

How to open the gift box?

Archaeology and the transfer of goods

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Summary:

When it seeks to understand the way in which the goods it uncovers were transferred, archaeology is entirely dependent on a theory and a typology developed by social anthropology. In contrast to the traditional approach dating back to Marcel Mauss, which considers that the whole of the “primitive” world is marked by an undifferentiation between gift and exchange, Alain Testart has proposed, on the contrary, to rigorously delimit these concepts by using the criterion of legal exigibility. This analysis, which also reveals the existence of other forms of simple transfers, can be deepened by exploring complex (combined or indeterminate) forms.

In the end, archaeology, because it approaches social relations from their material traces, cannot hope, in the absence of writing, to reconstruct directly the way in which goods were owned and transferred. This knowledge can nevertheless be approached insofar as archaeology can provide the elements that make it possible to identify a social type and, in turn, the predominant modes of transfer that prevailed within this type for a given category of goods.

Keywords:

Gift, Exchange, Alain Testart, Marcel Mauss, Transfer of goods

Introduction

That rights over goods and their transfers constitute one of the key dimensions around which human societies are organized is obvious. Yet, strange as it may seem, on neither of these two aspects has the science of these societies forged a consensual basis of analysis. No general comparative study of property rights exists, and it can even be said that no serious attempt has ever been made in this direction. As far as transfers are concerned, the situation is hardly less critical. In fact, for decades, writings about societies distant from our own, either by their structure or by their epoch, have most often been marked by a conceptual blurring on this point. Since the founding work of Marcel Mauss (Mauss [1924] 2004), the concepts of gift and exchange, in particular, never being rigorously defined, seem sometimes to oppose each other, sometimes to intermingle to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Thus, when attempting to interpret the circulation of objects in distant times, archaeologists face a double difficulty. The first, inherent to their discipline, is that objects do not preserve any trace of the rights that humans have exercised over them, nor of the manner in which these rights may have changed holders. This problem, by itself, is already considerable. But in the absence of a clear definition of the various ways in which rights in property are transferred, it has no chance of finding a satisfactory solution. To use a metaphor, recognizing animals in the night is a challenge; but to succeed in doing so without knowing exactly what the different species look like and what their characteristics are is utterly impossible.

The following article is an extension of the work of Alain Testart, who developed a criterion for classifying transfers of goods and thus identified the different fundamental types (Testart 2001; 2007). We will therefore begin by recalling the main contributions of this analysis. However, this is only the first step in a long process: social reality is infinitely more complex than simple "pure" types would suggest. It is therefore essential to understand the way in which the latter combine to produce the former. Finally, perhaps the most difficult task remains: to determine the extent to which the transfer of goods says something about social relations, and the contribution of this analysis to archaeology.

1. Types of transfers of goods: a classification

1.1 Gift versus exchange

The starting point of Testart's critique is to rigorously define gift and exchange - and thus to differentiate them from each other. We know that in Mauss's text, gift and exchange are so confused that the author uses a number of expressions such as "contractual gifts" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 10-11), the "exchange through gifts" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 16, 23), the "exchange-gift" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 29, 59), the "gift-through-exchange" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 37), the "remuneration-cum-gift" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 39), the "obligation to give" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 16, 17, 50), the "obligatory and voluntary exchanges of gifts" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 19), or again gifts destined "to paying" (Mauss [1924] 2004, 94). In substance - and this is even the subtitle of the work - the gift is seen as "the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies". In the eyes of Alain Testart, this is a double error, both ethnographic and conceptual. Ethnographic, because the will to encompass the whole of non-state societies in a unique approach, as

if within them, the transfers of goods uniformly obeyed the same rules, does not correspond to the diversity of the social types observed, and that science must precisely identify. But Mauss's approach also reflects a conceptual error, by forging oxymorons, "logical monstrosities of the same nature as a circle-square" (Testart 2001, 742), which intermingle concepts that should, on the contrary, be carefully delimited.

