Rousseau than

⁵ “For the rationality of the gift contradicted everything he had said before on the subject of *hau*” (SG: 289).

⁶ In the following chapter, Sahlins emphasizes in the same vein: “If friends make gifts, gifts make friends [...]. A great proportion of primitive exchange, much more than our own traffic, has as its decisive function this latter, instrumental one: the material flow underwrites or initiates social relations. Thus do primitive peoples transcend the Hobbesian chaos”. (SAE: 295) Certainly anti-utilitarian but also functionalist, this analysis reduces the gift to its instrumental “function”: to establish or sustain relations – precisely the aporia which his subsequent works propose to overcome.

Hobbes, the resolution of “primitive anarchy” in terms of sociability.⁷ But does this not imply a hypothesis opposite to that of Hobbes, the hypothesis of a “natural sociability” shaped by human culture – and which the practice of giving supposes, expresses and actualizes?

In such respect, this chapter, somewhat unfinished, finds its continuation in more recent works by Sahlins that keep challenging Hobbes’s conception of human nature, but also ponder the sources of a ‘natural’ sociability. Let us then try to pursue deciphering it in light of a few later texts.

4. THE HOBBSIAN STATE OF NATURE AS WESTERN IDEOLOGY

In a major text, “The Sadness of Sweetness” (1996), and his subsequent synthesis, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (2008), Sahlins briefly revisits this confrontation between Mauss and Hobbes. While reiterating his earlier thesis that Mauss discovered the origins of the gift in Hobbesian terms of an alternative to war, he no longer seems to grant much anthropological insight to either of them in their descriptions of the “state of nature” and now radicalizes his Hobbesian reading of Mauss’s *Essay* from a different perspective.

Indeed, the “war of all against all” would not constitute “the understructure of society”, as much as an articulation typical of “the native anthropology of western cosmology”, namely, that myth of an asocial or even antisocial human nature, so greedy and violent that it would relinquish society to anarchy if it were not subjected to some discipline or government. This metaphysics peculiar to the West brings together those whom Sahlins does not hesitate to call “Hobbesians”, that is, all those authors – from the sophists and their “road companions”, including Thucydides,⁸ to Freud, even Durkheim and contemporary sociobiology, via Saint Augustine, Machiavelli, the authors of the *Federalist*, Bentham and so many others – who have forged this cultural tradition, this “sustained Western contempt for humanity: this long-term scandal of human avarice, together with the antithesis of culture and nature that informs it” (Sahlins 2008: 3).

⁷ “By its segmentary morphology, Mauss’s primitive society rather returns to the third stage of the *Discourse on Inequality* than to the radical individualism of a Hobbesian state of nature [...] And as Mauss and Rousseau had similarly seen the oppositions as social, so equally their resolutions would be sociable. That is, for Mauss, an exchange that ‘extends to everything, to everyone, to all time’” (SG: 275). In short, this is the model of the “gift of everyone to everyone” which Sahlins will develop in his writings on kinship, as discussed in the following section.

⁸ According to Sahlins, Hobbes, translator of Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War*, drew his description of the state of nature from that of the civil war at Corcyra (2008: 10).

According to him, Mauss is partly heir to the English philosopher's "traditional tale of the bad men and Leviathan",⁹ at least in part, as he inherited it from his uncle Durkheim and his anthropology of *homo duplex*. Indeed, one should read in the *Essay* the "same implicit theory" (1996: 405): that of a double humanity, half angel, half demon, at once "a social creature, able to submit his self-interest to the morality of the society" and "a presocial and sensuous animal, egocentrically given to his own welfare" (*ibid.*: 402). Therefore, it does not matter that in the Maussian gift-contract "people reciprocally surrender everything to on another, in contrast to the classic contract in which they unilaterally surrender force to the One who will bear their person" (*ibid.*: 406). It is indeed from this "indigenous ideology" of human nature that their conception of "social nature" – and the need for a binding contract to better tame this original hostility between men and its corollary, their natural appetite for power and gain – would result. More generally, it is French and British anthropology as a whole which is, by valuing unlike German anthropology "civilization" against "culture", particularly "prone to the anguish of anarchy and to the correlate respect for order and power" (*ibid.*). As if, suggests Sahlins ironically, "the pervasive intuition of an underlying chaos, a Radcliffe-Brownian movement of self-interested human atoms, has weight like a nightmare of the social anthropologist" (*ibid.*).

