

## The Gift – Mauss, Bataille, Hyde, and Derrida

Contributed by Erik W. Davis  
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Erik W. Davis: The Gift &dash; Mauss, Bataille, Hyde, and Derrida. (2006.) This article is licensed under the Creative Commons. Source: Deathpower. Mauss In his classic essay *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Mauss attacked the long-held notion that among so-called primitive peoples, gift-giving was a clandestine form of rational economic exchange. This was a thunderbolt of an argument, the full ramifications of which are barely absorbed, even in anthropology. Essentially, Mauss was arguing that White people have been assuming, on the basis of their own economic forms of barter and currency-exchange, that this was primary. Instead, Mauss argues that gift-giving was instead the primary form of exchange, of which barter and currency-exchange are secondary distortions which deny the collective good guaranteed by gift economies (cf. general reciprocity). There were three major points that I take from Mauss in addition to the general structure of the argument (above).

Erik W. Davis: The Gift &dash; Mauss, Bataille, Hyde, and Derrida. (2006.) This article is licensed under the Creative Commons. Source: Deathpower. Mauss In his classic essay *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Mauss attacked the long-held notion that among so-called primitive peoples, gift-giving was a clandestine form of rational economic exchange. This was a thunderbolt of an argument, the full ramifications of which are barely absorbed, even in anthropology. Essentially, Mauss was arguing that White people have been assuming, on the basis of their own economic forms of barter and currency-exchange, that this was primary. Instead, Mauss argues that gift-giving was instead the primary form of exchange, of which barter and currency-exchange are secondary distortions which deny the collective good guaranteed by gift economies (cf. general reciprocity). There were three major points that I take from Mauss in addition to the general structure of the argument (above). First, societies based on the exchange of the gift impose three positive obligations on members: 1. The obligation to give (you can't not give) 2. The obligation to receive (you cannot refuse to receive) 3. The obligation to return (you must return that which is given) Second, the exchange of gifts are essentially agonistic. We compete to give. This is seen most clearly in Mauss's examination of the Northwest Coast Potlatch, where intangible social status results from the gift. There are criticisms that can be made of using the Northwest Coast as an example in the sort of evolutionary argument favored by Mauss: for one thing, the Northwest Coast is a place of almost unparalleled natural plenty. Food often literally walks right up to you. Subsistence, so-called, is rarely an issue for those who know how to eat. Therefore, in one of the few exceptions to a very general rule, the Northwest Coast societies had a complex system of hierarchy and division of labor without ever engaging in agriculture. Nevertheless, Mauss's point may still be taken: when status is at stake in giving (i.e., when status is returned to the giver through the act of giving), an antagonistic relation enters, and giving becomes a sort of competition. This may be generalized even more basically, in a way that is logically prior to the issue of status: when one gives to another, one alienates from oneself some part of one's wealth. A difference is created. The recipient receives the wealth. This creates a relationship, since the gift must later be returned. Since the gift itself may not be returned, nor may an identical gift be returned, what is returned to the original giver is not the exact form of wealth but what Mauss referred to as the *hau* or spirit of the gift, taking the word from the Maori. The point here is that social antagonism is tied inextricably to the gift in a manner that acknowledges difference in gifts. Third, the gift may not be returned immediately. This is crucial. A gift economy is not a permanent Christmas morning, where all exchange gifts, and ideally all gifts are roughly equal to each other. Rather a gift economy is one in which I give you a gift on Monday, and on Saturday (or some other unspecified day) I receive a different gift from you. The status which emerges from the exchanges depends partly on the time of return (not too soon, not too late) and the gifts themselves (a game of permanent one-upmanship emerges, in which to under-repay a previous gift is to experience humiliation and the loss of status). This has all been very usefully described in Chapter 4 of Marshall Sahlins's classic and still-extraordinary book *Stone Age Economics*. Sahlins makes a number of good points here, but for me the most useful is the way in which he charts the requirement that gift exchange involve a third party in order to create a generalized reciprocity, and that the *hau* of the gift should be understood as the productive capacity of the gift. To put this latter point another way, Sahlins points out that the *hau* of the gift must be returned in order to prevent the recipient of the gift from profiting by the gift. So, the gift of goat must result in the reciprocal gift of that goat's offspring, which are the *hau*, or productive capacity, of the gift. Here, we see the introduction of the idea of the excess of the gift, which is crucial to understanding later receptions of gift theory. Bataille One problem with Mauss's work is that it does not theorize wealth as such. Bataille does. I've seen people attack his classic three-volume masterpiece *The Accursed Share (TAS)* as a reformulation of his earlier concepts of non-productive expenditure (wait for it, below) on the basis of his supposed conversion to Stalinism, but I've yet to see evidence either of his Stalinism or his rejection of non-productive expenditure. Indeed, the latter seems quite alive and motivating in *TAS*. What drives Bataille is the notion of excess. He calls his work (*TAS*) a "essay on general economy." What he means by this is something much much bigger than the circulation of wealth, but an attempt to first of all theorize what it is that circulates, period. In this he shares a deep affinity, which has been almost completely ignored in my own readings (except, perhaps in the appropriations of Bataille by Deleuze and Guattari), with the Deep Ecology movement. Maybe that's why I love this argument. It speaks to me of common sense. Where does wealth come from? Let's back up. What is wealth, most generally? It is found in all sorts of things, including symbolic tokens such as coins. It is found in animals, hides, coins, and food, among other things. These, in turn, are all produced by the variety and differentiation of energy, the ultimate source of which is always unitary: the sun. It is not coincidental that Bataille titles the first section of his first chapter of his first volume "The dependence of the economy on the circulation of energy on the earth." Bataille starts with energy. (So, importantly, do many of the most compelling &dash;

