

CHAPTER I

THE CIRCLE



The Kula is probably the best known and most celebrated anthropological example of the gift. It is also a graphic (in the double sense of the term) example of a certain circle in which the gift is implicated – a ‘ring’, says Malinowski, that forms a ‘closed circuit’. Yet this is not the only circle here. There is another that is prior to and much more fundamental than any ring of the kind that Malinowski describes. It is the circle of the gift itself – the gift’s own circularity.

The Kula is a form of exchange carried out by ‘communities inhabiting a wide *ring* of islands, which form a *closed circuit*’ (Malinowski 1922: 81; my emphases). It involves the circulation of necklaces of red shell – *souvala* – with bracelets of white shell – *mwali* – which as they are exchanged move around this ring in opposite directions, clockwise and anti-clockwise, respectively. And they move around it constantly, says Malinowski, on account of a certain rule. ‘One transaction does not finish the Kula relationship, the rule being “once in the Kula, always in the Kula” and a partnership between two men is a permanent and *lifelong* affair’ (my emphasis). Likewise the necklaces and bracelets exchanged ‘may always be found travelling and changing hands, and there is no question of [their] ever settling down, so that the principle “once in the Kula, always in the Kula” applies also to the valuables themselves’ (Malinowski 1922: 81–83). It is as if both the partners engaged in this exchange and the objects with which they engage one another are caught up in the circle, are surrounded by it, and cannot escape. It is as if they are destined to go round and round in circles until the end – the death of one of the partners in these lifelong relationships or the end as social death – the ‘loss of face’, becoming nobody (an oxymoron, no doubt), which, as Mauss says in his own discussion of the gift, is the fate of all those who fail to reciprocate.

Such is the rule of the Kula, but for all we know it may be the rule of much more than this native institution. It may even be the rule of life itself. We will

therefore take the risk of paraphrasing this rule and suggesting what may sound trivial or unintelligible because much needs to be demonstrated for its import to become apparent: Once in time, always in time – always, that is, until the end of one’s time – all claims to the contrary, whether implicit or explicit, notwithstanding. We will take the risk also of pointing out that if such is the case, and on account of this rule, there is no question of anyone or anything ever settling down, that whatever is caught up in time is destined to travel around the circle constantly – until the end of its time, as we have just said. We are already suggesting that time, the circle of the gift and a range of other circular phenomena – the life cycle, for example, but also, as we shall see, other circles within this circle – are inextricably intertwined. It is one of the tasks of this book to trace and highlight the connections.

It may take up to ten years for a bracelet or necklace to make the round, says Malinowski, but it always does come back to the point of departure. It stands to reason, of course. As the saying has it, what goes round, comes round. Yet Malinowski’s point is not one of rationality and common sense. He has a different agenda. Being an anthropologist, he wishes to do what all anthropologists strive to do, namely, to save the ‘savage’¹ – in this particular case, save it from the calumny of pure economic nature. What Malinowski wishes to do in making an issue of the Kula is to undermine the claims of those who ‘reason incorrectly thus’:

The passion of acquiring, the loathing to lose or give away, is the most fundamental and most primitive element in man’s attitude to wealth. In primitive man, this primitive characteristic will appear in its simplest and purer form. *Grab and never let go* will be the guiding principle of his life (Malinowski 1922: 96).

For Malinowski ‘grab and never let go’ is hardly what happens with this particular primitive man. He emphasises the circle of these gift exchanges precisely because he wishes to demonstrate that the Trobrianders are people like us, that they have social codes and rules which they diligently observe, that they, too, have managed to master the most primitive elements of human nature by means of culture. In fact, he will go on to argue – and this is his main point – that when it comes to attitudes to wealth, they have mastered nature to a far greater extent than we have. The gift goes round and round precisely because they always let go of what they grab. The Trobrianders may wish to possess things, but with them, says Malinowski, this desire to possess is not at all a desire to possess. Paradoxically, they wish to possess only to dispossess themselves. They take what is given to them, not to keep and appropriate but to give to someone else. Such is the ethos of this society. ‘The *important point* is that with them to *possess is to give* – and here the natives differ from us notably’ (Malinowski 1922: 97; my emphases).

