EXCHANGE

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A crucial way that people deal with the objects in their lives is by exchanging them with others. We exchange money for things in shops, we give and receive gifts and favours with others throughout our lives, and we transact with co-workers on the job, pay taxes to states and receive government services in return. Because exchange pervades social life and takes so many forms, it could be approached in a range of different ways and used to address a range of different questions about people and the groups in which they live. Neoclassical economics, for instance, is the consideration of exchange from a certain perspective, in which people are seen as relatively autonomous individuals who transact with each other things of value that are identified as bearers of utility, effectively offering more or less gratification to these individuals.

Social anthropologists generally have approached exchange differently. Conventionally, they have been concerned with how the transaction of things is related to the nature of the relationships between people and social groups. Compared with economists, they have been less concerned with the utility of objects and less interested in seeing exchange as the result of decisions by individuals to increase their utilities; instead, they are less willing to see individuals as autonomous in the first place. As a part of this, they tend to reject the idea of utility, which speaks of person, object and gratification. They replace it with the idea of meaning, which speaks of more or less collective perceptions of the nature and significance of objects.

My purpose in this chapter is to consider exchange from an anthropological perspective, which is appropriate, given that this is the discipline that has devoted the most attention to it. This chapter does not, however, pretend to a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, which is too vast and diffuse to permit ready summary. Rather, it begins with a set of classic anthropological works and debates, and uses these to lay out a set of issues and perspectives that they define. It then uses the works, issues and perspectives to frame some of the more recent streams of work on exchange, some from within anthropology and some from elsewhere. Presenting work on exchange in this way serves two purposes. First, it allows us to see the ways that the classics are reflected in current work, and so reminds us that what is in those classics encompasses much of what has attracted scholarly interest in the more recent past continuing awareness of this helps us avoid the task of reinventing the wheel. Second, it allows us to see an important trend in work on exchange that emerged over the past few decades and that seems likely to continue. That trend is to broaden the context in which exchange is considered. While the classic works sought to view exchange in a broad perspective, that vision was realized only gradually. The shape of this realization are the main plot embedded in the tale this chapter tells.

Exchange necessarily involves the movement of things from one social actor to another, though those social actors are not necessarily individual people acting on their own behalf. Quite often they are groups of one sort or another; occasionally they can be immaterial entities like deities. Because exchange involves the movement of things, it is part of people's material culture. However, the things that are transacted are not always material objects,
though most of them are. In accord with this, I use 'thing' and 'object' in an extended sense, to refer to physical objects, services, and even intangible entities like ideas, knowledge, names and the like.

**THE GIFT**

Exchange has been an important topic in social anthropology for about as long as the discipline has existed; after all, it was the focus of one of the founding works in the field in its modern form, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Inevitably, different anthropologists have drawn on different intellectual resources as they have considered exchange. However, the work that probably has the greatest influence is Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925/1990), the starting point of this chapter.

Mauss's slim book is an effort to identify forms of the exchange of objects in different societies, ranging from Polynesia and Melanesia to modern France. His was a comprehensive vision, and he was interested in placing exchange in the context of social organization and social relations. The work uses a core model to explore a core question: how does exchange serve to help build social groups, both the groups that exist within society and society itself.

The core of *The Gift* is a discussion of societies in which the gift form of exchange predominates—societies of the gift. However, Mauss's overall approach is broadly developmental, in which it echoes much early social science. So Mauss was interested in the distinction between the modern exchange societies, and pre-industrial societies, which he (1925/1990: 47) saw as stages in 'social evolution' that mark a number of general changes. One is the decreasing significance of large-scale, organized giving. A second is an increasing cultural separation of objects from people and social relationships: 'We live in societies that draw a strict distinction between things and persons' (1925/1990: 47). A third is a change in the nature and motivation for giving. For modern Western societies, gifts tend to be seen as an expression of individual sentiment. On the other hand, in gift societies, objects, occasions, gift-giving patterns, and the like are integral to social organization; gift-giving is unconscious; gift-giving is an expression of individual sentiment. The first item is the point at which all kinds of institutions are given expression at once and the same time—religious, juridical, and Likewise economic' (1925/1990: 3). Mauss's approach in *The Gift* represents the relationship between giver and recipient. To fail to give, to receive or to reciprocate would be to deny, or at least redefine, that relationship.