and controversial — theorists of collapse, such as Joseph Tainter and John Michael Greer.) Wealth is utterly dependent, in a way that is completely non-metaphorical, on the circulation of energy on the earth. That is, wealth is the same thing, at a basic level, as life itself. So, how does the sun interact with life? The primary example, which is well-chosen, is that of plants. A plant receives its energy from the sun, which it then photosynthesizes. But crucially, all plants photosynthesize more energy than they are able to use for the mere purposes of maintenance. That is, there is from the very beginning an excess of energy which must be dealt with. The plant may use this excess for growth and reproduction (useful, productive expenditure, analogous to the productive haul of the gift identified by Sahlins), or it must waste it, by giving it away with no expectation of productive return, by turning it into “useless” self-adornment, or by destroying it (non-productive expenditure). Of course, to say that this expenditure is “useless” is merely to say that it is useless for the giver. It is the basis of the life of others, and is simultaneously the basis of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. Ecologically speaking, this can be seen in the complex micro-ecosystems that develop, for instance, between a tree and its soil: the tree takes nutrients from the soil which are useless to the soil itself. The tree in turn stabilizes the soil and its ecology, allowing for the continued production of those same nutrients, and returns fuel to the soil in the form of dead leaves and matter. Exchange is not optional, but mandatory, by the very nature of it. The excess of energy which cannot be absorbed, and which, like the tapas of Indian asceticism, can burn a non-reciprocating individual up, becomes the gift which must be given. Economy is a game of hot-potato. For me, the crucial point is that the excess is the predicate on which all relationship is built. That is to say that without excess, and its expenditure, no organism could interact with any other. No reproduction would be possible, no communication. The destruction of expenditure, or its expulsion from the organism, or its expenditure in “useless” terms, all indicate the necessity of a relationship to another—a place for it to be destroyed, a recipient of its excess, or another to notice the beauty of useless self-adornment. ((This appears to be the basis of David Graeber’s fascinating attempt to rework the anthropological theory of value, which I will tackle here in a later post. [Graeber, David. *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.] Importantly, the essay on which this book is based is Graeber’s own earlier article linking adornment with wealth: Graeber, David. “Beads and money: notes toward a theory of wealth and power.” *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 1 (1996): 2-24.)) Bataille puts it this way: Human improductive expenditure creates new improductive values, which reconnect humans to the universe through the loss principle. For Bataille, the problem of economics is not how societies deal with scarcity, but how they deal with their inevitable surplus. How do we expend, give away, or destroy the surplus, the excess, which accrues to us a basic fact of being alive? This leads him, in his first volume, to insist that the overproductive, hyper-“efficient” world must deal with its excess, which he calls the accursed share, by giving it away. Only this, he claims can lead to peace. But giving it away is not the only option, and in Bataille’s work, it is perhaps the least interesting of the options considered. Another commentator, who seems to have traveled a similar path to my own, synthesizes Bataille’s argument using his classic example of Aztec sacrifice. Symbolically, along with the object itself, the one who offers the sacrifice is seen as removed from the demands of utility and consequently as possibly a sovereign subject. Those who offer the sacrifice are not completely dominated by the needs of the system or the process, but, rather, can exist free of their constraints in the moment of the sacrifice. Bataille examines these notions in light of Aztec sacrifice. While to modern sensibilities the immense level of human sacrifice in that culture seems an abomination, it represents the nature of sacrifice. In the words of Bataille, “The victim is surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the accursed share, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the order of things; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings.” (Bataille, Georges. *The accursed share*. Translated by Robert Hurley. 3 vols. Vol. 1. New York: Zone Books, 1989, p. 59, quoted from David L.R. Kosalka, *Bataille and the notion of gift*.) Volumes 2 and 3 of TAS get even more fascinating, as Bataille investigates the Accursed Share in relationship to the production of eroticism and sovereignty, respectively. These will have to wait for a later post, unfortunately. For now, let’s move on to Hyde. Hyde Lewis Hyde’s book is an interesting, and somewhat odd (though not as odd as Bataille’s) piece. It sits outside of the tradition I am sketching here, but is important for one primary reason: Hyde theorizes the work that must take place during the gift’s interval. There’s a lot that is relevant to my work in particular from Hyde, but for our purposes here, the two major points I would like to highlight are that Hyde, pace Mauss, insists that it is possible to distinguish between a true gift and a false gift. Here’s a good excerpt from Wikipedia’s article on gift economy: Hyde argues, somewhat against Mauss, that there is a difference between a “true” gift given out of gratitude and a “false” gift given only out of obligation. In Hyde’s view, the “true” gift binds us in a way beyond any commodity transaction, but “we cannot really become bound to those who give us false gifts.” Referring to Alcoholics Anonymous—which functions internally largely as a gift economy—Hyde passes on a piece of AA jargon: a “Two-Stepper” is a person who tries to go directly from stopping drinking alcohol to the twelfth step of giving back to others. That person has received a gift (sobriety) for which he or she feels an obligation; however, instead of doing the necessary labor (the next ten steps) to be in a position to fulfill the obligation, he or she attempts to give that which he or she does not yet possess. ((Lewis Hyde. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, 1983, p. 46)) Bataille sees matter as necessarily and inevitably producing an excess, an “accursed share” (a hot potato) which must be given. Hyde accepts that gifts are a sort of accursed share (though he seems to be unaware of Bataille’s work on the matter) — the original essay was published under the title “The gift must always move.” But contra Bataille, Hyde believes that the gift received must be energized by the labor added to it by the recipient. The gift produces a haul, an accursed share, an excess, only when the recipient has done the honest work necessary to honestly receive it. In Hyde’s example of the two-stepper, the sober two-