This implicit rapprochement between Mauss and Radcliffe-Brown could thus lead to read the *Essay on the Gift* as an expression *avant la lettre* of the "incurable functionalism" of anthropology, inseparable from the indigenous Western ideology, which Sahlins has never ceased to criticize: as if the gift, as an institution, had as its *raison d'être* and function to promote sociability among men, or rather, following the example of the *Leviathan*, to domesticate their "unsociable sociability", to use the Kantian formula. If this were the case, there would be nothing to be expected either from his anthropology or from his political philosophy of the gift to open an alternative to this Western illusion. Is this the case? It is not certain, for if Sahlins criticizes this so-called "unsociable sociability" without Mauss, or even against such a Hobbesian Mauss, this criticism, paradoxically, keeps bringing him back to the question of the gift, and thus to the anti-Hobbesian insights of the *Essay*.

⁹ Contradicting this interpretation, see Caillé (2019, 2020) and more generally the work of the *Revue du MAUSS* (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales), otherwise underwriting Sahlins's anti-economicism.

5. THE MYSTERIOUS EFFECTIVENESS OF RELATIONALITY

In a short text about the gifts of totemic plants and animals in Australia and New Guinea, entitled “The Gift of Everyone to Everyone”, Sahlins writes:

We thus discover a society the opposite in principle of the bellicose state of nature that Hobbes posited as the primordial condition – an idea of the inherent human condition, moreover, which is still too much with us. Instead of a ‘war of every man against every man’, each opposing others in his own self-interest, here is a society organized on the premise of everyone giving himself to everyone (2018: 79).

This model of the gift of everyone to everyone reminds us of what Sahlins called, in Chapter V of *Stone Age Economics*, “generalized reciprocity”, that is, unlike “balanced reciprocity” and its “one-for-one exchange”, a form of giving in which the obligation to give is “diffuse” and “indefinite”, in short, not very demanding in terms of time, quality or quantity (*SAE*: 331-332).

He also emphasizes the extent to which it is the dominant form, particularly within kinship relationships, and how “balanced reciprocity” (that of matrimonial, commercial and peace treaty “contracts” in particular), “builds trust and confidence, in effect reduces social distance, and so increases the chances for more generalized future dealings-as the initial blood-brotherhood transaction creates a ‘credit rating,’ as it were” (*ibid.*: 428-429, emphasis added). If the “gift of everyone to everyone” (or generalized reciprocity), thus presented as the most “social” and “sociable” kind of gift, is so alien to Western indigenous ideology, is it not precisely because it presupposes a completely different conception of human nature?

In his recent book *What Kinship is ... and is not* (2013a), as in *The Western Illusion of Social Nature*, Sahlins analyzes numerous examples of such gifts to show how, in the kinship-based community, this generalized reciprocity is underpinned by the very quality of the bonds that unite its members. Drawing on Durkheim’s first analyses of totemism in 1898, he shows that these kinship ties, far from being reduced to blood ties, are based on “particular cultural logics of relatedness” (*ibid.*: 9). Thus, he writes: “Love and nurture, giving food or partaking in it together, working together, living from the same land, mutual aid, sharing the fortunes of migration and residence, as well as adoption and marriage, are so many grounds of kinship” (*ibid.*: 29).

What defines kinship relationships therefore is this “mutuality of being”, which Sahlins also calls “intersubjective belonging”, “participation

in one another's experience". Moreover, what makes kinship – as procreation also illustrates – is the “transmission of life capacities among persons” (*ibid.*). Food-giving (like breast-feeding) is a good example. Following Nancy Munn, Sahlins relates how a Gawa man begins to create fosterage with a baby by pre-masticating food and putting it in the baby's mouth. Here food-giving is life-giving: it put a new kind of life (the giver's life) into the eater who is now bound to the giver as part of himself, and reciprocally the giver recognizes his own life in the eater. It is in this sense that “kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are parts of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent” (*ibid.*: 21).