The first step is to identify the pitfalls of the current vocabulary, whose imprecision is a factor of confusion. To begin with, the act of "giving" does not necessarily mean that one is making a "gift". When we are at the store and we ask the shopkeeper to "give" us a loaf of bread, we know that this transfer is not free, but that it implies a payment - and that the absence of this has many consequences. In other words, if the baker "gives" us a loaf of bread, he does not make a "gift" to us. The situation with respect to exchange is equally unclear, since the term has two very different meanings. In its broadest sense, exchange is purely descriptive, and expresses the idea that two transfers are made in opposite directions between two entities: this is the case, for example, in physics, of gas exchanges. It is in this sense, but only in this sense, that we can speak of an exchange of gifts, as when at the Christmas party, gifts are passed between participants and each is both giver and receiver. But exchange also has a much narrower meaning - and it is the latter that must be used in sociology: it then designates a situation where the two transfers are not only reciprocal, but where they are also the necessary condition of each other. This is exactly what happens in the bakery: the baker transfers the baguette to the customer if, and only if, the customer transfers money to him - and vice versa.

What differentiates the gift from the exchange is not, therefore, the presence or absence of a transfer in the opposite direction: if the exchange cannot, by definition, be one-way, on the other hand, a gift can very well be accompanied by a counter-gift. It is even less the simultaneous or deferred character of the reciprocal transfer: just like the counterpart of an exchange, the counter-gift can intervene at the same time as the gift (in the case of Christmas presents) or be deferred (when one returns an invitation to dinner), without this changing anything about its nature. The difference between gift and exchange lies entirely in the exigible character - in the legal sense of the term - of the counter-transference. In making a gift, one can expect and hope for a counter-gift - the counter-gift may even represent the sole motivation for making the gift. But, crucially, if there is a breach, there is no legal way to enforce this counter-gift. If the owner of a restaurant where one has dined without paying can go to court to enforce his or her right, there is no way to do the same with a friend who has not returned a restaurant invitation. Once again, therefore, the ambiguity of the term often used by Mauss, that of obligation (to give, to receive or to return), must be noted. Indeed, it is imperative to differentiate between a purely moral obligation, which can at most only be translated into social pressure, and a legal obligation, which opens the possibility for the injured party to appeal to legitimate force in order to assert his rights. For the transfer of goods, to speak of obligation in general, without making this distinction, is thus to deny oneself the possibility of thinking about the profound difference between gift and exchange. Would one object that in a society without a State, the distinction loses its relevance, the notions of right and legitimate force becoming pointless? This would be a profound error. If, in stateless societies, law is not written, and its implementation is not necessarily the work of formal and specific organs, no society exists that ignores any form of law and, consequently, of a definition of the framework of the legitimate exercise of force. This in no way closes the possibility that there may

be transfers that are at the limit of exigibility, and which would therefore raise objective difficulties of classification - we shall return to this point.

1.2 Other types of transfers

The proposed definition of gift and exchange does not exhaust the possible range of transfers; first, because there is a third type of transfer, which is neither exchange nor gift. Secondly, because within gift and exchange, one can usefully draw additional distinctions. Let us begin with these: the gift is classically associated with the counter-gift, that is, the gift that comes in response to a previous gift, made in the opposite direction. Again, this double movement constitutes an exchange only in an extremely broad sense, insufficiently precise for sociological analysis. Strictly speaking, each of these two transfers does not constitute the condition that makes the other exigible; in other words, giving a counter-gift may be a moral obligation but, by definition, not a legal one. As regards exchange, it is necessary to distinguish free exchange, the most common form, from forms in which one of the two co-exchangers is forced to make the transfer by the other (or possibly by a third party): think, for example, of our modern expropriations and nationalizations, where the State compensates the owner from whom it buys his property.

There remain, therefore, transfers that are neither gifts nor exchanges. These are those which derive from a legal obligation - they are therefore exigible. But, unlike exchange, this exigibility does not arise from a transfer in the opposite direction. The first example that comes to mind is undoubtedly that of modern taxes, which are inseparable from the state; but one could just as easily cite payments of a judicial nature (damages or fines), which also exist in many non-state societies. These "transfers of the third type", or "t3t", as Alain Testart called them, form the last major category of legitimate transfers, which has largely passed under the radar of a social anthropology focused on gift and exchange.

A final problem concerns the appropriateness of including all illegitimate transfers - including looting, or the trade in illicit products - in the classification. Following the paths opened up by F. Athané (Athané 2011), and in particular his concept of "community of reference", I attempted to show how illegitimate transfers could be the subject of a classification that closely mirrored that of legitimate transfers (Darmangeat 2016). Such an analysis seems a priori to contravene the principles laid down by A. Testart - the criterion of exigibility applies, at first sight, only to legitimate transfers. On the contrary, it proves to be not only consistent with his own, but also very useful for understanding situations where, in the absence of a State, the legitimacy of a transfer can be assessed differently within the same society. However, we shall leave aside this difficult problem here, and stick to the most fundamental aspects of the analysis.