In *The Gift* Mauss took a critical view of modern and, by extension, modern Western capitalist societies more generally, though his broadly developmental approach made this conclusion more nuanced than it is sometimes seen. Mauss’s main point was that the modern capitalist society is fundamentally different from the classical society; it has obscured it somewhat. That critical view has two aspects. First, he suggests that the distinction between modern societies and societies of the gift is not as radical as some might think. While these societies may be dominated by the gift, modern societies also contain it. This assertion, in however, somewhat wistful, as Mauss describes an attenuated set of practices among the French peasantry or laws that are not enforced (1925/1990: 66-7, 154 n. 5), or refers to reforms that are 'laboriously in gestation' but have yet to bear fruit (for example 1925/1990: 67–8, 78). Second, he approaches pre-modern societies as forms to be understood on their own terms and more important, he uses them to illustrate an aspect of transaction that tended to be ignored in the economic ideology that pervades modern life (e.g. Dumont 1977). In effect, Mauss was objecting to Adam Smith’s (1776/1976: 17) famous assertion of particularity and reciprocity to define the exchange of one thing for another. For Mauss, there is nothing innate about the sort of exchange that Smith meant. It comes about through habit, custom, and usage, and if we forget this, we cannot understand people’s lives and societies. In spite of these elements in his work, however, Mauss’s approach stresses the differences between types of societies that are part of a developmental or evolutionary sequence: societies of the gift developing into modern exchange societies. For Mauss, the gift is the core of the market where money circulates, of sale, proper, and above all of the notion of price rock-bottom (1925/1990: 46).

Mauss’s treatment of types of transactions and types of transactors in gift societies attracted criticism from one of the anthropologists whose work he drew on, Malinowski and his description of exchange on Kirivina, in the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia, in *Argonauts.* This description describes a social system that modulates a tension in the anthropological treatment of exchange that persisted throughout the twentieth century; a tension that, moreover, helped to inform the dominant context in which researchers placed exchange. In *Argonauts* (1922: 177), Malinowski included a list of the sorts of exchange transactions that he observed on Kirivina, which to Mauss (1925/1990: 73) evidently run ‘from pure gift to pure barter’, from the social and normative, on the one hand, to the impersonal, egocentric and calculating on the other, and Mauss invoked the social and normative and in his treatment of societies of the gift. Malinowski bridled at this. Shortly after *The Gift* was published, he said that Malinowski had got it wrong.

The honorific concept is bound to carry out his duties. though his submission is not due to any ... mysterious 'group sentiment', but to the detailed and elaborate working of a system ... [in which there] comes to the defence of an equivalent repayment or counter-service. (Malinowski 1926: 42)

In pointing to the equivalent returns, Malinowski was asserting that there was no truly social and normative, non-egocentric gift in Kirivina. In saying this, he was portraying exchange 'as essentially dyadic transactions between self-interested individuals, and as promised on some kind of balance' (Ferry 1986: 454).

On its face, this may appear to be a dispute about the details of the ethnography of a handful of people in a minor part of the world. However, it is much more than that, for it is the manifestation of differences between fundamental approaches to studying social relations about social life. For Mauss, exchange, and by implication social life generally, is a manifestation of society as a whole, an entity that may or may not encourage individualism and egocentric calculation (Mauss 1938/1985). Thus, for Mauss, it is not individuals but groups or persons who carry on exchange (Ferry 1986: 455). For Malinowski, 'on the other hand, social life in some sense came second. People and their needs and desires came first, and these results in the social organization and practices that an observer sees. Because people come first, transactions need to be explained in terms of social rules and understandings of the sort Mauss described, but in terms that of what a similar equivalent repayment that transactors expect to get in return, and do typically get in return, for what they give. For Malinowski, then, what Marx said of bourgeois society applies to as well to Melanesia, where there rules.

Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, social bond only by their free will ... Equality, because ... they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposal on his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself.

(From Capitl I, Chapter 6, in Tucker 1978: 343)
This tension between a more person-centered and a more society-centered approach to transactions has not gone away, and it is unlikely that it will go away, though it takes different forms at different times. Its most self-evident expression in the twentieth century among anthropologists was the debate between formalists and structuralists, which is important especially in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s (see Delton 1967; LeClerc and Schneider 1968). While this debate was about many things, formalists generally manifest Mallinckrodt’s concern to start with individuals, their calculations and transactions, while structuralists tended to echo Mauss, looking more at the ways that systems of belief and social order shaped people’s actions. More generally, the difference between these two orientations is reflected in the more individualistic, especially neoclassical, economists, and anthropologists. The former start with individuals and their desires, and build systems and regularity on that foundation. Anthropologists, by contrast, are prone to reverse the analytical process, and see in people’s actions the consequences of systems and regularity, whether these spring from the logic of the social order or of people’s beliefs and values.

The gift and the debt are generated not simply of historical interest, for they help define a set of questions and disputes that have shaped subsequent investigation and discussion and that help to tie together and make sense of much current work related to exchange. A number of features of the work are important here. First is Mauss’s developmental sequence, and especially the broad distinction between those societies where gifts are important and modern societies where they are not. Second is the point that transactions reflect and help define the relationships between transactors. Third is the spirit of the gift, which points to the importance of people’s understandings of objects and their place in exchange and transaction.

GIFT SOCIETIES AND MODERN SOCIETIES

I said that the first point Mauss’s work raises is the distinction between gift societies and modern societies, which are dominated by the transaction of commodities. This distinction is elaborated most cogently in the work of C.A. Gregory, who has presented a comprehensive description of gifts and commodity exchange, cast in ideal-typical terms. He says that gift exchange occurs between transactors who are not just individual humans, but as members and embodiments of social identity, to use the identities of giver, recipient and relationship (see Gregory 1980: especially 660); in contrast, commodity exchange occurs between transactors who are otherwise independent of each other, it is voluntary (at least formally) and involves alienated objects.

In gift systems, then, the particular gift exchange are identified in terms of their durable relationships with each other. A clear form of this is relationships between friends but it is apparent as well in durable non-political kin, such as those linking trade partners or people who see themselves as coming from the same place. On the other hand, in commodity systems the parties to a commodity exchange are identified as autonomous individuals linked to each other only through the transaction at hand. A clear form of this is the transient relation between customer and store clerk, one which dissolves once the purchase is completed.

In gift systems, as indicated already, social expectations spring from the nature of the relationship that makes giving obligatory in the appropriate circumstances. In commodity systems, on the other hand, the transactions are voluntary; people are not obliged to exchange for one another. The result is that people instead exchange for one another: for example, if a person wants to buy a car, they go into a car dealership, and the car dealership provides the car, and the dealership may pay for it. The relationship between the parties to a commodity exchange is that of a commodity exchange.

Gregory’s work was influential for identifying and elaborating the distinction between gifts and commodities (for an extended discussion, see Chapter 12). For my purposes here, however, it is significant because it relates sorts of transactions clearly to sorts of societies and forms of social relation, and hence fills a gap in The Gift, which was concerned more with identifying gifts, describing and making sense of them.

Gregory holds that gift and commodity societies differ in the fundamental ways that people are organized, and the ways that people and objects are perceived. Gift societies are organized in terms of kinship, and the objects are organized as clan members; descent is a quality social relationship between people. Further, such societies are oriented toward the social reproduction of people, not just as individual humans, but as members and embodiments of social identity. On the other hand, commodity societies are oriented toward the social production of things; not just material objects, but the identity and meaning as different commodities. In these societies, people are organized in terms of production, which means class relations and the division of labor, and hence the organization of quantitative social relationships (see generally Gregory 1982).