I have highlighted the equalisation of *taking* (possession) with *giving* because it is, indeed, an important point, perhaps one of the most important points that

one can make. It is important not for the reasons that Malinowski had in mind – to demonstrate the generosity of the Trobrianders – for as we shall see there is no generosity involved here (cf. Weiner 1992) or anywhere else for that matter. It is important rather because it opens up a new domain of inquiry that, although it may not necessarily lead anywhere, could perhaps shed different light on these issues. We may note two interrelated themes in this respect. The first is the implication that to give any of these ceremonial objects, the Trobrianders must first take. If ‘with them to possess is to give’, it stands to reason that they are always dispossessed, that they have nothing to give except what they take. Looking at it from another perspective, they must take to give because they are not themselves the creators of these objects. As Malinowski makes clear in his comparison with the British Crown jewels, the bracelets and necklaces have value because of their history, their association with mythical ancestors, heroes, or gods. They have been passed down to them through the generations and they in turn will pass them on to the next. To generalise even more, at the limit they – the Trobrianders – as much as anyone else, must take to give because no one ever makes anything (a) present from nothing. It is impossible. Any way one looks at it then, giving presupposes taking, and this is an irreducible condition. If that is the case, however, the Trobrianders, as much as anyone else, give what they do not have (for it does not belong to them) hence give nothing or, what is yet another way of saying the same thing, they give what is not and cannot be a gift.

The second and related theme has to do with the equalisation of the two notions we have highlighted – taking and giving. If taking amounts to the same thing as giving, then by all good logic the reverse must also be true: giving amounts to the same thing as taking. It is true firstly because as Malinowski insists, the Kula is a ring and what the Trobrianders give, say, a necklace, will eventually find its way back to the point of departure. What they give they will take back, even if belatedly. Yet giving amounts to the same thing as taking for another, even more fundamental reason. The Kula is not merely a ring, but also a form of exchange, and what this means is that the Trobrianders will take as they give. Long before the necklace makes the round of the Kula, the gift has already gone round and come round in the form of the counter-gift – a bracelet – the circle of the gift has already completed itself. It always completes itself before it completes itself – in a little more than an instant, however small this ‘little’ might be. We shall discuss this instant, if it exists at all, in due course. Let us simply note here that another way of saying what we, and Malinowski, in his own way, have been saying is to argue that there is no such thing as gift, that what passes for a gift is simply another form of exchange. Malinowski does, in fact, say this, even if not in so many words. In the *Argonauts* he is still referring to pure gifts, as if there can be impure gifts and still be gifts. In *Crime and Custom*, however, he will reconsider his position. In the chapter ‘The Principle of Give and Take Pervading Tribal Life’, he will note that ‘when ... I describe [in the *Argonauts*] a category of offerings as

“Pure Gifts” and place under this heading the gifts of husband to wife and of father to children, I am obviously committing a mistake’. The mistake, Malinowski goes on to say, was to take this transaction out of context and hence fail to see that it was part of a circle, a wider chain of transactions in which the presumed gift was in fact payment for services received. Malinowski will note further:

In the same paragraph I have supplied, however, an implicit rectification of my mistake in stating that ‘a gift given by the father to his son is said [by the natives] to be a repayment for the man’s relationship to the mother’ (p. 179). I have also pointed out there that the ‘free gifts’ to the wife are also based on the same idea (Malinowski 1926: 40).