The above can be summarized with the following diagram ¹ :

¹ This presentation appears to us to represent a step forward compared to the one proposed in (Darmangeat 2016, 26): it rectifies some problematic formulations and moreover explicitly brings out the case of the counter-gift.

Typology of legitimate transfers

I. Non exigible transfer

- because of a non exigible reverse transfer: **counter-gift**
- for another reason: **gift**

II. Exigible transfert

- because of a reverse-transfer:
 - both parties entered freely into the relationship: **free exchange**
 - either party entered into the exchange relationship as a result of a legal obligation: **mandatory exchange**
- for another reason: **t3t**

2. Complex forms

The above analysis identifies, so to speak, the elementary forms of transfer. It thus constitutes an indispensable, but not sufficient, step in the analysis: reality is not limited to these forms, and also includes more complex phenomena. These phenomena proceed from the elementary forms in two ways: combination and indeterminacy.

2.1 Combination

A transfer can be called combined when it mixes, in an inseparable way, several elementary forms. A common case, in our own world, is that of a sale at a friendly price: the seller's choice not to demand an equivalent value for the object transferred corresponds to his will to make a gift while concealing it, for one reason or another, in the form of an exchange.

Such combinations of forms are commonly found in all societies: for example, in the institution known as tee, practiced by the Enga-speaking people of New Guinea, which is related to what is known as "ceremonial exchanges". According to the detailed description provided by Daryl K. Feil (Feil 1980; 1984), the tee includes three specifically named transfers. The cycle is inaugurated by the ~~XXXXXX~~. This is most often done at the request of the recipient, who asks for certain goods - primarily pigs - from one of his exchange partners. If the individual requested cannot or does not wish to respond to the request himself, he may turn to one of his own partners (and so on). Some time later, in a public and formalized manner, the recipients of ~~XXXXXX~~ engage in a reverse transfer, called a ~~XXXXXXXX~~ normally of equal or greater value. Finally, for each live pig received and slaughtered, each recipient of a ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ returns one or more shares of cooked pork, called ~~XXX~~

What is the nature of the ~~XXXXXXXX~~ this counter transfer that comes as a response to the saandi? In order to know whether it constitutes a (counter)gift or one of the two terms of an exchange, it is necessary to determine if it is exigible. The analysis suggests that the answer to this question is positive, but only for a portion of the transfer, that which represents an amount equivalent to or slightly greater than the value of the ~~XXXXXX~~. Indeed, not only does "failure to return pork threatens the [exchange] relationship and unless it is a strong one, it cannot be smoothed over" (Feil 1984, 50, see also p. 213), but

such a failure gives rise to complaints, to “bitter quarrels, perhaps even fights” (Feil 1984, 206). The information according to which the modern courts declared themselves incompetent to judge these matters (Feil 1984, 207) is decisive: it indicates that the judicial bodies were seized of them, which meant that in the eyes of the protagonists, these disputes fell indeed within the legal domain.

The particularly high increment to which some ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ gave rise, on the other hand, lies undoubtedly in the realm of non-exigency and therefore of gift. But “while a profitable increase is always hoped for, a return based on Tombema equivalences is acceptable and sufficient to sustain the exchange relationship” (Feil 1984, 39). The additional ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ precisely because it is optional and not required, is the mark of generosity - which a local proverb expresses in the following way: “A man with a good heart adds a pig and gives” (Feil 1984, 57). Who would call someone generous who is merely fulfilling an obligation?

In the Tombema Enga ~~XXX~~ exchange and gift are intertwined in a way that is both intimate and original. Firstly, because there is no apparent difference between exchange and gift, and the transition from one to the other is seamless. Then, because the most successful exchange is the one that gives rise, in the same movement, to a gift. Thus the gift is not only organically associated with the exchange: it constitutes its supreme goal.