Thus, Sahlins emphasizes, if in these societies, as for Rimbaud, “Je est un autre”, then the other concerns me and I have to take care of him as another myself. This is why, for most of humanity, “greed is less an expression of a pre-social human nature than a defect of humanity [that] digs a chasm in the mutual relations that define human existence” (2008: 53-55). To put it another way, in the words of Marilyn Strathern (1988: 13), if “the singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm”, a “dividual individual”, the enigma of gift appears less enigmatic. It finds its solution, Sahlins suggests, in what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009: 243) calls “the mysterious effectiveness of relationality” at the heart of this indigenous anthropology of human nature (Sahlins 2013a: 58). Indeed, if, as Mauss wrote, “by giving one is giving oneself” (*EG*: 46), if gift-giving is life-giving, then this life force of the gift compels a return from within the receiver. A gift which is not returned becomes life-threatening not only to the ungrateful recipient but also of the generous giver. As the Maori say, recalls Sahlins, the receiver “steals” a little of the life offered to him, “consumes” (*kai*) the spirit of the gift (which connects both of them) so that he “drains” the giver's life (2013a: 58). Or in other words: back to the *hau* as to the why of the gift, and back to our fourth chapter of *Stone Age Economics*!

6. BACK TO MAUSS (WITHOUT HOBBS)

But also back to Mauss and his *Essay*, or more generally to his entire anthropology of the gift. For it must be recalled here that the *Essay*, in his words, was only a “fragment of much vaster studies” (*EG*: 141). Mauss explicitly limited his subject matter to the study of what he called “total prestations of the agonistic type” (*EG*: 149). He left aside the forms of giving that he described as “more elementary”: the non-agonistic total prestations, to which he referred as well, if all too briefly, in the introduction to the essay (as well as in a few other preparatory texts) and in his *Manual*

of *Ethnography*. Of these, which he sometimes simply calls “total prestations” (hence the risk of confusion), he finds “the purest type” in “the alliance of two phratries in Pacific or North American tribes in general”, based on complementarity and the “cooperation between the two halves of the tribe” (*ibid.*).

In his *Manual*, Mauss specifies how much “in all non-market societies, exchange occurs between people who are bound more or less permanently, sometimes absolutely and totally”. Consequently “I owe everything to my parents-in-laws but my sons-in-law owe me everything [...] what is involved is *total reciprocity*” [Mauss 2007 (1947): 102, emphasis added]. It is thus the anti-Hobbesian model of the “gift from everyone to everyone” evoked by Sahlins and which has its source in kinship relations. If it can be understood as a contract, it is in the sense of “permanent contracts” (*EG* 159) established between clans, families and individuals “by means of perpetual and all kinds of services and benefits, usually in the form of donations and services, religious or otherwise, free of charge” [Mauss 1997 (1924): 29].

Mauss further emphasizes that this “system of total prestations, of clan to clan – that in which individuals and groups exchange everything amongst themselves – constitutes the most ancient system of economy and law (*droit*) that we can establish and conceptualize” (*EG*: 422). It is therefore because this system of prestation is indeed the most elementary, because these non-agonistic prestations are original, so to speak natural, that “we are touching upon the fundamentals” (*ibid.*), “one of the human bedrocks on which our societies are built” (*EG*: 144). The point is, for now, that a completely different “social nature” of primitive societies manifests itself in this argument, one that is much more Sahlinsian, based on the model of “generalized reciprocity”, than Hobbesian, at least with regard to the relations of kinship that form its framework. Indeed, a Hobbesian reading of Mauss would assume that agonistic forms precede their non-agonistic forms, that violence is itself primary and foundational, and therefore that giving is the solution to this naturalness of inter-human conflict. But this is not the case for Mauss. In this sense, the Maussian “state of nature” is more a culturally forged one where, as Sahlins (2008: 100) writes, “sociality is the normal human condition” [2008: 100], and not the result of the domestication of antisocial natural dispositions through the civilizing work of the social.

