

Reconsidering reciprocity and capitalism

Daromir Rudnyckyj

2023

Faculty of Social Science

Faculty Publications

This is a postprint version of the article.

© 2023 © The Author(s) 2023.

The final publication is available at:

Rudnyckyj, D. (2023). Reconsidering reciprocity and capitalism. *Ethnography*, 24(3), 450–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381231180069>

Downloaded from UVicSpace Research & Learning Repository

dspace.library.uvic.ca



University
of Victoria

Libraries

Epilogue: Reconsidering Reciprocity and Capitalism Today

Daromir Rudnyckyj
University of Victoria

For nearly a century, anthropologists have been preoccupied with the gift. So much so, that one of the signature contributions of the subfield of economic anthropology has been to remind the human sciences at large of its importance, not only in non-industrial societies but in contemporary settings as well. By illuminating the importance of gift-giving in Kwakwaka'wakw potlach ceremonies for understand social and political relationships, the discipline was able to cast a reflection by which it could better understand the role that gifts play in the contemporary world. Thus, the role of Christmas or birthday presents in forging social relations or the ostentatious white tiger and cheetah furs (later determined to be fakes) presented to former US president Donald Trump on his first diplomatic visit with the Saudi royal family could be understood through the optics afforded by attention to the gift. The central insight that the foregrounding of gift exchanges generated was that not every transaction, even in liberal market societies, could be reduced to rational economic calculations. Rather, social or political systems were framed by semiotic relationships often mediated through gift exchange.

The essays collected here, however, move beyond merely rehashing the long-established anthropological truism that gifts are indispensable to the formation of social and political ties. Indeed, in highlighting transnational giving the essays make three critical interventions that illustrate the enduring importance of the gift in economic anthropology. First, they illustrate the importance of thinking about the gift on a transnational scale. Second, they deepen our understanding of the role of gifts and charity in coalescing collective identities, not only in terms of local communities, but in broader national, diasporic, and global terms as well. And, third, the essays draw attention to the fact that not all transnational or global economic exchanges

can be understood through the same logics that we comprehend market relationships. In making these interventions, the essays reveal the enduring value of the anthropological preoccupation with the gift, even as anthropologists have broken new terrain by focusing on transnational phenomena characterized by new social technologies, global flows, diasporic communities, and expert capitalism.

In his classic work, *The Great Transformation*, the political economist Karl Polanyi categorized three main modes of economic exchange: market, redistributive, and reciprocal. Implicit in these distinctions was a certain academic division of labor. Although a scholar who drew on as wide a range of sources as Polanyi would have likely rejected such a division, the conventional map of the human sciences assumed that each mode of exchange was the proper domain of a particular discipline. In general terms, the analysis of market relationships was presumed to be the purview of economics. Political science and sociology were thought to be the appropriate institutional locations for the analysis of the role of the state in facilitating redistribution. And anthropology, given its focus on personal, face-to-face social relations in empirical context was thought suited to analyzing the reciprocal social relations produced through the gift. Typically, even in cases where anthropologists did attend to other modes of exchange, it was typically in their manifestations at the village level. Thus, anthropological attention to the market was done in the context of “the bazaar economy” rather than into the analysis of how markets operated in secular capitalist settings. Anthropology, because of its focus on personal, face-to-face relationships in communal settings, seemed ideally positioned to focus on the gift and its role in cementing personal relationships and fostering social bonds.

This collection of essays upsets the presumed scalar isomorphism in the Polanyian classification by showing how gift exchange is not necessarily restricted to personal, face-to-face

relations. Rather, by considering gifts in transnational context they provide insight into how gift exchanges can operate on the same scale as market exchanges based on monetary exchange. Take for example, Leilah Veivaina's focus on the endowed trusts that facilitated flows of charitable giving from Hong Kong to Mumbai, transforming the cityscape of Mumbai. This theme also appears in Sanam Roohi's attention to how affluent Non-Resident Indian (NRI) professionals in the United States foster community welfare in India through donations to communities in South India. Similarly, Millie Creighton illustrates how Japanese citizens on the island of Shikoku sent monetary donations to Buddhist temples in Myanmar as a way of memorializing soldiers from the island who died there during the WWII Japanese occupation. Gradually, this pattern of giving became less concerned with memorializing war dead and more dedicated toward humanitarian aid, such as medical care. In each of these cases, gifts are dedicated toward fostering transnational relationships, revealing how the gift cannot be considered only in terms of fostering face-to-face personal relationships, but can foster even distant, impersonal relationships between communities on a transnational scale.