Also in the highlands of New Guinea, among the Mendi this time, another type of combination is found, that of t3t and mandatory exchange. As in many other societies in this region, certain social obligations (linked in particular to marriages or deaths) required compulsory payments in goods. The originality of mendi society was that some of these payments took the form of a double transfer: the party who was ultimately to receive the payment began by handing over a set of goods to the other. The latter was then obliged, in a second phase, to repay with increments:

Kowar payments are obligatorily made in honor of deceased clansmen and unmarried women to their matrilineal kin. Maternal relatives of the deceased make a private initiatory payment (...). A public event, the ~~XXXXXX~~ itself formally repays the ~~XXXXXX~~ initiatory payment, but must also include a substantial increment, called ~~XXXXXX~~ in honor of the dead person. Similarly, in the context of large-scale death compensation payments (~~XXXXXX~~) during which scores of valuables change hands between members of allied clans, ~~XXXXXX~~ refers to pigs (or other wealth) given above the repayment of initiatory gifts in honor of men and women who died as a result of intergroup hostilities. (Lederman 1986, 149)

Despite the inappropriate use of the term “gift” in the last sentence, the description is crystal clear, and shows how this custom constituted both an obligatory exchange in its form and a t3t in its content.

2.2 Indeterminacy

2.2.1 Between gift and exchange

The above lines have touched on the second way in which elementary transfers can be made more complex: that of indeterminacy. In state societies, at least in principle, the boundary between what is legally enforceable and what is merely morally obligatory is clear, and the (written) law is supposed to draw it with precision. The rigor of this delimitation should certainly not be exaggerated: reality can deviate significantly from the principles, either because of the financial or social obstacles that can dissuade or

even prevent the unworthy from filing a complaint, or because it is never possible to enclose reality completely in a few formal precepts - the activity of tax advisors, for example, consists to a large extent in taking advantage of these grey areas. But the indeterminacy of exigibility which, where the state reigns, can be interpreted as a deviation from the norm, represents a much more banal case in non-state societies, for an additional reason: within the framework of a private dispute, the implementation of violence, however legitimate, is to be borne by the injured party. In simple terms, if in a state society, one does not take justice into one's own hands, in a stateless society this is not only a legitimate means of asserting one's rights: it is the only possible one. In these conditions, it is easy to imagine that the act is conditioned by the balance of power. An individual without support, or a member of a group of relatives that is too weak, will be able to give up using violence that is otherwise socially legitimate, simply because he does not have the means to do so. The concrete manner in which legal obligation is exercised in stateless societies thus favours the existence of social situations in which exigibility is presented in an attenuated form, and all the more difficult to discern.

This issue is particularly frequent in ethnology with a form of bilateral transfer which, at first sight, belongs to both exchange and gift - it is precisely this case of figure which led Marcel Mauss, and many others after him, not to establish a clear conceptual differentiation between the two terms. According to Alain Testart, who devoted many pages to analyzing it (Testart 2001), such a configuration must be understood as a non-market exchange, as opposed to the market exchange, which is canonical to our own society.

The market exchange is the one in which the sale of the good is independent of the personal link that unites the seller and the buyer. Ultimately, this link no longer exists: the market is an anonymous place, where anyone can buy anything from anyone - to the point that, once the goods are put up for sale, refusing to conclude the transaction in view of the identity of the buyer is nowadays a penal offense. On the other hand, a non-market exchange is an exchange framed, or even conditioned, by the prior personal link between the partners. It is the preeminent form of exchange in ancient societies, which ignore the market and are steeped in person-to-person ties and where, very often, exchange friendships are formalized and named, as among the Jivaro (Harner 1973, 125).

In remarkable pages, Alain Testart puts in comparison the two opposite forms of fetishism generated by these two categories of exchange. The fetishism proper to commercial exchange, underlined by Marxist economic analysis, makes the value of goods appear as their intrinsic property, while concealing the fact that this value expresses a social relationship between producers. Conversely, writes Alain Testart:

If the market form generates its own illusion, the non-market form can also generate its own. That which is inserted in a relationship of friendship [...] engenders the illusion according to which it would only be a question of gifts and counter-gifts. This exchange takes on the appearance of an exchange of gifts [...]. No mention is made of a promise to return, as if not to offend the susceptibility of the "friend"; even less is he reminded that he is in debt, if this is the case, for even more obvious reasons; the successive acts, which in reality answer each other and group themselves two by two as cessions and counter-cessions, appear as if they were not linked together; the very essence of the exchange, the fact that it is a conditional cession [...], and the exchange can henceforth appear only as a series

of acts based on the sole freedom of each person and the good feelings in which he finds himself with regard to his partner. (Testart 2001, 739-40)