It is possible to criticize what Gregory has to say by pointing to the importance of personal transactions in commodity-based societies (e.g. Carrier 1992) and of impersonal transactions in gift-based systems (e.g. Cell 1992). However, it is important to see that he has made a sustained and persuasive effort to link social and cultural, and even economic, aspects of exchange to the broader social context in which they occur. With Gregory, then, we move beyond Mauss’s descriptive assertion that, in societies of the gift, gifts express religious, ritual, moral and economic values and processes to a coherent statement of how and why both gifts and commodities do so in their respective sorts of societies. We also see a broadening of the context in which exchange is viewed, as Gregory points us to much more than the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. We come in seeing links between forms of exchange and forms of social life. Marilyn Strathern addressed such links as well (Strathern 1988), though from her focus is narrower, being what she describes as Melanesian societies. These are classic societies of the gift, and she elaborates on the ways that people in such societies see the transactors and the objects transacted in gift exchange as intensely unaltered. She says that in these societies, the objects are independent entities. Rather, both are conceived in terms of the social relationships that brought them about, and not in terms of ownership or relationships that they help to create. The pig given in exchange, like the person who gives it, is an embodiment of the people involved in its past; the people who fed the pigs and raised the children, the men who cleared the gardens and built the houses, the money that was made out the exchange that shaped the histories of all that is involved in the exchange that we see today.

While Gregory and Strathern link exchange to the social contexts in which it is embedded, they still restrict their concern to the field of beliefs and processes within the society in which exchange occurs. Claude Meillassoux (1981) represents a contemporary broadening, but in a different direction. For him, the ways that understanding exchange can lead us beyond that society. In his analysis of village societies in colonial Africa he argues that these societies, by creating a sense of community and relationships with urban areas and the capitalist relations and processes that characterize those areas, force villagers to migrate to work for part of their adult lives. These migrants are the embodiment of the processes of class rearing, including not just the exchange and other transactions involved. In return for sending them off to urban areas, villages typically receive a portion of the wages that they earn, in the form of remittances, cash that allows villagers to purchase objects otherwise unavailable. From the perspective of the organizations that employ them, these migrants are cheap labour. They are paid less than they would be in metropolitan countries, where their direct and indirect wages would have to cover not just their subsistence while they worked, but also the costs of reproducing the labour force that are borne by villagers (see Meillassoux 1981, 99–103).

It is worth noting that Meillassoux’s concern with relations between village, city and the larger political-economic order appear in other areas of the world. Gregory’s work provides an important stream in the study of peasant societies. This study of peasant societies investigates the survival strategy of households. Some work shows that households produce things and sustain their members in ways that resemble what Meillassoux describes. Because of the costs borne by the household when they are produced, these objects and members’ labour can be sold on the market cheaper than would be possible if the household did not maintain the relationships associated with them (see Harris 2000; Harris 1982; Wolf 1966; see more broadly Gudeman and Rivers 1991).

Meillassoux’s work, like the peasant studies I have described, raises issues that lead to a further broadening of the context in which exchange is viewed, and that have to do with place and time of the exchange, beyond the obligation to give, receive and reciprocate, even beyond the society in which the exchange occurs. The village migrant working on an African gold mine is involved in an exchange of labour for money that speaks not just of the labour and the objects exchanged, but also of his worker’s past and future in his home village, and the company’s position in global markets and the ways that this is made more secure by the availability of cheap labour. Moreover, this
exchange speaks of more than societies of the gift or of the commodity, for it is concerned with the relationship between them. That miner’s labours (like the peasant’s place brought to market) embodies both its antecedents in the gift system of village life (and of peasant households) and its consequences in the commodity world of the gold market (and First World supermarket shelves).

