

## THE TIME(S) OF THE GIFT

John O'Neill

Today, we seek to give less to the poor -- to refuse them work, to reduce their wages, to withdraw welfare and to turn away the beggar. To rationalize the withdrawal of the welfare gift, market theorists have enunciated an ideology of the free gift -- the gift that must obligate neither the donor nor the recipient. It is quite remarkable, therefore, that Derrida's *Given Time* (1994) should risk offering the ideologists of the autonomous gift a philosophical/ literary pedigree. To do so, Derrida has tried to overwhelm the counter-sociological tradition of the gift that is *voluntary yet obligatory* (Mauss, 1950; 1990; Titmuss, 1970). I shall argue instead that what Mauss teaches us is that social life involves a *meta-gift*, i.e., an inalienable surplus of labour and service that cannot be reduced to the calculation of contracts. This gift cannot be returned by creating an egalitarian society anymore than it can be liquidated in the exercise of possessive talents. This is because the surplus-value in the gift derives from an economy of collective ability rather than one of individual need. Collective talent therefore complements the inequality of need with a gift of civic assurances, that are the proper context for the secular practices of charity (O'Neill, 1994).

To start, Derrida documents the amount of time he has given/spent on the quasi-economic concepts of appropriation, expropriation, speculation and economy in earlier seminars and publications. He finds that one way or another he has been working on the notion of the gift more or less consciously for 20 years. What are we to make of this legacy -- should we ignore it, for the sake of the gift it overwhelms? The difficulty of commentary upon Derrida, as Searle (1977) first discovered in his modest attempt to separate the sense and nonsense in (un) limited ink is that Derrida is a violent reader/writer. Every essay is an act of sovereignty -- a potlatch, a meltdown of all difference in the name of difference. With Derrida, all is lost in the beginning... with or from his first word:

The King takes all my notion of time; I give the rest to  
Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all.

He reads into this remark by Madame de Maintenon the notion of time as a wedge or cut between giving and taking — a cut woman cannot make. Thus she dreams of having all her time to herself — and, once the King is dead, to fully devote herself to Saint-Cyr, her charitable foundation for impoverished young ladies.

She did not mean to say that, you will say.

What if... yes she did [ *Et si* ]

Thus Derrida challenges the reader to read otherwise than the reading he offers us -- his / our gift? To resist Derrida's opening move, we must reject the way it privileges the (*phallic*) question of independence in / as exchange. Madame de Maintenon is not waiting out her time to be freely charitable once the King is dead. She, like any other human being, always gives *more* of herself than any gift or job or product can convey. The excess of the gift is the mark of the human and the social that is irreducible to contract -- hence the surplus-value in all exchange.

Derridean commentary itself is driven by the phantasy of a debt-free society sprung from Nietzsche's vision of morals without genealogy, self-birthed in the newly born wo(man)'s aristocratic dismissal of Judaeo-Christian servility. Yet Derrida's opening flirtation with woman's gift of time achieves no outcome because it founders upon a misconceived philosophy of charity. The result is Derrida's reduction of the gift to woman's gift of time she doesn't have to give in the first (*phallic*) place! But Annette Weiner has shown that the essence of Mauss's point about gift exchange is that its ethical hinge is "*keeping-while-giving*". In a world of necessary exchanges of commodities, labour and persons, what must be achieved is woman's identity and genealogy. This is managed through the retention of those inalienable possessions that are the markers of human identity at birth, marriage and death. Because these "cosmological" makers are produced by women, they are the basis for woman's distinctive power and the occasion for practical alliances and competition with men:

Power relations are not separate from gender relations but are inextricably lodged at the centre of how women and men play out their dual roles as siblings and spouses. The processes of keeping-while-giving project political potential onto every essential exchange, making women's reproductive capabilities as siblings and spouses integral to how power is generated... Throughout the Pacific and other societies of similar

political scale, women as sisters and spouses gain their own domains of power through controlling economic resources and protecting inalienable possession and the various cosmological phenomena that provide authentication of historical, ancestral linkages. When the cosmological source of this authentication is transmitted to material possession that women produce, the domain of women's power expands. And when women as sisters retain control over inalienable possession that rank difference politically and therefore authenticate hierarchy, they achieve political authority and power in the own right. In these instances, it is women's control over human and cultural reproduction that is politically vital to the establishment of hierarchy. (Weiner, 1992: 152).