In a correlative manner, the dividing line between exchange and gift - the exigibility of the counterpart - tends to be faded and to become often more theoretical than real:

Whatever the reason for non-return, betrayal by the friend, bad grace or simple material impossibility, it is only very rarely that one will have recourse to this ultimate means [violence]. One would have to mobilize one's relatives, all those who can and are willing, for one reason or another, to lend a hand; it is always a risky operation, it is a war. This is why one will generally be satisfied with breaking the relationship which existed between the two friends: one will not exchange any more and one will not have any more relationship with him. This is precisely what a donor does to an ungrateful recipient who does not provide a counter-gift. The usual mode of sanction of the exchange between friends is the same as in the gift. (Testart 2001, 741)

Alain Testart then adds in note:

This is also why it is so difficult to disentangle in ethnographic data what is gift and what is exchange between friends: the common mode of sanction is the same, and it is only the presence, or the possibility admitted as legitimate, of a rare mode (and all the more so since the societies studied are always in the colonial context), the violent mode, which in all rigor can provide the decisive criterion. (Testart 2001 note 39)

The question that can nevertheless be asked - and which was not addressed with sufficient clarity in the previous text that I devoted to this subject - is that of the existence of an objective zone of indeterminacy. The problem goes beyond the simple "difficulty", on the part of an outside observer with incomplete information, of ruling on the possible exigibility of a counter transfer. It is also to know if, in the eyes of the parties concerned as well as of the society to which they belong, there can exist objectively indeterminate situations. As mentioned above, such situations, although rare, exist in societies with written law and a formalized judicial system. In the case of societies that do not have such systems, there is no reason to exclude them from the analysis.

Thus, alongside non-market exchange, which, while possessing the outward appearance of a gift, is indeed exchange, we must concede the existence of a "circle-square", the "gift-exchange" - for, if in the abstract realm of theory, social and geometric bodies are pure, in the real world, they can borrow their characteristics from two distinct types.

Would all this mean a return to the starting point? After having criticized them so severely in the wake of Alain Testart, are we not now recognizing the relevance of the concepts proposed by Mauss? Wouldn't the conceptual demarcation between exchange and gift be vain, or, at the very least, irrelevant for societies without a state or a market? Such a conclusion would be tantamount to throwing out the baby with the dirty bathwater. Not only can an intermediate situation only be properly understood if the two poles that constitute it have been properly defined, but the case under which Mauss, and others after him, grouped all transfers in stateless societies only constitutes a very specific category.

2.2.2 *Other indeterminacies*

To conclude on this point, it should be added that the indeterminacy of exigibility does not only blur the boundary between gift and exchange, and that it can just as well concern the other modes of transfer.

Compulsory exchange remains a relatively rare form, so it is hardly surprising that its fringe is even rarer. In modern times, however, an intermediate form between free and compulsory exchange can be discerned in certain types of wage relations. Indeed, these have not always taken the form they do in the modern labour market. As Yann Moulier-Boutang has shown in his monumental work on this question (Moulier Boutang 1998), between slavery and free wage labor there have been countless situations where formal freedom was intermingled with legal obligations, in order to force labor to be exchanged (or to keep a freely initiated exchange going). This "constrained wage system" took, for example, the form of peonage, widespread in Latin America, where the supposedly free worker was chained to his employer by a system of debts that were never extinguished.