The writings that I have described in this section continue, although in a way he would not have foreseen, Mauss’s (1925/1950: 33 point, that in exchanges ‘all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time — religious, judicial, and moral... likewise economic.’ With Gregory, we are concerned with society’s prevailing economic and social organization, common understandings of people and their relationships, and the ways that people understand the objects that surround them. With Strathern, we are concerned with the people, objects and relationships in the past that constitute the actors and objects in exchange. With Williams we are concerned with actors and relationships that are distant in both time and space from the exchange that we see.

Talk of exchange, then, ends up leading us away from the people we observe and the fact that we observe. The sections that follow illustrate aspects of this. In doing so, they incorporate other and different work, and point to some of the important ways that the study of exchange is changing.

TRANSACTIONS AND TRANSACTORS

I said that the second point that Mauss’s work raised is the relationship between the transaction and the transactor. This relationship can be approached in two different ways, one concerning the identity of the transactors, the other concerning the organization of the transaction.

The Identity of Transactors

Because I have presented aspects of this issue already, I will deal with it only briefly here. Recall that, in gift systems, partake to an exchange and subject to each other in durable ways and are obligated to repay, while in commodity systems they are neither related nor obligated. One way to get at this difference, and a complication, is to look at the contrast between gift and commodity systems, as through Marshall Sahlins’s writing on exchange, based on Melanesian materials (especially Sahlins 1972: Chapter 5).

Sahlins argues that villagers tend to manifest three different approaches to their exchanges. At one extreme, there is the open-handed and generous giving and sharing that forms the flow of things, and the free relations within the immediate kin group, typically the family. Next is honest and even-handed exchange within the society but not within the immediate kin group, the realm that includes most of the gift exchanges in Mauss, Strathern and Gregory. At the third extreme is exchange with outsiders. Here there is no open-handedness or even-handedness, but tight-fistedness, the desire to get as little as possible out of the exchange, which shades into sharp dealing and even theft. For Sahlins, then, the type of exchange matches with the type of transactors: there may be no single identity that is typical of transactors in societies of the gift, and by implication in societies of the commodity.

It appears, in fact, that the situation is more complex than Sahlins’s model indicates. It is apparent if we consider societies of the commodity, Western capitalist societies. They are notorious for the value they place on their economy (Durkheim 1897) and the free market (Carrier 1997). And in the free market, as Gregory indicated, transactors are individuals motivated by their own interests and self-interest. Even so, in such societies gift transactions are frequent; the mass celebration of Christmas gives is only the most obvious example (Miller 1992). However, the identity associated with such gift transactions are ambiguous. This ambiguity is apparent to all those who have neglected to give appropriately: to someone with whom they are in a close relation, just as much as with those who have had a gift rejected or questioned by a close relative (e.g. Carrier 1995: 207–8). At the same time, what can be called the ideology of the gift appears to deny the obligation, just as does the idea of the thing given is significant (after all, the thought is in the gift). Under this ideology, the giving and the object given are spontaneous, unmediated expressions of the giver’s sentiments, which means that they spring from the same internal factors that motivate commodity transactions (e.g. Carrier 1995: Chapter 7). Carrier (1995: Table 4.6) sets out, ‘fee and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it’.

The Organization of Transactors

I said that the relationship between transactors and transactors could also be approached in terms of the organization of transactors. By this I mean the ways that the flow of things, and the flow of things between the parties to an exchange can generate or recreate sets of people. To a degree, this is implicit in Sahlins’s discussion of types of exchange, where, for the different sorts of transaction map on to the different sets of transactors that an individual confronts: family, community, others. Of course, one’s close relative is another person’s stranger, so that the sorts of people vary with the individual transactor whose perspective we are assuming. Other work on exchange indicates how transactions can reveal or create sets of people relatively independently of the perspective of any given transactor.

