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Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi + 210 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-00218-0.

Review by Kenneth Loisel, Trinity University

Harry Liebersohn's *Return of the Gift* charts the development in the history of thinking about the place of the gift in public life over nearly three centuries, "as it disappeared from and returned to the conversation of modern Europe" (p. 1). Privileging, but not exclusively focusing on European writing about non-Europeans from the seventeenth century to the interwar period, Liebersohn tells a fascinating story of how theorists from a number of disciplines came to appreciate the political relevance of reciprocal gift giving as a collective bond of solidarity; Marcel Mauss's classic *Essai sur le don* from 1925 is the logical *terminus ad quem* of such an undertaking.<sup>[1]</sup> Before gift giving disappeared from the mental furniture of modern social scientists, Liebersohn reminds us that it had been a critical element in European anciens régimes. From early modern village wives in Normandy welcoming a newborn with presents of local foodstuffs to a seventeenth-century Spanish diplomat offering royal gifts at the viceroyalty of Naples, reciprocal gift giving was pervasive in pre-Revolutionary Europe. Unlike modern tendencies, gifts did not merely strengthen private ties, but also were critical in public life as they served to bind together individuals with their surrounding communities and rulers. As Natalie Davis has shown in the case of early modern France, there was perhaps no better example of the political function of the gift than the royal *entrée*: upon entering one of his major towns, the newly crowned monarch received presents such as statues, and he in turn reciprocated in a variety of ways, from freeing prisoners to lightening some of the tax load on the populace.<sup>[2]</sup>

Liebersohn opens his study with the trial of the former governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings, in order to show just how much had changed by the late eighteenth century. Edmund Burke and a handful of other parliamentarians accused Hastings of corruption, extortion and general misrule during his tenure. Although Burke marshaled much evidence against the defendant—his first speech in 1788 for the prosecution lasted over two hours—he pointed the most damning finger at Hastings's widespread use of gift exchange in India. As a student of European history and Indian culture, Burke understood that the reciprocal giving and receiving of presents in traditional societies could solidify the body politic. Burke nevertheless interpreted Hastings's behavior through the lens of the East India Company's recent history of plunder where employees like Robert Clive were able to amass incredible fortunes at the expense of state treasuries.

Liebersohn relates this increasing uneasiness about the gift in the public realm to shifts in thinking about government and the individual underway since the mid-seventeenth century. Gifts and personal friendships in politics enjoyed little credit with liberal and proto-liberal theorists who instead placed an increasing premium on impartial law and bureaucratic systems. When Locke evoked friendship in the *Two Treatises* (1689), for example, he emphasized that it inevitably led to poor judgment and factionalism. Liebersohn curiously does not make any

mention of Locke, and instead focuses largely on the work of Thomas Hobbes, Bernard Mandeville, and Adam Smith. What these thinkers held in common was their adherence in varying degrees to the notion that human action followed the dictates of pleasure and self-interest. Marcel Mauss lamented the rise of what may be somewhat simplistically termed as the “selfish theory”—singling out Mandeville by name in his essay—because he believed that this kind of theorizing could only account for a market exchange economy where self-regarding impulses predominated. Where could reciprocal gift giving possibly fit in such a worldview? Liebersohn rightly sees this condemnation as unfair, and points to thinkers such as Smith and his notion of “liberality” (pp. 35-9) where self-interested individuals also performed acts of charity in order to enhance social reputation. While such gifts were asymmetrical rather than reciprocal since no return on charity was expected, Liebersohn nevertheless demonstrates that gifts were not altogether excluded from the liberal tradition.

If the reciprocal gift’s waning importance in social thought as a bond of solidarity was not entirely due to liberalism, the French Revolution and the birth of modern politics were another matter. Burke represented a transitory figure who still understood that reciprocal gift giving had a theoretical place in public life, but James Mill, writing a mere generation later, simply could not comprehend it. In assessing the Hastings era in India, Mill saw gift giving in politics as symptomatic of corruptive bribery and inefficiency which smacked of an aristocratic world that the democratizing nineteenth century was eager to leave behind. Liebersohn points out that this position of equating gifts with corruption had already appeared in the Enlightenment, such as in Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). Mill was convinced that India, like the rest of the British Empire, would be best run if gifts were expunged despite the warnings of Indian intellectuals like historian Ghulam Hussain that they remained an essential component of state building. This disagreement between Europeans and non-Europeans over the political relevance of the gift surely complicated the building of empire.