Finally, exigibility may also suffer from indeterminacy without the transfer being conditioned by a counterpart. The most obvious case is that of an intermediate situation between the gift and the t3t, namely a unilateral transfer that would stand at the limit of exigibility. The medieval period provides various examples of transfers destined for an emerging or failing state, and of which it is not known whether they were taxes or gracious gratuities (Guéry 1984, 1256-59). It is necessary to repeat that exigibility exists, however, outside the State. Concerning societies studied by ethnology, the possibility of indeterminacy between t3t and gift is highlighted by the custom known among various hunter-gatherer peoples under the name of demand sharing. Nicholas Peterson, the scholar who first named the phenomenon (Peterson 1993), groups together under this same name situations of a very different nature from the point of view of exigibility. The dimension that he emphasizes - the fact that the transfer is solicited by its recipient, whether verbally or not - does not in fact overlap with its obligatory nature. There can therefore be gifts that are solicited (Christmas presents to children, after a duly drawn up wish list) or not (one made spontaneously to a friend in need), as well as obligatory transfers that are solicited (a fine paid after a parking ticket) or not (taxes paid by direct debit). In itself, therefore, the dimension of solicitation does not seem to be very useful for grasping the dimension of obligation. Nevertheless, it is clear from the examples given by Peterson that, while some are clearly gifts and others are compulsory transfers (such as the transfer of certain parts of a game animal as part of a kinship relationship), there are cases where solicitation exerts pressure bordering on a threat, without it being possible to determine whether this threat refers to a socially legitimate exercise of violence.

By the way, these indeterminacies do not only concern (legitimately) payable transfers. Anthropology has also drawn attention to the phenomenon known as tolerated theft (Blurton Jones 1987). While its study has focused on the issue of its social functions and its place in evolutionary reasoning, it is not without interest to note that this practice, by standing on the borderline between theft and gift, completes the zones of indeterminacy by providing an intermediate form between gift and t4t.

3. From forms of transfer to social relationships

In what way does this social analysis, which could be described as "grammatical", articulate with the archaeological approach?

At the risk of giving the impression of sawing off the branch on which this text is sitting, it is necessary first of all to insist on the innumerable - and sometimes insoluble - difficulties that this connection raises, and which fall into two different categories. The first are internal to sociological theory, and have to do with the complexity of the relationship that modes of transfer have with social structures. The second are specifically archaeological, and are linked to the fact that this discipline can only apprehend these structures and social relationships through material facts.

3.1 Forms of transfer and social relationships

As we have just said, there is no simple and univocal relationship between the formal nature of a transfer and the social relationship in which it is embedded. More precisely, while the formal nature of a transfer is an indispensable element in the characterization of the social relationship that involves it, it is far from sufficient.

To be convinced of this, let us consider the two unilateral transfers represented by the gift and the t3t, which are radically opposed in terms of exigibility. Contrary to what one might believe at first sight, this opposition does not correspond in any way to the absence or presence of a hierarchical relationship. If, in our societies, the exigibility of the t3t immediately brings to mind transfers imposed by the authority of the State, this exigibility can intervene in quite other contexts, in particular that of kinship. This situation is obviously very common in non-state societies. But even in contemporary society, let us recall that parents have an obligation of maintenance towards their children, which obviously does not express the slightest hierarchical superiority of the latter over them. In the same way, giving is very far from always being the expression of a disinterestedness and an absence of domination. It can be made by the superior to the inferior, on an individual basis (the alms given to the poor, the liberality to the Roman client) or collectively (the ancient evergetism or our modern philanthropic foundations). In all cases, the rich person honors himself by publicly accomplishing his gesture and by ensuring that it has all the desired resonance. Conversely, the gift can also emanate from the subordinate who solicits the powerful, including in the form of sacrifice when the latter belongs to the supernatural world.

Moreover, if we place ourselves this time not at the level of a particular social relationship, but at the more general level of the social type, it would be futile to hope to characterize it by the absence or presence of a given form of transfer; the four elementary forms of transfer probably coexist in all social types. On the other hand, some types may be marked by the predominance of certain forms over others. In a society such as that of the San ("Bushmen"), the vast majority of transfers were in the form of gifts - or some indeterminate form between gifts and t3t. Capitalism, this "immense collection of commodities" (Marx [1867] 1990, 125), is dominated by exchange - although the strong tendency to an increasing role of the state in the economy gives ever greater importance to t3t.

However, this approach remains a clumsy way of posing the problems. The usefulness - or rather, the indispensability - of a robust classification of modes of transfer is not that it can be used to determine a social relationship by itself. It is to contribute to this determination, in particular by making it possible to discriminate between two social relationships that could wrongly be confused, and thus avoiding Mauss's mistake of

thinking of all “primitive” transfers in a single, vast category. This is certainly of more modest scope, but it should not be underestimated. Thus, for example, the criterion of exigibility makes it possible to differentiate between gifts made within the framework of a client relationship and tributes and other contributions imposed by a chiefdom or a state. The same is true, for example, of vast collective achievements, where one must ask whether the work was provided freely or whether it induced coercion - the social relationship between the ordering party and the performers being obviously not at all the same in one case as in the other. This last point once provided the material for lively discussions about, among other things, the pyramids of Egypt or, more recently, the megaliths (Boulestin 2016; Gallay 2006; Testart 2014).