Perhaps the classic case of this in anthropology is the kula exchange that Malinowski observed in the Trobriand Islands and described in Argonauts. A kula exchange takes place between a pair of individuals, and involves the exchange of ceremonial necklaces (iyaul) and armshells (molu). If we look at kula exchange from a different perspective, however, we see something more than individual pairs of transactors and transmitters. That is, in these transactors, individuals are motivated by their own interests and self-interest. Even so, in such societies gift transactions are frequent; the mass celebration of Christmas gives is only the most obvious example (Miller 1992). However, the identity associated with such gift transactions are ambiguous. This ambiguity is apparent to all those who have neglected to give appropriately: to someone with whom they are in a close relation, just as much as with those who have had a gift rejected or questioned by a close relative (e.g. Carrier 1995: 207–8). At the same time, what can be called the ideology of the gift appears to deny the obligation, just as does the idea of the thing given is significant (after all, the thought is in the gift). Under this ideology, the giving and the object given are spontaneous, unmediated expressions of the giver’s sentiments, which means that they spring from the same internal factors that motivate commodity transactions (e.g. Carrier 1995: Chapter 7). Carrier (1995: Table 4.6) sets out, ‘free and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it’.

I have described two ways in which the flow of objects in exchange links givers and recipients into social networks and units of different sorts. One is the big-man system of competitive exchange, where the networks and units are focused on a single actor, and transactions are crucial for the shape of the network. The other is the kula, where the networks have no focus but result from the actions of individual transactors and their exchange partners, who commonly act in ignorance of what many other transactors in the kula system are doing. The second set of exchanges focuses on the study of another set of exchanges that unite dispersed people into an overall system, commodity chains (e.g. Fine 2002; Leslie and Beiner 1999; Locke and Ritto 2001). From a
that one or another interpretation is necessary or necessarily correct. Rather, it is that when the conceptual frameworks change, so do the obligations to secure child care, like other exchanges that are part of the provisioning of their households, whether those exchanges are commercial, social or otherwise, they are likely to be judged by others who are party to those exchanges.

CONCLUSION

I have used a set of issues arising from Mauss’s The Gift to describe important features in the ways that anthropologists and others have approached exchange. In doing this, I have tried to indicate the ways that those issues and approaches can take us very far from the conventional image of people giving to and receiving from each other, whether in a marriage exchange in the plains of southern Africa or in Christmas giving in a city like Paris. I have tried to use this concluding section to reflect on the places that these studies of exchange have taken us.

Conventional anthropological work on exchange has focused primarily on the people transacting and the situation in which they transact: who gave, who received, and how they think about it. In addressing these issues, this work has necessarily extended the area of interests beyond the identity of the participants and their place in the exchange, but relatively little, and generally these extensions are still linked closely to the transacting parties.

However, I have tried to show that the recent history of work on exchange has involved addressing these same questions – who, what, why, how they think about it – in terms that extend far beyond the conventional focus on the time and place of exchange. These extensions effectively trace the social and cultural causes and consequences of the exchange to ever broader times and places. While it is true that conventional anthropological work devoted relatively little attention to these issues, it will not do to say that it was blind to them. For instance, I have shown how Malinowski looked to broader places when he related individual transactions in the Trobriand Islands to a regional system, and how Sahlin looked to broader times when he related competitive exchange in the New Guinea highlands to the rise and fall of sociopolitical groups.

When scholars have situated the people and places they study in larger fields, the net is cast

In their ceremonial gift exchanges surrounding marriage, death and the like, Panamans regularly give large quantities of uncooked starch, most commonly cassava (an introduced foodstuf and bundles of sago flour (a traditional foodstuff prepared by people in villages near by). Where the immediate family that leads the ceremonial giving includes an adult male who has migrated to work in one or another of the country’s cities, that person will play a prominent role in accumulating the gift to be given, a part that will reflect the social relationships that the migrant has built in the city. The successful and conscientious migrant will have established a network of close relationships with other migrants from the province who are also working in the city, including those from the villages near Panam, where sago is grown. The less successful and conscientious migrant will not. When the ceremonial exchange takes place, watching Panamans do not simply assess the quantity of starch given, they also see it in the social relationships that surrounded its acquisition. A generous supply of traditional sago bundles from nearby villages reveals a migrant who has successfully engaged in the Western world of labor in the city, and an inadequate supply of bag of purchased rice reveals a migrant who has been less successful, and so can contribute nothing but money.