It seems then, that nothing is *free* – and as we will see, no one is free either – not even the gifts that circulate in the household and sustain the relationship between spouses and between parents and children. Even such ‘pure relationships’ – to use an expression meant to apply to what is presumed to be a very different kind of society² – are not pure. They, too, are tainted by calculation, whether conscious or unconscious. If one takes – as one must – one gives, and if one gives, one takes, as in any other kind of economic transaction – barter, for example, or buying and selling. The household is itself an economy – *oikonomia* – the first one perhaps, and if the household is an economy, nothing else can escape the law of division, distribution, and exchange. To say this is not to deny the *phenomenon* of the gift, what passes as gift, the fact in other words that people exchange what they consider to be gifts. It is, rather, to highlight the fact that it is only a phenomenon or, what is another way of saying the same thing, that the gift itself or in itself whose phenomenon people deal with in everyday life is a phantom. Nor is this to deny the phenomenological difference between gift exchange and other forms of exchange. Apparently, unlike barter or buying and selling where exchange is immediate, the cycle of what passes as the gift takes time to complete itself. And it is true, too, that there is a tempo involved, a range of options as to the time delay between gift and counter-gift that, as Bourdieu (1977) says in his own discussion of the gift, is constitutive of the process and can be used strategically by the recipient to his or her advantage. Yet all this makes it no less a form of exchange and an economy than barter or buying and selling, despite the mystique with which it is usually surrounded.

The impossibility of the gift (and the preponderance of the economy), which we are noting here in a preliminary fashion and which we will discuss in all its complexity in the next chapter, is an important premise in its own right even if not a new one. But it is important also because of what it says – provided that one is prepared to listen carefully – about other, seemingly unrelated but significant issues, epistemological and political, which are themselves surrounded by a certain mystique. As in the case of the gift with which we are all familiar, the mystique has to do with the ability to give without taking beforehand, hence

also without taking with the other hand, the one that does not do the giving. It has to do with the power of giving, as we will call it, the presumed ability to give beyond or outside every conceivable economy, which may be what ability or power ultimately mean – making something (a) present from nothing. There is much at stake in the demystification of this notion, first and foremost the status of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, what I will call here European thought for short, which is premised on such a magical power. What is at stake to begin with is a certain intellectual gift, or gift of thought – not that it is ever conceptualised in such terms. Nonetheless, if one listens carefully to what the terms say, one would not fail to hear its name. The gift in question is what the subject takes *for granted*, namely, as the term itself suggests what it takes as a grant or gift. It should, of course, take nothing for granted – not a single thing. For European thought there is no gift of thought, if by gift we mean what one subject gives to another. This is a given (gift of thought). For European thought the subject ought to think for itself, give itself the gift of thought through its own devices – an auto-gift, we might say. This is also a given (gift of thought), and it is foundational. It is precisely what it means to be enlightened and the motto of the Enlightenment: think for yourself – which is what the enlightened subject takes for granted as a grant or gift.

At stake is also the gift that this presumed auto-gift of thought makes possible, if it does. Thinking for oneself may be ‘the touchstone of truth’, as Kant says, but it is far more than that. It is also the condition of possibility of auto-nomy – another auto-gift. For it should be clear that the subject that thinks for itself no longer depends on others for the truth. It produces or validates it – the two terms amount to the same thing in this context – all by itself. And because it no longer needs to take anything (for granted), it no longer needs to give anything either – neither to give in (to others) nor to give up (its independence). This, too, is foundational. It is, among other things, an essential ingredient of the distinction between the modern and the traditional – broadly speaking, the distinction between those who supposedly question and doubt everything and by doing so constitute themselves as autonomous subjectivities and those who conform by repeating what is handed down to them. What is at stake finally in this discussion of the impossibility of the gift is the gift of thought that those who give themselves the gift of thought – true knowledge and understanding – thereby giving themselves also the gift of autonomy give to the rest of the world. The story of *this* gift – the gift of European thought – is well known and need not detain us long. It is the story of the white man’s burden, the task of civilising the world that this ‘man’ set for himself all by himself – for he thought and no doubt still thinks that he is capable of thinking for himself. This task proved to be a burden precisely because even though the white ‘man’ gave everything he had – light – he received nothing in return to make his labour in the tropics worthwhile, not even gratitude – which, let us hasten to add, is no longer the case, at least

in certain postcolonial quarters, some more unlikely than others. As we will see in the next chapter, gratitude is now more forthcoming – *now* meaning the time after colonialism, the postcolonial era. Although European thought ought to be criticised, even provincialized or decentred, which is the task that postcolonial discourse sets itself – also all by itself because it, too, thinks that it thinks for itself – there is also recognition that this thought is a gift to us all and we should therefore be grateful for it. But what if there is no gift, as we have been saying – what if this gift of thought is nothing? Would not the gratitude we are expected to express be for nothing?