Derrida blithely sets himself apart from the anthropological tradition on the embedded relations of gift and economy (Sahlins, 1965;1972) by declaring that he is opposed to tradition in any shape or form. He reduces tradition to repetition and recycling without surplus. One only gives what one expects to get back. One has nothing to give that one has not borrowed. Tradition is not for the sons of Derrida:

...we are departing, in a peremptory and distinct fashion, from this tradition. That is to say, from tradition itself. We will take our point of departure in the disassociation, in the overwhelming evidence of this other axiom: There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol, in a partition without return and without division (*répartition*), without being-with-self of the gift-counter-gift. (Derrida, 1994:13).

Derrida appropriates what everyone knows in order to give it back as what one can only learn from him. Is this not a poor return? He operates by simply rejecting the grammatical embedding of exchange, gift and debt and by dividing the conventional understanding of their contextual logic given in the very sources to which he appeals:

If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain

*aneconomic*. (Derrida, 1994:7).

What are we to make of Derrida's "if"; how is it able to generate a "must"? It does so by the very same move he denounces in Mauss's text. Thus he perversely insists that Mauss's caution is counterfeit. He accuses Mauss of hiding his desire to substitute a gift economy for a contract economy, even though he suspects he is simply "paying us with words while talking a lot of hot air, *nous payer des mots en se payant des mots*" (Derrida, 1991:84; 1994:61). Desperate to substitute his own coin, Derrida admonishes Mauss for failing to taking responsibility for *The Gift*. He cites Mauss's beautiful concluding pages by underlining any term whose ethico-natural (*must/il faut*) can be given a naturalistic/deterministic sense:

No doubt, as with every 'il faut' is that one must -- *il faut* -- go beyond contestation and prescribe. One must-- *il faut*-- opt *for* the gift, for generosity, for noble expenditure, for practice and a morality of the gift ("il faut donner," one must give). One cannot be content to speak of the gift and to describe the gift without giving and without saying *one must give*, without giving by saying one must give, without giving to think that one must give but a thinking that would not consist merely in thinking but in doing what is called giving, a thinking that would call upon one to give in the proper sense, that is, to do more than call upon one to give in the proper sense of the word, but to give beyond the call, beyond the mere word. (Derrida, 1994:62)

What Mauss said is that the myth of a primitive state of nature where men are ruled by violence and domination is more likely as a late capitalist scenario than as a real primitive history from which we have removed ourselves due to the rule of reason and individualism:

First of all, we return, as return we must, to habits of 'aristocratic extravagance'. As is happening in English-speaking countries and so many other contemporary societies, whether made up of savages of the highly civilized, the rich must come back to considering themselves-- freely and also by obligation-- as the financial guardians of their fellow citizens. Among ancient civilizations, from which ours has sprung, some had a (debtors') jubilee, others liturgies (of duty) such as

choregies and trierarchies, and *sysstia* (meals in common), and the obligatory expenditure by the aedile and the consular dignitaries. We should return to laws of this kind. Then there must be more care for the individual, his life, his health, his education (which is, moreover, a profitable investment), his family, and their future. There must be more good faith, more sensitivity, more generosity in contracts dealing with the hiring of services, the letting of houses, the sale of vital foodstuffs. And it will indeed be necessary to find a way to limit the rewards of speculation and interest. (Mauss, 1990: 68-9)