A second major intervention of the essays is to show how gifts can foster belonging and notions of group membership across spatial boundaries rather than within localized spaces. Social scientists have long emphasized the role of gifts in fostering membership in localized groups and factions. Perhaps paradigmatic in this sense were analyses of patron-client networks. This literature illustrated how gifts were used to both attract followers and produce identities based on allegiance to a powerful or charismatic leader. Gifts from a client to a patron ensured protection and served as a material sign of commitment to the patron's group. In the other direction, gifts from a patron to a client fostered loyalty and ensured that a client would not be tempted to join a different leader's retinue.

Although the essays here likewise illustrate the importance of reciprocity in serving as a material sign of membership in a given faction, the communities in question are not localized like traditional patron-client networks. Rather, the essays illustrate how gift exchanges can foster identities in broader terms. Thus, Mara Liechtman's analysis of humanitarian sovereignty demonstrates how Kuwaiti citizens, spurred to action through Islamic notions of zakat, or charitable giving, demonstrate their membership in a national collectivity through such giving. Kuwaiti citizens shape themselves as moral members of the nation through their participation in transnational charitable initiatives endorsed by the state. Similarly, Tom Widger's analysis of the Sri Lankan Friend-in-Need Society, illustrates how participants in this charity shape themselves as autonomous liberal subjects rather than in representing themselves in terms of either kin or religion. Qiuyu Jiang draws attention to how gifts of money and time by African Muslims in the Chinese city of Guangzhou create a sense of membership and community for this diasporic community.

Third, the essays draw attention to transnational economic exchanges that do not conform exclusively to market logics of profit maximization. Globalization has typically been understood as the spread of market norms resulting in the integration of production systems, financial activities, and labour markets beyond national borders. Yet, in focusing on transnational giving the essays speak to the fact that globalization is not isomorphic with marketization. Instead, globalization can be mediated through gift exchange, rather than interactions motivated by the profit imperative. Thus, Catherine Larouche, shows how middle-class Muslims in Uttar Pradesh draw on transnational charitable giving to facilitate the participation of poor Muslims in the local economy, seeking to enhance their self-sufficiency. In so doing, global resources are mobilized to achieve "substantive citizenship" based on civil, political, and social rights for all members of

the nation state. Vevaina's essay draws attention to the role that transnational gifts play in inscribing memories on the cityscape of Mumbai today, as profits from Hong Kong are repatriated on the "Monsoon winds" in her evocative terms. Relatedly, Leichtman shows how the Kuwaiti state seeks to build "soft power" through engaging in charitable and humanitarian undertakings. In all of these examples, gifts rather than profit play a role in the formation of global connections.

In sum, the essays collectively reveal the power of an ethnographic focus on individual and collective life gathered through the empirical experiences of an analyst can shed light on economic action. They offer rich, descriptive account of the motivations of those engaged in gift relationships and reveal how social ties are forged across space through economic relationships that are not purely market in orientation. In this sense they offer insights into phenomena that economists might miss, such as the fact that charity and gifts cannot be understood through the same logics as we understand the market. Further, while economics presumes individually calculative rational actors who make rational decisions based on cost-benefits analysis, the essays in this collection challenge this formation by showing that, while gifts may have a calculative dimension, they cannot be reduced to purely formal cost-benefits models or the profit imperative. Collectively, then, the essays show the value of an anthropological approach to economic phenomena in understanding the contemporary predicaments of social life in diverse contexts and how engaged subjects both conform to and confront the strictures of contemporary capitalism.