Mill inaugurated a long nineteenth century stretching to World War I in which thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic struggled to make sense of the public role of the gift at home and in other cultures. Through an impressively diverse survey of social and political thought in chapters two and three that cannot be fully covered in the present review, Liebersohn demonstrates that while classical economic liberalism represented one hindrance to identifying the importance of the reciprocal transfer of presents, the utopian visions of nineteenth-century communitarian thinking were another. In 1884, a year after the death of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels combined his own research with his deceased colleague’s observations on the economic prehistory of Europe and published to great success *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State: Following the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan*. As the clunky subtitle indicates, Morgan, an anthropologist from New York State, influenced Marx and Engels’s thinking about the evolution of human societies in historicizing the seemingly timeless Victorian pillars of the monogamous family and private property. Morgan concluded from linguistic and kinship studies of the neighboring Seneca Iroquois and other indigenous peoples that these non-European civilizations were altruistically communitarian. Morgan followed a well-established stage theory of history that viewed these so-called “primitive” societies as an earlier moment in humankind’s universal history, and Engels drew from this insight to stress that Europe had also once been a noncapitalist society where all property was collectively shared, including sexual partners.

While Morgan and Engels might have been profound theorists, they were lackluster anthropologists. Just as classical economists like Smith and Ricardo projected their self-interested, capitalist *homo economicus* back into the distant past, so too did communitarian thinkers construe premodern Europeans as uncompromisingly generous towards others. Writers from across the political spectrum therefore construed traditional societies of the past

and present as unfixed, empty signifiers that easily became transparent personifications of modern ideology. Despite receiving harsh criticism from later anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, the work of German historical economists, notably Karl Bücher's *The Origin of National Economies* (1893), stands out in this study as one of the few exceptions to this trend as they argued that the capitalist logic of their contemporaries could not be unproblematically transposed to other times and places. Nevertheless, because reciprocal gift giving did not fit very well with either liberalism or communism—it neither followed the classical rules of a market economy nor did it completely expunge personal interest—Liebersohn argues that gift exchange largely disappeared from the nineteenth-century intellectual landscape. These chapters thus may be read to some degree as modern companions to J. H. Elliott's classic essay, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650*, as both authors emphasize that the conventional ways of European thinking about politics and society did not immediately change in response to sustained observation of non-European realities.<sup>[3]</sup> On the contrary, the process of assimilation of these facts and subsequent intellectual development moved at a glacial pace.

Although some degree of fieldwork within non-European cultures had existed for centuries, a new generation of university-trained anthropologists (though their disciplinary background varied considerably from physics to law) emerged at the turn of the twentieth century working both in Europe and the United States. Armed with theoretical sophistication and raw data from extended stays as participant-observers with native peoples from the Pacific Northwest to Oceania, these scholars took aim at the Manichean view that divided societies into either self-interested, atomized individuals or altruistic communitarians. Liebersohn examines the major works of some of the founding figures of modern anthropology: Franz Boas's *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl* (1897), Richard Thurnwald's *Bánaro Society* (1916) and Bronislaw Malinowski's landmark *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922).<sup>[4]</sup> What ties together all three of these men was their identification of the importance of reciprocal gift giving in shoring up indigenous collective solidarity and power structures.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this was Malinowski's now well-known tracking of the "kula ring" across the Massim islands located to the east of New Guinea. For Malinowski, the kula involved a two-way circulation of objects across the island chain that could take as long as a decade to complete: red shell necklaces moved in a clockwise manner while white bracelets travelled in the opposite direction. The moment these objects were exchanged between two individuals—who were typically chiefs according to Malinowski—was highly ceremonial, and served to bond them in a type of permanent, ritualized friendship that cut across the conventional boundaries of geography, kinship and language. Kula partners were not expected to keep their presents, however, but rather to pass them along to someone else at the next link in the ring. To break the chain of reciprocal giving could bring great loss of reputation and subsequent material wealth. Furthermore, the greater an individual's perceived standing in the community, the more kula partners he attracted and the more ritual objects he was expected temporarily to possess and later to put into circulation. Generosity thus reflected and validated social rank, an observation Franz Boas also advanced in his study of the Kwakiutl potlatch (p. 101).

Most importantly, Malinowski uses the kula gift circuit to argue against liberal and communist interpretations of non-European societies. While the indigenous participating in this reciprocal network of presents did not follow the straightforward utilitarian motive of maximizing financial resources as capitalist logic prescribed, the kula object certainly could not be understood as a selfless "free" gift either. Islanders embarked on long and dangerous voyages by land and sea because the kula enhanced their social capital by demonstrating their willingness and ability to give. The gift therefore lay at the center of an intellectual middle ground between

liberal self-interest and selfless communitarianism that Malinowski and other pioneers in modern anthropology were trying to carve out at the beginning of the twentieth century.