In order to override the Maussian economy of “voluntary yet obligatory” exchange Derrida insists upon the anti-concept of “*aneconomy*” in order to separate the necessity of the commodity from the liberality of gift exchange. This is the poisoned gift of Derridean criticism. It works to undo Mauss’s text, even to accuse it of forging a material necessity in place of the ethical contingency of the gift:

- (I) Derrida separates the time of the free gift from the time of the reciprocal gift;
- (II) he locates the “madness” (*débandade*) of Mauss’s language in the semantic dislocation of the “bound” and the “unbound” gift —“that which does not return to the father or that which does not return in general,” i.e., Derridean dissemination, or writing;
- (III) he argues that the play in the language game of giving, taking receiving, is evidence of the impossibility of any transcendental reduction of *the* gift (Nature, Being, God, Phallus) to a gift or partial object;
- (IV) he questions whether *The Gift* addresses only its own impossibility, excusing itself for “taking sides” (*parti pris*) in the questions of the gift versus the contract economy.

The cumulative effect of the Derridean cuts is to reduce *The Gift* to a delirious text read through its mirror texts, in Stéphane Mallarmé’s *To A Poor Man* (1961), Baudelaire’s poem, *Beat up the Poor*, and his story *Counterfeit Money* (1975) whose text (see Appendix) Derrida employs as another reading machine in order to deepen the undecidability of the gift:

Do not suppose that I am talking madness  
The earth opens up old to one dying of hunger  
I hate another alms and want you to forget me.  
And most of all, brother, do not go buy bread.

(Mallarmé)

But Mauss was concerned to show that gift economies only appear “mad”, “excessive” or “primitive” from the standpoint of an economy whose contract basis limits trust, time and solidarity. Of course, once the contract economy has achieved dominance over gift economies, it narrativizes its dominion in terms of the rule of reason over madness, to put a philosophical gloss upon its practices; or else it casts the temporal difference between them as the story of the rise of individualism over tribalism and collectivism — to put a political gloss on the same practices. Mauss's essay, therefore, is an attempt to restore the suppressed history of the gift economy in order to revalorize its place in a society that is neither capitalist nor communist because its welfare transfers reduce conflict and inequality.

Mauss was not engaged in any form of primitivism. A society where there is no denial (repression) of the necessary overlap of gift and exchange is either a historical or a political fiction. As Bourdieu shows, Derrida’s version of the time of the personal gift misreads its temporal structure, separating, archaizing and privileging the ideological spontaneity of the gift over its material and collective necessity:

The gift, generosity, conspicuous distribution - the extreme case of which is the potlatch -- are operations of social alchemy which may be observed whenever the direct application of overt physical or economic violence it negatively sanctions, and which tend to bring about the transmutation of economic capital into symbolic capital. Wastage of money, energy, time, and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is transmuted into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship, overt domination into misrecognized, ‘socially recognized’ domination, in other words, *legitimate authority*. (Bourdieu, 1977:192).

In a last-ditch struggle with Mauss's “conclusion”, Derrida picks on his citation of a Maori proverb:

Ko Maru kai atu

Ko maru kai mai

ka ngohe nghoe

Give as much as you take, all shall be very well.

(Mauss, 1990:71)

Despite everything in the practice of the gift that rules out the equivalence of giving/receiving, Derrida insists that Mauss is invoking the goodness of the rule of equivalence *as the excess of the gift* (Derrida, 1994: 67). But Mauss had already provided his own gloss on such proverbs. Whereas Mauss adopted several stanzas from a poem in the Scandinavian *Edda* to introduce his essay on the gift, Derrida picks out only the last stanza. Let us give it with Mauss's summarizing gloss:

It is better not to beg [ask for something]  
 Than to sacrifice too much [to the gods]:  
 A present given always expects one in return.  
 It is better not to bring any offering  
 Than to spend too much on it.

The Subject is clear. In Scandinavian civilization, and in a good number of others, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; *in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily*. (Mauss, 1990: 2-3, my emphasis).