The heap of gifts at the door of a house on Panam is not, of course, the only place where the objects exchanged carry a significant meaning beyond what was intended by those who acquired them. People often judge others by the quality of the commodities on their shelves. Likewise, they often judge people by their judgment of the quality of the things associated with them, whether these be things they possess, like the clothes they wear or the car they drive, or the things they do. Consider, for example, a couple with a small child who is in day care while the parents work. That care can come through purchase, through state provision, through a neighborhood coop erative arrangement, through a neighbor’s grandparent or other relative. Each of these ways of acquiring child care speaks of the parents, in a variety of possible ways.

The parents who pay for private provision may thereby assert their relative wealth, but equally they may adopt a social isolation that merely by their payment alone suggests they are unable to arrange child care through neighbors or relatives. The couple who participate in a neighborhood child-care pool may work to maintain the social significance of their involvement in the way they integrate into the social networks in their area (see Narotzky 2005). The point is not

UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRANSMITTED OBJECTS

I said that the third issue that Mauss’s work raises was ways that people understand the objects transmitted, because these objects are part of the identities of and relationships between the transactors, their understandings of the world, and the object and their understanding of the relationships that affect each other. I want to begin to consider this issue by returning to the distinction between gifts and commodities.

This distinction is especially important around Christmas. People give gifts then, but almost universally the things that they give are commodities. Because of the way gifts are understood in British and American society (the two that I know best), these purchasing commodities are risky gifts: to give something that is too obvious is to redefine the relationship between giver and recipient as being something like a commodity relationship: relatively impersonal and indifferent.

So people redefine these commodities by their practices and their talk. In terms of their practices, they remove the price tag and wrap the object in festive paper which together hide, if not transform, its status as a commodity (indeed, in some settings the wrapping may be more important than the object wrapped; see Hendry 1995). In terms of their talk, they tell each other how hard it is to shop for Christmas gifts: the stores are crowded, the staff are overworked and grumpy and often enough are hired temporarily for the season and so know little about their work or the store, the store displays are a mess, it is hard to find anything worth getting. In portraiture of the shopping as arduous, people obscure the commodity identity of the object beneath an overlay of personal portraits, which invests it with the identity of the giver and the giver’s relationship with the recipient (see Carver 1995: Chapter 8).

In these societies, Christmas is the most intense collective time of shopping and converting commodities into a form suitable for use in gift relations. In this heightened time it is a ritual that affirms and celebrates people’s ability to perform the task that they carry out in mundane work throughout the year. Everyday shopping, after all, is not simply acquiring objects for use: it is acquiring objects for use in personal exchange relationships, which means gift relationships: even those who live alone prone, it seems, to imagine a relationship in which the objects will be used (Miller 1998; see also Carver 1995: Chapter 5).

Christmas shopping is a striking instance of the way that objects in exchange carry the meaning of their past. Christmas presents that obviously carry its past meaning as a commodity is inappropriate as a gift in a close personal relationship. In different circumstances, of course, the object’s meaning and their implications will be different. This further example from Panam Island will illustrate some of the complexities of this.

process and transformation

somewhat different perspective, see Carrier and Miller 1999).