These anthropologists provided the critical intellectual scaffolding for Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don*, first published in the 1925 installment of *L'Année Sociologique*, an academic journal founded by his iconic uncle, Émile Durkheim. He intended the *Essai* to resonate across many disciplines, as he stated clearly at the outset that it enmeshed "social history, theoretical sociology, political economy and morality..."[5] It was indeed a grand work of synthesis on the reciprocal gift in which self-interest and generosity intersected that necessarily involved the creative repackaging of earlier ethnographic research. And yet his examination of the gift differed from previous studies in three key ways. First, his approach encompassed a much grander space than his predecessors, incorporating multiple sites along the Pacific littoral. Second, his intellectual collaboration was quite explicitly cosmopolitan as he not only drank deeply from American, British, French and German scholarship, but also maintained influential friendships with British colleagues like James Frazer and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. And most importantly, Mauss devoted the final two chapters of the *Essai* to render explicit what had been only adumbrated in Malinowski and others: reciprocal gift giving was not merely a non-European phenomenon, but could in fact be found in the continent's past and could also meaningfully reshape its future. Pointing to recent developments such as the creation of mutual societies and the success of the cooperative movement across the Channel, Mauss hoped that the reintroduction of obligatory, reciprocal gift-giving practices alongside a vibrant market economy could offer Europe a third way forward between communism—Liebersohn writes at length on Mauss's repugnance towards Bolshevism—and unfettered self-interest.

Written with great clarity and economy of prose, Liebersohn's book is significant on a number of accounts. First, as the critical engagement with Mauss continues to grow among historians, the present study helps us better to situate his canonical text in the long and complex intellectual history from the seventeenth century onward of evaluating the role of gift giving in public life. Second, Liebersohn persuasively demonstrates in the vein of Paul Fussell that, at least at the level of ideas, the notion that the Great War inaugurated a profound rethinking of European cultural norms can still prove quite fruitful.[6] Mauss was a part of a generation of intellectuals who looked with dismay on a Europe whose political and moral order had been overturned and whose trauma had hitherto been unthinkable. He imagined the gift as a key element in a new, more peaceful and just order, and conveyed at the end of the *Essai* the hope that "our analysis might suggest the way to better administrative procedures for our societies." [7] And finally, from a methodological standpoint, Liebersohn's study is an admirable piece of global intellectual history. As the final chapter on Mauss makes most apparent, this is not a highly abstracted treatment of the unit-idea of the gift, for *The Return of the Gift* continually strives to relate causally the genesis of ideas to multiple contexts, situating them in relationship to contemporaneous intellectual movements, as well as an author's politics and background.

As noted earlier, there are some omissions from this work. For French historians, one of the more conspicuous absences occurs in the third chapter when Liebersohn highlights the contention of Morgan and Engels that the appearance of private property was a profoundly transformative moment in the history of humanity that signaled the beginning of the end of communitarian living. Such a pessimistic view echoes the well-known position of Rousseau in Part II of his second *Discourse*, which unfortunately receives no mention. This is all the more surprising as scholars, despite their disagreement over how Marx read Rousseau, have acknowledged the latter's impact on Marx's writing, which in turn served as a foundation for Engels's later research. From an organizational standpoint, this book advances chronologically, but at times sacrifices chronology for conceptual coherence which some readers may find

disorienting. In the second chapter on liberalism, for example, Liebersohn covers a vast amount of terrain that takes his narrative from the English Civil War through the end of World War I where scholars like Karl Bücher were beginning to think more seriously about the place of the gift in a war-torn society (pp. 53-60). This extended discussion on Bücher's later work would have been better suited in the final chapter (where it is again mentioned but not explicated) as it more clearly throws into relief the novelty of Mauss's essay.

But these are minor elisions and methodological quibbles. Liebersohn has bequeathed a major gift to historians interested not only in the genealogy of the gift in European thought, but in the wider history of solidarity. His book spans confidently across three centuries, multiple disciplinary traditions and national literatures, and several continents. In the spirit of Marcel Mauss, future scholars must now ask: how can we reciprocate?

#### NOTES

[1] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison with an Introduction by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967), p. 2.

[2] Natalie Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 90-5.

[3] J.H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), esp. ch. 2.

[4] Franz Boas, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*, based on personal observations and on notes made by Mr. George Hunt, in *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution: Report of the U.S. National Museum* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897), 311-738; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, pref. James G. Frazer (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1922); Richard Thurnwald, *Bánaro Society: Social Organization and Kinship System of a Tribe in the Interior of New Guinea. Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, 3/4 (1916).

[5] Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 2.

[6] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). Jay Winter has strongly challenged the thesis of the Great War as a cultural break with the past in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[7] Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 69.

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