The value of Mauss's longer citation is that one can see from the poem that the gift cannot be extracted from the political economy of alliances. “There are no free gifts”, as Douglas (Mauss, 1990) puts it, because there is too much at stake in failing to make a friend rather than an enemy. Derrida's insistence on the free gift that lays no return upon the receiver thoroughly confuses Mauss's point that the subjective time of the free gift is the other side of the objective time of the obligation to return a gift. Derrida totally ignores Mauss's gloss on the Edda. The contrast in the poem is not between gift and exchange — except from a later economic perspective -- but between the subjective and objective dimensions of an economy of gift-giving that is a cultural universal. Mauss clearly rejected any notion of any excess over practice or of any higher wisdom than what is wise in practice:

Thus, from one extreme of human evolution to the other, there are no two kinds of wisdom. Therefore let us adopt as the principle of our life what has always been a principle of action and will always be so: to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily. We run no risk of disappointment. (Mauss, 1990: 71)

Because he ignores the institutional contexts of exchange, Derrida's strategy of assigning conflicting temporalities to the economy (cycle) and to the gift (effraction) disrupts the social rhythm of the gift. Nothing is exchanged for the sake of exchange. All exchange enhances relations of exchange. All exchanges are in some respect unequal in order to sustain the surplus values in the social and political relationships that they presuppose. Now this surplus value may be expressed in both *gendered* and *non-gendered* terms but the trace of engendement can never be erased. This may be seen in the expression *social (re) production* where the *re* marks the collective amplification presupposed by individual acts to achieve communicative / exchange value. Mauss argues that the error in the idea of contract is to believe that it is possible to appropriate *without remainder* the surplus value that is the mark of human activity. Every society is organized in terms of its inalienable symbols of life, death, blood, labour, land, love, time which are *kept and sold*. That is the *enigma of the gift* (Godelier, 1999; 8) captured in Mauss's term *hau* (spirit of things) in which the sacred and secular economies are two sides of the same coin (*pace* Derrida's counterfeit example):

Legends about precious objects (*agalмата*) have as it were a raw material: they originate more or less directly in the thematic of magical kingship... The possession of precious things is both sign and precondition of beneficent power; so too, the possession of the sacred field, of the sacred tree, of the sacred flock, which are all enduringly connected with it. This conceptual heartland, in which the talismanic object -- in some degree already 'coined', insofar as it is a precious thing--is at once, the expression and the guarantor of 'value' (Gernet, 1981: 144).

The exchange of person and things are two sides of the same universe which may be viewed from either end as either a cosmic principle beyond us or within us (Durkheim, 1915). The subordination of gift giving to commodity exchange which subordinates labour to capital is the larger context of woman's patriarchal subordination. But the point is that neither patriarchal nor capital domination can ever be complete. The *paradox of slavery* (O'Neill, 1996) is that only a human being not unlike the master can be enslaved or tortured. This is the limit of all systems of domination. Thus even the gift that must be given (by woman, slave or child) must also be *voluntary*. Moreover, the gift that must be received must also be received *graciously*. Both giver and receiver are therefore holy to one another:

In reality what is present in the object, along with the owner, is the entire imaginary of society, of his society. It is all of the imaginary duplicates of the human beings to whom have been attributed (it cannot be said that these are loaned because these duplicates cannot give anything in return) the powers to reproduce life to grant health and prosperity, or the opposite, to cause death, famine, the extinction of the group (Godelier, 1999: 95).

Derrida never considers that the gift circulates in a *divine* economy motivated by the conviction that we never give anything that has not already been given to us by God -- whether in lending our strength, talents or material fortune. If to give is divine, to receive god's gifts is even more so -- and not to do so, most ungrateful. Once again, however, Derrida overrides the Christian doctrine of Grace even though it may be understood to revise the Hebraic Covenant, especially if one does not ignore the latter's divine threats of destruction for non-compliance! The doctrine of Grace, of course, cuts across both the Old and the New Testament (and it is possible to argue that it is wholly present in the difference between Elohim and Jahweh).