However, would Mauss have agreed with Sahlins’s thesis that “human nature begins at home” (2008: 44), that “kinship is culture, all culture” (2013a: 89)?¹⁰ And close to the same idea, would he see generalized reci-

¹⁰ In the same vein, Sahlins, in a somewhat irenic way, recalls that “‘kinship and kindness’,

procuity, or to use David Graeber's term, "communism",¹¹ as the "elementary form of the social contract" (Graeber 2001: 162) and "the foundation of all human sociability" (Graeber 2012: 203)? Nothing is less certain. Indeed, even if violence is not foundational in Mauss's understanding, its threat or workings are never absent; and even more so when one leaves one's "home", when the social and genealogical distance between individuals and groups is important, or more generally, due to the "morphological depths of segmented societies" (*EG*: 277). In such situations of confrontation with otherness, for example with potentially hostile "strangers", unless one falls into what Sahlins calls "negative reciprocity" (*SEA*, ch. 5), the gift, in its agonistic forms, serves as a test and challenge aimed at the question: alliance or hostility? Consequently, the wager of the gift – a risky and fragile wager when it is not part of prior mutual trust, as in kinship relationships – is at the same time a performer of alliance and recognition (Caillé 2019: ch. 3, 2021). In short, precisely because of its dimension of rivalry, the agonistic gift is also a source of sociality.

More generally, and in connection with this dimension of recognition, Mauss acknowledges more generally that many forms of giving, even in societies without potlatch, and even in the context of kinship, contain an element of rivalry. Through the dialectic of challenge and response of these "struggles of generosity" (*EG*: 200), if the donor, through his display of generosity, asserts his name, his rank, the recipient is challenged to respond, to take up this challenge by becoming a donor in his turn. Otherwise he risks being put "in the shadow of his name", losing his face, his dignity, his freedom man or even his life (*EG*: 243). Agent of socialization, the gift is all the same also a force for self-affirmation. In and through giving, each person asserts his subjectivity and freedom, manifesting his value by demonstrating his capacity to give.

Perhaps we can then better understand the political philosophy of the *Essay on the Gift*, as it is formulated in its conclusion, as the quest for some form of articulation of communism and individualism. In his *Manuel d'ethnographie*, Mauss wrote: "Societies can be defined by their communism or individualism, or more precisely by the degree of individualism and communism that they show: both are always present; the task is to

E.B. Tylor once observed, have a common root, a derivation that expresses in the happiest way one of the main principles of social life" (2008: 47).

¹¹ It is in line with Mauss himself [2007 (1947): 99, 102], as he discussed it extensively in *Toward and Anthropology of Value* (2001: 159-160), that David Graeber, prominent follower of Sahlins, would address this system of prestations, or generalized reciprocity, as "communism", clearly opposed to "exchange", including both commercial exchange and agonistic forms of giving (GRAEBER 2012: chap. 5).

determine their respective proportions”, there is always both, and it is the balance between them that must be determined” [2007 (1947): 99]. This dosage can be understood as an articulation – which also involves a tension – between the logic of sharing and mutuality proper to the system of total non-agonistic prestations on the one hand, and the imperative of reciprocity and self-assertion implied by the system of agonistic prestations on the other. It is in this respect that “we can and should come back to the archaic” (EG: 420). And such would be the moral and political lesson of the savages.

It is in this perspective that we must read his plea for modern social insurances. It is not only a question of sharing collective resources to protect the worker from the effects of illness, unemployment or old age. To this recognition of his needs, in the name of solidarity, is added the recognition of his personal contribution to the community, in the name of reciprocity. Because “the worker has given his life and labor to the collectivity ... those who have benefited from his services have not completely discharged their debt to him by the payment of a salary” (EG: 416). His life must be “insured” in return. As such, the social insurance system, unlike charity, public assistance or private pension scheme, can be defined as a space for mutual and solidarity-based gifts. It is the reason why, Mauss adds, “an excess of generosity and communism would be as detrimental to him and as detrimental to society as the egoism of our contemporaries and the individualism of our laws” (EG: 419). Social insurance¹² is thus one of those subtle balances between communism and individualism on which the spirit of giving – we are back to it again – is hovering, and which the “socialist society” of the future, as Mauss saw it, calls for (Mauss 1996).

CONCLUSION

In sum, Sahlins’s reading of the *Essay on the Gift* forcefully pursued Mauss’s attention to the gift’s “total” significance and its “spiritual” dimensions – even as it developed a new interpretation of the famed Maori notion of *hau*, or “spirit” of the gift, in which cultural connotations of fecundity and morality combined. But it also offered an Hobbesian-inflected, rational and utilitarian rendering of the gift as a form of social contract, which elided the more complex and contradictory facets of gift-exchange that were underscored by Mauss in the *Essay on the Gift* – such as its intricate combina-

¹² Such as the “solicitude of mutualism”, cooperatives, French “professional groups” or English “friendly societies” (EG: 420).

tion of freedom and obligation, interest and disinterestedness, solidary and agonistic pulsions.