Commodity chains are defined by the links between people and institutions in the life of a market object, from its creation to its consumption. Farmers, food processors, shippers, distributors, retailers and shoppers are the links in a chain through which the beans are grown, harvested, processed, transported, stored, put on store shelves, purchased, brought home and eaten. These chains lead to define the actual position of the beans somewhere between the Andean and Panaman systems. And these systems have described their actual position being of a matter of empirical investigation. These chains can be long and complex, so that a significant portion of the people and institutions involved commonly act in ignorance of what many others are doing (like those in the link). Equally, however, in some chains one or another institution will have a significant grasp of the chain as a whole. In some food chains, for instance, large retailers will seek to control or directly influence many links in the chain, and will seek knowledge about the others (rather like aspiring big man). Likewise, the rise of "ethical consumption," most visible in the Fair Trade line of products, marks an effort by some to increase consumers’ knowledge of and influence over links in the chain (Clayton 2002).

In this section I have described work, some drawn from fields wider than anthropology, that bears on the points in Mauss’s The Gift, the ways that exchange is related to the identity of transactors and to the organization of society. The more recent work that I have mentioned does not spring from conventional anthropological approach to exchange, though clearly in resonates with its concerns. And, like some of the other work described in this chapter, this work illustrates an important current trend in approaching exchange, broadening the focus beyond the place and time of the transaction itself, to include its antecedents and consequences.
even wider. I have shown, for instance, how Mellin's related the forms of exchange in African village societies to the forms of exchange in urban capitalist societies. This point is echoed in work on peasant societies, which persist in part, perhaps, because of the way that they ease the operation of capitalist firms. This wider net is not restricted only to the social dimensions of exchange, but appears as well in work on the cultural dimension. When I described work on gift giving in Western societies, I showed how people's understandings of the objects that they give and receive reflect their understandings of those objects' past and future contexts. The same point emerges, of course, in work on commodity chains and on Fair Trade, ethical consumption and sustainable commodities.

Neither my summary here nor the issues I described in the body of this chapter can pretend to be exhaustive. My purpose has been more modest. It is to indicate both the classic foundations of anthropological consideration of exchange and an important trend in the modern work relating to exchange. The goal in this chapter is to outline the ways that considering people's give-and-take can help us to understand their lives and the social and cultural worlds in which they exist. It is also to suggest a growing and a growing need to place those social and cultural worlds in broader contexts, contexts linked by the material that people transmit with each other.

NOTES

1 As this might indicate, the physical attributes of objects in exchange are relatively unimportant in considerations of exchange. Every so often, anthropologists are told that they really should look at these attributes, rather than seeing objects simply in terms of their social and cultural connotations. Just as often, the advice is ignored (but see Keane 2001). Attention, then, remains fixed on how people interpret the things exchanged, whether in terms of the relationship in which they are transacted, or in terms of cultural ascriptions of scarcity, gender, history or the like.

2 Gregory has rejected the idea that he meant to use "the distinction between gifts and commodities to classify societies", adding "nor have I ever supposed that "we" are to commodities as "they" are to gifts. Such a process of analysis is anathema to me" (Gregory 1997: 47). Even so, such a distinction seems to be justified by various passages in his writings.

3 Much of the work I have described in this section makes the sort of points often associated with Appadurai's influential (1986) collection, The Social Life of Things. That volume appears to have crystallized the trends in the study of exchange that are the concern of this chapter.

4 Here, each party competes to give an amount larger than the other can reciprocate. In some systems, however, each party competes to destroy more than the other can match, the most famous of these being the potlatch of the Pacific Northwest (e.g. Codere 1959; Drucker and Heizer 1967; see Mauss 1925/1950: 2-6).

5 In some cases, the relationship between object and person or group is so strong that efforts are made to keep the object out of exchange altogether (e.g. Weiner 1992; this issue is addressed in different ways in Bloch and Parry 1989; Gudeman 2003).

6 To point to the cultural meaning of objects given in exchange leads us into important work in the study of consumption. This is a vast topic, far beyond the scope of this chapter. Fundational works on the issue include Bloch and Parry (1989), Holub (1984), Douglas and Isherwood (1972), Subrahmanyam (1976) and of course Veblen (1927).

REFERENCES