Caputo (1997) has argued that God's grace is to be compared with Derrida's incalculable gift toward the *wholly other*, separating it entirely from the celestial economy of the forgiveness of

spiritual poverty and debt. Here much is lost in the translation, so to speak, of Divine Grace. It must suffice to re-state the bare structure of the idea of God's grace:

- I There is no contract with God:
    - (a) Jesus is sacrificed to redeem sin, and
    - (b) to provide a model for our forgiveness of one another;
  - II God makes gifts to humans who have no equivalent gift:
    - (a) God's first gift is the Creation;
    - (b) A creature cannot return the Creation, world, life / death;
    - (c) Life / death is owed to God; it is not ours to give or take;
    - (d) God graciously accepts unequal gifts from us (sacrifice, prayer);
- 111 God's second gift is His Son, Jesus.

The Derridean gift nevertheless demands that it be unconstrained; it must be an asocial and unconscious event (*ereiginis*). It must neither aggrandize the giver nor diminish the receiver; it is aneconomic, apolitical and non-sacrificial (Kosky, 1997). The ethics of the gift must not be materialized; the Derridean gift demands an autonomous space — exemplified in Baudelaire's story of the beggar's receipt of a counterfeit coin which I have analysed at length elsewhere (O'Neill, 1999).

We must resist Derrida's substitution of Baudelaire's story of the evil gift for Mauss's essay on the good gift. Not to do so, is to surrender to Derrida's own delirious economics distilled from reversing the terms of the gift so that anything purposefully given and received is a poisoned gift (*pharmakon*). To preserve the autonomy of ethical shock, Derrida courts the evil of the poisoned gift, imperilling friendship and solidarity. Now Derrida's notion of a non-reciprocal gift derives from the Greek lineage (*dōron*), the dose of poison (*pharmakon*) with which Derrida loves to "mix" the exchange gift. But, Greek law forbade gratuitous *gifts*, i.e., presentations that are not inherent in an alliance (*dōtine*). Despite Derrida, *dōsis* (act of giving) cannot be separated from *dōron* and *dōtine*, — these are "three words for expressing a gift, because there are three ways of conceiving it" (Benveniste, 1971: 271-80; 1973: 57). Thus what Mauss argued is that we have made ourselves human by treating one another hospitably. This means we have delimited the power (*potis*) of the

master / mistress by treating a subordinate as a guest (*hospes*). In other words, whoever is master of him / herself is a despot (*despotés*) but does not behave despotically, i.e., as an arbitrary potent (Benveniste, 1973: 71-83). The master is “himself” by virtue of his representative authority over a family, not by his power to give orders. The master is host (*hostis*) inasmuch as he reciprocates services rendered. In Rome even strangers were not excluded from this obligation which underwrote all other pacts. To be excluded from such alliances is to be outside the community of gifts or municipality.

The Derridean gift is poisonous because it undoes a social structure which it presupposes for any sense it might otherwise retain. The separation of the liberal and utilitarian moments of exchange (*chrémastiké*) was unthinkable in Greek economics (Pekora, 1997). This is because the aristocratic master (*Kurios*) owed his free time to the bound time of his household workers (women and slaves). But then the master’s autonomy bound him to the ritual commitments of political life (piety and friendship) - not to an empty signifier of totality. Derrida (1978) aligns with Bataille’s (1990) surrealist invocation of the sovereignty of sacrifice without return. The gift of writing is thereby transfigured into an elementary form of the religious life. But Bataille’s loosening of the general economy of the potlatch from the restricted economy of the commodity, merely dissolves the dialectic of freedom by shifting it entirely to the side of the master’s sovereignty away from the slave’s working-through of the double economy of dependence and freedom. (O’Neill, 1996). Derrida follows suit: he dissolves the distinction between good and bad money, pushing the gift away from moral exchange into the autonomous albeit evil heroics of the counterfeit - coin. Once again, Derrida misreads Aristotle’s construction of the *oikos* (the household economy):

As soon as there is monetary sign - and first of all sign - that is, difference and credit, the *oikos* is opened and cannot dominate its limit. On the threshold of itself, the family no longer knows its bounds. *This is at the same time its originary twin and the chance for any kind of hospitality.* It is, like counterfeit money, the chance of the gift itself. The chance for the event

(Derrida, 1992: 158, my emphasis).