This is what this book is driving at, where it is slowly going. Its contention is that there is no auto-gift of thought, only the gift's suppressed other, an economy of thought where, as in every economy – for there are many – giving amounts to the same thing as taking and taking to the same thing as giving. I have just intimated that Kant, the pillar of the Enlightenment if ever there was one, was well aware of the existence of this economy even if apparently he did not call it by this name. He certainly knew very well that when it comes to the question of knowledge, giving is nothing more than taking and taking nothing more than giving. But he also believed that it was possible to break the circularity and step outside the circle. Hence the directive to take nothing for granted – for there is no such thing as a grant or gift of thought – encapsulated in the motto of the Enlightenment: think for yourself. Kant staked everything on this prospect and lost – instantly, at the very moment he defined what enlightenment meant. And so did all those who came after him, took up his directive, and sought to abide by it. Kant lost by virtue of giving; they lost by virtue of taking. If there is no gift of thought, there is no gift of thought, whether this gift is given by another person or by the self to itself – as an-auto gift, as we have just said. The subject always takes if it is to give anything at all and does so precisely because much like the Trobrianders who Malinowski paraded through the pages of the *Argonauts*, it is always dispossessed. Even when it takes nothing for granted, it always takes something for granted – as a bare minimum, the directive that it should take nothing for granted. Paradoxically, to think for itself the subject must not think for itself. This is to say that there is no free thinking or thinking for free, which should not be all that surprising, because as everyone knows nothing is free in the economy, there is always a cost of living to reckon with. If one takes – as one must – one gives. It is to say that here as elsewhere there is a price to pay for taking – a cost of thinking.

To schematise in the extreme and assert what will have to be demonstrated, for the epistemic subject the price to pay for taking is subjectivism, for the political subject subjection. The first cost is more familiar than the second. The subject is subjective not so much because it takes for granted at the discursive level as the philosophers of the Enlightenment assumed – an assumption that underscores also the Marxist notion of ideology. If that were the case, things would have been

simpler. The subject is subjective rather primarily because, as it is often said in the literature, its vision of the world reflects its position in social space, its historical, social, and cultural conditioning, in short, because of what it has taken for granted to become what it is – a subject of one sort or another. And although what it is is a historical accident and not cast in stone – for it can no doubt change and eventually become something different – what it can never do is be nothing, which is to say, objective. If it were possible for the subject to purge itself from everything it has taken for granted – which is not – it would no longer be subjective. But it would no longer be subject either. It would turn itself into an object – a thing. For the same reasons the subject is always already subject to the powers that be. To put it schematically once again, if to be subject rather than a thing the subject must take for granted, and if it acts on the basis of what it knows rather than out of pure impulse – for, as we shall see, in that case too it would not be subject – then it forecloses the possibility of ever becoming autonomous. Having taken for granted, it has already given in to the powers that be and given up this prospect. It always already gives in and gives up even when, at the limit, the only thing it ever needs to take for granted to become autonomous is the directive to take nothing for granted. This is to say that to be autonomous the subject must not be autonomous, that to criticise, resist, revolt against authority it must conform to it. Such is the paradox of living in what I have chosen to call political economy: political because it is about struggles, whether individual or collective, to liberate the self from the powers that be, and economy because here, too, there is a price to pay for taking, a cost of doing.