3.2 Archaeology and forms of transfer

To the internal difficulties in the articulation between types of transfer and a theory of social relationships and types, one must add those which are specific to archaeology, and which are far from minor.

To begin with, it is necessary to recall two trivialities, which nobody denies on principle, but which are too often lost sight of when interpreting the data.

The first, already recalled in the introduction to this text, is that unless one has an inscription clearly playing the role of a property mark, it is extremely difficult, if not strictly impossible, to know the identity of the holder of the rights exercised over an object found in an archaeological context, and not even the nature of these rights. At most, one can make more or less well-founded suppositions, based on indirect elements (such as the habit of attributing to the deceased the goods found in his grave). It should be added that if, in the absence of a written record, one cannot know who held the rights to a property, one cannot consequently know either if these rights had changed hands, and under what conditions. In other words, ownership is entirely subject to archaeological invisibility - and the nature of the transfers to which it gave rise with it.

The only dimension that archaeology apprehends with more certainty - it therefore speaks of it all the more willingly - is the spatial one. It is sometimes possible to demonstrate that an object found in a given place comes from somewhere else. Some movements are spectacular, such as those of shells found far from the coast, the extraordinary “laurel leaves” of Volgu, carved 20,000 years ago in blocks of flint extracted from veins located up to 250 km away (Thevenot 2019, 61), or the polished alpine jade blades emblematic of the Rubane region, which are found up to 2000 km from their place of production (Gauthier et Pétrequin 2017). This is commonly referred to as the “circulation” of these raw materials, or so-called prestige goods. But this term circulation is as misleading as it is useful. The only circulation that archaeology can detect is physical circulation; and this physical circulation is very different from economic (or social) circulation, i.e. the transfer of property or usage rights. The first indicates the probability of the second: it is difficult to imagine how farmers or hunter-gatherers would have regularly travelled hundreds of kilometers to obtain supplies of flint, for example. Still, one must be wary of hasty conclusions. In Irian Jaya, the Dani studied by Pierre and Anne-Marie Pétrequin travelled several days to get to the quarries from which they got the stones for their polished axes (Pétrequin et Pétrequin 2002, 134-46). And in Australia, groups could travel several hundred kilometers to acquire ochre (Jones 1984). In any case, if spatial circulation over long distances makes it possible to deduce with reasonable certainty social circulation, in the opposite direction,

a good part of the social circulation does not translate into any significant physical circulation and therefore remains archaeologically invisible: to take the case of the Dani, if the axe is used to pay a bride price to a family of the same village, this social transfer will only translate into a physical movement of a few meters. In other words, archaeology will sometimes be tempted to see a social circulation where there was none, and will often have no way of perceiving it where it existed.

Conclusion

The rigorous classification of the modes of transfer of goods constitutes an essential element for the theory of social relationships and, beyond, of social formations. It will only be possible to go beyond the rather heterogeneous and ill-defined categories in use (“bands”, “trans-egalitarian societies”, “mid-range societies”, “chiefdoms”, etc.) by endeavouring, among other things, to forge a new classification based on a finer characterization of social relationships, within which the transfer of goods most often plays a key role. It is only in this way that social anthropology, reviving the scientific program around which it was once constituted, will be able to provide the conceptual tools that will make it possible to link material production and social structures, and thus provide archaeologists with the keys to interpretation (Testart 2006). For the latter, on the other hand, and because of the very way in which their discipline approaches social facts, the nature of the transfers to which the goods they discover gave rise – and, most of the time, the very existence of these transfers – is not a key, but a closed door. Archaeology has no direct way of establishing whether the jade axe it uncovers was given away, sold, or given up as a mandatory payment, and any attempt to rule on this question directly from the characteristics of the object can only be a speculation. The answer, however, may be reached by more circuitous routes. By relying on a solid anthropological theory – which has yet to be built – the archaeological investigation can try to determine the type of society that produced this axe and thus, indirectly, identify the social relationships in which it was inserted as well as, as a result, the probable manner and circumstances in which it was brought to change hands.

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