Derrida confounds the distinction between the goods of the household that useful because they release the master for the ritual exchanges between friends (*philia*) — which are both *voluntary and obligatory*, as Mauss has it — and those goods which achieve their goal in the elective fraternity of the polis. Here, too, Derrida loses the distinction / connection between the free time of the polis and the bound time of the market. It is, however, giving Derrida too much to contextualize for him the attribution of *sovereign but alienable time* that derives from Lockean contract theory (Booth, 1993), let alone Marx’s analytic of capital time (O’Neill, 1986; Cohen, 1977).

I have argued that Derrida’s introduction of the notion of an *aneconomic* gift is an ill-timed exaggeration of the claim of autonomy over the tradition of obligation. To have his way, Derrida indulges in a delirious reading of Mauss’s *The Gift*. He finally palms us off with Baudelaire’s story of the “gift” to a beggar of a counterfeit coin as an example of the joy of giving, however difficult (for the reader/friend) to assimilate — even as a story! Derrida’s attempt to separate the moments of autonomy and dependence in exchange violates the dialectic of voluntary yet obligatory participation in social, economic and political life. It entirely loses the supplement of surplus value in collective life - i.e., Mauss / Durkheim’s divine society, the gift that keeps on giving. No society, no one, can survive without fixed points / symbols and objects of identity and intergenerationality exempt (sacred) from exchange. Gift giving, like all communication, is a material / subjective practice whose sense is funded by the symbolic / objective necessity of the social reproduction of kinship and political alliances. The sacred and the secular are two dimensions of the symbolic economy through which we project social relationships upon things that we treat as the source of our kinship and continuity:

Men ultimately find themselves alienated to a material object  
Which is none other than themselves, but an object into which  
Than have disappeared, in which they are necessarily and  
paradoxically present through and by their absence. This is not  
the social and material alienation directly imposed from without  
by a master on his slaves or by a conqueror on the people he has  
subjected by might. It is an alienation which arises within each

person because it springs from the relations that fashion man's social being, the relations that obtain *between* all members of a single society, who make this society (Godelier, 1999; 137-38)

In a secular society what is sacred is our gift to ourselves by means of taxation, the decommodified gifts of welfare (health, education) and the civic inclusion of all persons regarded as bearers of inalienable citizenship rights and duties. Even though mercantile and industrial capitalism makes the exchange of gifts secondary to contractual exchange, it can hardly be said that social cohesion has ceased to work through gift relationships. Sociability, charity and welfare have remained ever present if not enlarged practices of modern society. Indeed, what concerned Mauss is that the privileged might neglect the return gift of the poor, so to speak, as much through lip-service to market rationality as from greed. Gifts are neither covertly egoistic nor simply demeaning; one cannot give without treating the receiver as one entitled in turn to give. For this reason, even poverty allowances include the receiver's obligations to give and to engage hospitably and seasonally with others.

I shall re-state what I think is at risk in the current appeal to the excessive of autonomy underwritten by the dissolution of self and other beyond history and society [O'Neill, 2001(a)]. The Derrida / Bataille / Levinas line kills off kinship and family in order to restart them in a filial pleasure / pain principle. The risk in this is that what is bound (life/death) on the level of the collectivity (society/religion ) is loosened on the level of the self (narcissism/horror of repetition). The self-made soul sinking under the burden of tradition and the anxiety of imitation soon worships at the killing places of the father, family and law [O'Neill, 2001(b)].

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