This brings me finally to European thought itself, its revolution – the intellectual and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment – and re-volution – what appears as the historical trajectory that brings back to the point of departure. If, as we have been saying, there are no auto-gifts of thought, hence no autonomy either, the conclusion that European thought has gone round and come round seems unavoidable. Much like the necklaces and bracelets of the Kula ring, it has come full circle: from the time when the individual was not thinking for itself and was therefore subject to the powers that be – the time before the Enlightenment – to the time when it finally dawned on the modernist subject that the individual cannot think for itself and is therefore beyond liberation – our time which, as we shall see, some chose to call, with good reason, postliberatory. I have been saying it *appears* and it *seems* because the circle that I am highlighting here has become visible only in recent decades – which is not to say that because it is now visible it is also accepted in its finality. Yet this circle has been there from the beginning for everyone to see, and some did in fact see it, however dimly. Once again, a comparison with the Kula ring may be instructive here. As I have already suggested, the Kula is a ring or a circle not only or even mainly because, as Malinowski argues, the objects exchanged always return to the point of departure. It is always already a circle – the circle of the gift. The gift/necklace comes

back to the point of the departure before it comes back to the point of departure – in a little more than an instant – in the form of the counter-gift/bracelet. In much the same way, European thought has always already gone round and come round, at the moment of its conception or conceptualisation – on account, as we have said, of the giving that was also taking and the taking that was also giving (in and up).

All this suggests that there is really not very much to say about the question of European thought being a gift to the rest of the world, much less about the gratitude that the rest owes the West. In all seriousness we may ask: What gift? What European thought? All we have encountered at the foundations of this intellectual and cultural edifice is contradictions. And why should anyone expect that it would be otherwise? Is not ‘the system at war with itself’ (Douglas 1966: 140)? Surely, this was not meant only for the Mae Enga.³

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At the time of writing these introductory lines I was staying in a friend’s house for a few days. One morning as I was drinking coffee, I noticed on the mug I was holding the following inscription: ‘Owned by no one. Free to challenge anything. The Guardian’. *The Guardian* is a well-known and respected British newspaper, and I was mildly amused to find out that the mug was given out free when one bought a copy of the paper. But the inscription also struck me because it confirmed yet again the strong hold or stronghold that the idea of autonomy has over the modernist imagination, the magical aura that surrounds this notion to the extent that it makes it suitable for a promotional ploy. It is true, no doubt, that if one is owned by no one, one is free. But is there such a subject? And if there is, would it have any reason to challenge anything when itself is challenged by nothing?

To suggest an answer to these questions in a more empirically grounded manner I will turn to an example from Mediterranean ethnography – Bourdieu’s (1977) work on the Kabyle.⁴ If the Kabyle man is challenged, says Bourdieu, the code of honour requires that as a general rule he responds with a counter-challenge. For what is at stake is his reputation as a man. But there are exceptions to this rule. When the challenge comes from a clearly inferior man, he can refuse to take it seriously without losing face. The challenge of the inferior man does not challenge him enough to take it up and respond with a counter-challenge. Perhaps it does not challenge him at all and leaves him completely indifferent. Whatever the case, the superior man does not take the challenge seriously and does not take it up. Being superior, he has no need to *take* – note that the challenge may well be a gift of some sort. At the limit, he is so superior that he depends on no one. He is therefore free. But precisely because he is free, he is not challenged by anything or anyone and has no need to challenge anything or anyone in turn. He is completely indifferent to the world. Such, as we shall see in due course, is

what many have come to recognise as the sterility of freedom. There is no such man, of course – and this may be just as well. There is no such man not because there are no superiors and inferiors in the world but because for every superior there is someone else who is even more superior and someone else who is more superior still so that, to follow this logic to its logical conclusion (if it has one), it is superiors all the way up and no doubt inferiors all the way down.

It seems then, that to challenge anyone, to criticise, resist, rebel, or revolt against, or more simply engage with, the subject must itself be challengeable. Someone or something must have a certain hold over it. The subject, in short, must not be free. This is also how this book is implicated in what it says about European thought and its presumed gift – autonomy. It is yet another proof, if another proof is needed, that there is no such thing.

Notes

1. I have called this elsewhere the salvation intent (Argyrou 2002).
2. Modern societies, according to Giddens (1991).
3. 'Perhaps all social systems are built on contradiction, in some sense at war with themselves' (Douglas 1966: 140).
4. But see also Herzfeld's (1985) work on the island of Crete.