The Question of the Gift: Essays Across Disciplines
Edited by Mark Osteen
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I. Overview
Ever since the publication of Marcel Mauss's landmark 1925 anthropological study-cum-historical romance Essai sur le don, scholars in a variety of disciplines have been fascinated with gift exchange. Yet despite Mauss's discovery that gifts are "total social phenomena" governed by particular norms and obligations (76), they have often been either explained away as disguised self-interest or sentimentalized as a remnant of a golden age of pure generosity. The Question of the Gift, an interdisciplinary collection of essays, poses new questions and offers new paradigms that transcend these trite polarities.

According to Jacques T. Godbout, in the realm of the gift, "the implicit and the unsaid reign supreme" (4-5); these essays expose these implicit norms and unspoken principles. Such work is essential because, as Alan Schrift observes, the question of the gift "addresses fundamental issues of intersubjective interaction" (18). Explaining its motives and meanings is therefore necessary to a fully ethical conception of social life.

Because the issues involved in the gift cut across traditional academic disciplines, it is particularly well suited for interdisciplinary inquiry that can both highlight the weaknesses and synthesize the strengths of economics, sociology, philosophy, literary criticism and theory. By bringing together first-class scholars from disparate fields, this collection offers a broad range of new research on a universal phenomenon that will interest a wide audience and stimulate further interdisciplinary work. Indeed, the collection is especially timely now that the recent publication of Natalie Zemon Davis's study of gifts in early modern France has rekindled scholarly interest in these questions.

II. History of the Field and Significance of the Current Book
Mauss's Essai sur le don [The Gift], the foundational text in gift studies,
has been immensely influential for French social theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (who reframed Mauss's three obligations--giving, receiving, and reciprocating--as parts of a larger system) and Georges Bataille, who declared dépense ("expenditure") to be a major unacknowledged force in all human culture. Outside of France, in the 1960s and '70s social scientists such as Marshall Sahlins and Alvin Gouldner reinterpreted Mauss's analyses of the "spirit" of the gift and questioned and expanded his treatment of reciprocity.

More recently, a number of scholars—including Chris Gregory, Annette Weiner, Marilyn Strathern, James Carrier, and Maurice Godelier in anthropology, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques T. Godbout, Helmuth Berking, David Cheal and Aafke E. Komter in sociology—have used the social and ethical complexities of gift-giving to challenge the market rhetoric and exchange theory that dominate the social sciences. Each of these works offers important new research and introduces valuable concepts or theories: Gregory and Weiner develop the idea of inalienability; Strathern and Komter stress gender differences in gift practices; Godelier re-examines the significance of the sacred; Bourdieu analyzes the many forms of capital involved in gift practices; Godbout, Carrier, and Cheal celebrate the gift in contemporary culture as an essentially moral economy residing alongside of capitalism.

The influence of Mauss's work has not been restricted to anthropology and sociology: scholars from fields as diverse as history, economics, law, philosophy, and literary theory have felt the effects of this seminal work on the ethics of exchange. For example, Davis's recent book contests Mauss's historical narrative, in which the gift has been largely supplanted by market exchanges. Instead, she distinguishes three overlapping relational modes that continue to operate in social exchanges, none of which ever entirely disappears. Further, it may be argued that much post-structuralist literary theory, particularly that of Jacques Derrida, has been engaged in reconceiving Maussian insights. In Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money, Derrida revitalized interest in the gift among literary scholars and critics with his provocative claim that the gift is impossible since, from the moment one even recognizes a transaction as a gift, it becomes weighted with obligations and therefore no longer qualifies as a pure present. Indeed, for Derrida, the gift is a figure for the impossible, for whatever lies outside of symbolic systems.

Aside from Derrida, the most influential gift theorist for literary studies has been Lewis Hyde, whose book, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, stimulated a raft of articles using gift theory to explain literary texts. Although Hyde's application of anthropological principles to artistic commerce sometimes imitates Mauss's idealizing tendencies, his work paved the way for important recent books by literary scholars such as Vincent Pecora, who traces Western concepts of the gift back to Aristotle's distinction between the agora and the oikos, and John Frow, who explores the interdependence of gifts and commodities. Nevertheless, most literary criticism on the gift has been undertheorized, often merely employing uncritically the principles or terms found in Hyde, Derrida, or Bourdieu.

Further, despite this wealth of important work in different disciplines, most scholarship on gift exchange and reciprocity has been aimed at scholars within a single field. Anthropologists have not always recognized work in economics or sociology; most economists dismiss the gift as lying outside of their purview; philosophers and literary theorists often restrict their ambit to linguistic or ethical questions without considering the history of gift exchange, its cultural variations, or its complex
manifestations. Thus the two fine recent collections, edited by Komter and Alan D. Schrift, focus primarily on social science and philosophy, respectively. The Question of the Gift has, in contrast, been prepared with the belief that the only way to gain a fuller understanding of the gift is to expand, rather than narrow the focus, and to encourage experts from disparate fields to engage in dialogue with each other.

The Question of the Gift thus continues the fruitful interdisciplinary conversations among social scientists, philosophers, and literary/cultural critics begun in The New Economic Criticism, an earlier volume that I coedited. Moreover, The Question of the Gift will be the first collection of new (only one essay has been published elsewhere) interdisciplinary essays on the gift (Komter's and Schrift's consist mainly of reprints), and the first to feature essays by social scientists alongside work by scholars in the humanities. Each of these essays not only questions the conventions of its field; each one brings together research from the social sciences and humanities to forge truly new and exciting syntheses.