Recent returns by Sahlins to the topic of the gift showed a persistent interest in the notion of the ‘spirit’ of the gift, together with an enhanced critique of any Hobbesian view of the human nature as Western ideology. Moreover, his attention to one modality of the gift, whereby “everyone gives to everyone”, as it flourishes in the context of the sphere of kinship or kin-like relatedness in particular, brings to the fore affinities with anti-Hobbesian and anti-utilitarian aspects of Mauss’s views which he had left aside in his earlier reading of the gift as social contract. However, it also poses a contrast to Mauss’s more optimistic, as well as more political envisioning of the gift’s effects possibly extending to all spheres and levels of social life, including the state.¹³ In other words, if Sahlins had at first striven to conceptualize the contractual aspects of the gift by expelling its spiritual dimensions, it is now the contractual dimension which tends to disappear, becoming either too obligatory and threatening or simply superfluous.

To some extent, Sahlins conceptual trajectory may well stem from the tensions entailed in wishing to combine one’s understanding of what the gift is, was, and vision of what it could or ought to be. Obviously enough, Sahlins is not the first nor the last in a rich lineage of social scientists, who similarly wished to link between their empirical (past and present) and ethical, political, or even utopian visions of the gift; and similarly came to display internal conceptual contradictions or change their stance, consciously or not, over the years. This was the case, as well known, with Mauss himself in the *Essay*, ending with a chapter of conclusions which he deemed touching on morality no less than economic sociology and political economy and general sociology (his terms). Calling to bring back the gift as noble and solidary practice to the center stage of modern society, he appears to “forget” to take into account what he had taught us so vividly in his earlier empirical chapters concerning the contradictory as well as darker and conflictual facets of the gift in archaic societies and various historical settings.¹⁴

¹³ It is striking that Sahlins, questioning in *On Kings* the sources of political power through the example of divine royalty, returns once again to Hobbes, albeit in a critical manner, but without Mauss and without any reference to the gift: “There are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth. Hobbes notwithstanding, the state of nature is already something of a political state. It follows, that, taken in its social totality and cultural reality, something like the state is the general condition of humankind” (GRAEBER and SAHLINS 2017: 24). And yet, as Sahlins, good adept of Hocart, never ceases to remind us, does not the legitimacy of these divine kings – the mortal bodies of the ancestral god – rest on their capacity to give, to give “life”: in short on the gift of fertility that guarantees the well-being of their people?

¹⁴ For a similar contradiction emerging in the writings of Bourdieu, see SILBER 2009.

Clearly enough, much is left to do to further explore the relation between what Sahlins distinguished as the particular “spirit” of gift relations and their general “contractual” implications as not only a normative and political, but also empirical question. No less clearly, much has been written concerning the gift in recent years that may help us grasp the many ways, past or present, in which the ‘spirit’ of the gift may keep giving. Complementing the analysis in ways that would overflow the limited space of this article, we would need to discuss the contribution of a rich corpus of recent studies, across number of disciplines, which have underscored the relational, solidary and agonistic dimensions of gift relations, as well as their often contradictory pulsions and risky, unintended and unpredictable implications.¹⁵ This would tend to generate an understanding of the gift that is less necessarily oriented to reciprocity, progress, peace and rationality than Sahlins appeared to envision in his rendering of the gift as the equivalent of social contract in archaic societies. But it would also be one better attune to issues of identity, performance and recognition, as variously associated with different types of gift interactions rather than only one generic idea of the gift. And as a result, precisely, perhaps more realistic, more “political” to think and work with when following in the footsteps of Sahlins and reaching for a more peaceful and better society?

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¹⁵ See for example ADLOFF 2019; CAILLÉ 2019, 2020; CHANIAL 2011, 2012; ELDER-VASS 2015, GODBOUT 1998, 2007; HÉNAFF 2010; KOMTER 2007; LAZZERI and CAILLÉ 2007; PYYHTINEN 2014; SILBER 2019.

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