Chapter 6 ★

Marcel Mauss Revisited

We have here an admirable example of how capitalist property is created. The appropriation of gold, in particular, is by necessity a bloody business. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spaniards massacred the Peruvians and Mexicans; in the 19th century the Indians of California were coldly exterminated; the Australian Aborigines, methodically destroyed. And now this same genre of collective assassination which is war is directed against the Boers. The bourgeoisie no more recoils before blood than it recoils before human exploitation. Thus we see how “private property is founded upon labor”!

—Marcel Mauss, from “La guerre du Transvaal” (Le Mouvement Socialiste, June 1, 1900)

Citizens, in proposing to set off forthrightly on this path, we must never in any way forget our role as socialists and revolutionaries . . . We believe, comrades, that organizers and militants can indeed encourage the worker to foresight, and seek to create for him a little security in this unnatural and cruel society in which he lives. But we will not be satisfied with that. We will educate him for his revolutionary task by giving him a sort of foretaste of all the advantages that the future society will be able to offer him . . . We will create a veritable arsenal of socialist capital in the midst of bourgeois capital.

—Marcel Mauss, speaking before the First National and International Congress of Socialist Cooperatives, July 2–5, 1900.

In earlier chapters, I have given Marcel Mauss’ work somewhat short shrift, particularly in comparison with that of Marx. In fact, I believe Mauss’ theoretical corpus is the single most important in the history of anthropology. He was a man with a remarkable knack for asking all the most
interesting questions, even if he was also keenly aware in those early days of anthropological research, that he didn’t have the means to fully answer them. In the Anglophone world, his work is now known mainly through a mere four or five theoretical essays, but almost every one of them has inspired a vast secondary literature of its own. The universally recognized masterpiece is his “Essai sur le don” (1925), which has generated more debate, discussion, and ideas than any other work of anthropology—and that has obvious relevance to the intellectual project I have been developing over the course of this book. In this chapter, then, I would like to test some of these ideas against Mauss’ material from the “The Gift” itself. In doing so, however, I intend to make a larger theoretical point. In many way I think his work and Marx’s form a perfect complement. Marx was a socialist with an ongoing interest in anthropology; Mauss, an anthropologist who, throughout his life, remained an active participant in socialist politics. And just as for many years few seemed to be aware of Marx’s subtlety as a social thinker, almost no one nowadays seems aware of Mauss’ importance as a political one. Political passions form the framework, in fact, for much of his work, and probably nowhere more so than in the case of the gift. Let me begin, then, by describing some of the background to this work.

the gift as social contract

Mauss was during his own lifetime thought of most of all as the intellectual successor to his uncle, Emile Durkheim, the founder of French sociology. The most common way to look at Mauss’ work is as the pursuit of the same intellectual problems—if, as Louis Dumont emphasizes (1952), in much more pragmatic and empirical terms.

Durkheim’s problems, in turn, largely emerged from a dialogue that had been going on between French and British thinkers about the direction of social change in the nineteenth century: about the rise of individualism, the decline of religious solidarity and traditional forms of authority, the rise of the market as the main medium of human relations. Most of Mauss’ essays can be related to one or another of these themes: just as his essay on the “category of the person” can be read as an archeology of modern individualism; “The Gift” can be read as an exploration of the notion of the social contract.

Marshall Sahlins (1972) once suggested that the problem Mauss is ultimately tackling goes back to Thomas Hobbes: how do you create peace between people who have no immediate reason not to kill each other? Hobbes, of course, argued that given human beings’ endlessly acquisitive propensities, a state of nature could only have been a “war of all against all”; society proper could only begin when everyone agreed to create some overarching political power. The original “social contract,” then, was a matter of people