III. Contents
My introduction, “Questions of the Gift,” outlines the history of scholarship in anthropology, sociology, philosophy and ethics, literary criticism, and economics, highlighting the most important movements and principles and pinpointing the blind spots and unexamined assumptions in each. In conclude by calling for new research to further refine the principles of inalienability, to avoid economism (the pitfall Bourdieu's theory, to provide more nuanced discussions of the relationships between gifts and markets (such as discussed by Cheal and Godbout), and to rethink the close kinships among literature, gifts and the sacred.

Part One of the collection reopens the question of reciprocity. James Laidlaw uses the practices of Jain renouncers in India to question Mauss's claim for the primacy of the obligation to reciprocate, and to suggest that a truly non-reciprocal gift may be possible. Yunxiang Yan's fieldwork in Chinese villages led to his important recent book The Flow of Gifts; his contribution to this collection summarizes and extends that book's significant findings about prestige and asymmetrical relationships. Mauss represented gifts as essentially ambiguous, as combining generosity and self-interest, but Lee A. Fennell emphasizes in her chapter how the "illiquidity" of gifts (that is, their non-monetary value) generates "empathetic dialogue" between parties exchanging. These three essays offer new considerations of the nature and reach of reciprocity, the primal concept in gift theory and one of its most vexed.

Mauss notes that gift practices are omnipresent in "archaic" societies. Not surprisingly, then, we find that the ethical cornerstones for modern Western gift practices were laid long ago. Hence, Part Two presents three essays examining classical and Modern texts to reveal the sources of contemporary gift ethics. Charles Hinnant analyzes how gift exchanges in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis constitute a hybrid set of relationships that partake of both gift and commodity exchanges, and that reveal societies in transition from the clan to the nation; Martha Woodruff argues that Aristotle's writings on friendship provide a necessary supplement to Nietzsche's gift-giving virtue, which speaks too little about receiving gifts as well as giving them. Both theories, however, promote positive alternatives to economistic models of the self. Finally, Eun Kyung Min finds in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments a definition of gratitude distinct from both economic exchange and the consolations of justice, and one that has generated modern conceptions of selfhood and social interaction. Each of these essays contributes to the
reconfiguration of our ethical frameworks by reanalyzing texts that antedate Mauss and Derrida.

The fourth obligation Mauss recognizes--the gifts made to gods--has been relatively neglected. Yet gift objects and gift-giving remain inextricably, if often covertly, linked with the sacred. French sociologist and erotician Georges Bataille emphasized the latter aspect in his influential writings on the potlatch and sacrifice. Bataille associates "expenditure"--the principle underlying gift giving--with poetry, but his attempt to connect the realms of economy and culture floundered on his inability to distinguish between their quite different forms of capital. The essays in Part Three, then, seek to transcend Bataille's (and Derrida's) double-bind by tracing the relationships between economic and artistic commerce, and by examining their impact on ideas of personhood, property, and authorship. Jacqui Sadashige scrutinizes legal prohibitions on gifts in republican Rome, using the poetry of Catullus to outline shifting definitions of property and subjectivity; Nicoletta Pireddu demonstrates how Italian modernist Gabriele D'Annunzio rejects the logic of commodities for a principle of collective ritual that seeks to resacralize economic behavior; Anthony Fothergill juxtaposes a story by Joseph Conrad and the writings of Georg Simmel to expose the performative aspects of gifts and to illuminate how narratives themselves may participate in a gift economy; and Stephen Collis adduces the literary and personal correspondence between the poets H. D. and Robert Duncan to demonstrate how ambiguous and fraught are the links between patronage and presents.

Lastly, the essays in Part Four all question the very theoretical questions that have been posed in classic and contemporary gift theory. These essays, critiquing both traditional positions and current views, offer new pathways for future studies of the gift. Mark Osteen analyzes three principles in gift theory--inalienability, spirituality and selfhood--to conclude that an adequate definition of gift objects requires an account of their transcendental qualities. In their dialogical essays, Antonio Callari and Jack Amariglio elucidate the gaps in neoclassical economic theories of value, which fail to allow for the constitutive power of gift exchanges. Finally, Andrew Cowell relates how modern theories of the gift have strayed from the realities of bodily presence and social practice.

IV. Conclusion
New work on gift exchange is needed to help explain how norms of reciprocity sustain as well as test the fundamental building blocks of social life such as families and friendships. More broadly, we need it to provide new conceptions of social relations that reject the rationalist, individualistic model upon which our society believes it is based. Finally, understanding the gift may encourage us to rethink our notions of personhood--to define selves as nexuses of social connections rather than as allegedly autonomous, self-interested actors.

Understanding the gift is more necessary now than ever. We live in a culture consumed and deafened by the rhetoric of self-interest, by a superficial "globalization" that mostly consists of spreading this rhetoric without considering the lessons we might draw from the ways that people in other cultures interact through objects. In our own society, the questions of the gift impinge upon essential issues in social life: What kinds of obligations do gifts engender, and what role do gift practices play in creating communities? What are the relationships between persons and objects: can objects function other than as commodities? How are gift practices related to family dynamics? Does economism make gifts less prevalent or more calculated? How does thinking of each other as gift-
givers and receivers invite new ways of conceiving ourselves and our choices. If we revise the stories we tell about social interaction, might we also revise the interactions? How, in a secularized society, do gift rituals express the desire for spiritual transcendence? Finally, is a truly free gift possible or even desirable? The importance of these difficult but essential questions explains why the gift will continue to stimulate important work in both the social sciences and in the humanities.

The Question of the Gift thus offers illuminating interdisciplinary perspectives on the gift that will provide exciting new ways of thinking about human behavior, and that will prompt readers to think of themselves and their interactions in healthier and more fully ethical ways. This timely volume will therefore appeal to a broad audience consisting not only of scholars in anthropology, sociology and economics, but also of specialists in philosophy, law, and literature.

WORKS CITED