stepper attempts to skip all this labor involved in properly receiving the gift, and returns it too fast, violating the gift's necessary interval. It is an offense against the gift (and hence, given Mauss's understanding of the gift as prestation, or total social fact, a social offense). These appear to be contrary positions, and I remain uncertain whether they can be, or should be, reconciled. Bataille's understanding of the gift is that which is a free result of pre-existence's productive capacity, which must necessarily be expended. Hyde's notion is of inert matter which must be worked on by human artistry (and Hyde is primarily concerned with artists, and their non-alienating labor) in order to produce the same surplus. But Hyde's insight is that the gift must be properly received in order to be returned, and that, I think does not necessarily sit at cross-purposes with Bataille, though their underlying notions of the source of wealth may. Derrida I get tired of people who hear Derrida's name and immediately get angry. It's a copout. Derrida certainly has written some turkeys, and I would argue, even some pieces that were never intended seriously — they were, in Hyde's idiom, "false gifts" given out of obligation, tricks perpetrated on the recipients. But this is by far not the bulk of his work. His project is difficult for many to understand, let alone agree with, since it is essentially the ultimate problem identified by Socratic practice and Aristotle: guiding thought to the aporia which cancels our ability to think further. (on aporia, see also the politically engaged journal of the same name). Derrida's later works, especially, are eminently worthy of deep and intense engagement, and have rewarded my own efforts many times over. ((I would especially recommend Derrida, Jacques. *The gift of death*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor, Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995., Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. New York: Routledge, 1994., and Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's pharmacy." In *Dissemination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.)) In his excellent review of the concept of the gift, *Given time I: counterfeit money*, Derrida makes two additional major interventions connected to our discussion thus far: the nature of the gift, and the issue of time. Like Bataille, with whom Derrida does engage, the gift is necessarily a result of its own excess. For Derrida, this is less predicated on the fact of matter's own productive capacity (strangely, we see here a similarity more between Sahlins and Bataille than between Derrida and Bataille) but on the fact of antagonism in exchange, which always pushes the envelope, constantly attempting to outdo the other, and creating a constant excess which attempts to escape itself. Derrida takes up the issue of reciprocity: the gifts must attempt to at least be equal that which they repay, and indeed almost always attempt to go beyond, inducing what he sees as a sort of madness. Regardless of whether you like the idiom of madness (I'm not fond of it), the insight here is that if gifts equalize each other, or destroy each other, what is it that is, as Lewis Hyde would have it, "honestly given"? For Derrida, the conclusion becomes clear, and I must say he's right: what is given is time. The material of the gifts, the *hau*, is always destroyed by the subsequent gift. What is given to the whole — the collective — is time, the gift's interval, that which binds us together in a relationship of debt and love, resentment and cooperation, the interval in which the gift is not yet repaid. One can translate as follows: The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it gives time. The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. There where there is gift, there is time. What it gives, the gift, is time. ((Derrida, Jacques. *Given time: I. Counterfeit money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992, p. 41)) There is time between oneself and another, and hence time in common, only insofar as the excess is shared, exchanged. The process of excessive exchange attempts always to go beyond the previous gift, and the excess which is produced is the basis of relationship in time. In conclusions I don't pretend to have a permanent grasp on all the important issues here; my thought moves and changes, and I refuse as a matter of principle to freeze it in time, murdering it by claiming finality. However, I think that the above is a reasonably clear explication of the way in which I have received the notion of the gift, of wealth, and of general economy, and I do plan on using these ideas in my own work on Buddhist funerals in Cambodia. The major themes which I would call out are: 1. Wealth as excess, which must be non-productively (Bataille: "improductively") expended 2. The gift as a improductive expenditure 3. The gift as productive of relationship, community, and time