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### **The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving**

I was excited at the prospect of reading this book. It promised a new perspective and a genuine critique of classical exchange theory in anthropology. I suspected that an approach based on the concept of reproduction, social reproduction as I would express it, had much to offer. I must confess to disappointment and even to irritation, perhaps because of my anticipation. In any case this has led me to produce a deliberately polemical discussion, in part because I feel it necessary to be provocative in order to clarify important issues, but also because I find that this work is so unclear at critical junctures as to strip the principal argument of much of its force.

Some years ago, a colleague of mine wrote a manuscript called "Vaginal Power," which dealt with the world historical defeat of the female sex (Leleur 1974, 1979). Her argument was that women in fact had complete

and total power over the reproduction of society since they literally had control over the process of biological reproduction, that is, the production of the species. World history was witness to the many and various ways that men had struggled to overcome, negate, and dissolve this power, by force, authority, control over strategic goods, and symbolic discourse. I found her wonderful fantasy quite powerful and there was certainly a great deal of ethnographic material to illustrate her thesis, at least in retrospect, and not least in the ethnography from Melanesia with its menstruating men and male ritual capture of female fertility. The myths of many Amazonian Indian groups recounting the way in which men got hold of female powers, flutes and so forth, the way they broke their vagina dentata with stones to reverse the order of things, and the social practices of shaming bad hunters all seemed quite suitable arguments for a real turnaround in history. Although I did not agree with her argument, she at least was clear enough in her presentation to admit of common interpretations of ethnographic examples.

This book is different. For while it proposes a “new” theory, its contours are vague and often self-contradictory and they do not, in the end, constitute anything particularly new. Weiner sets out to reinterpret the nature of “reciprocity, the incest taboo, and women’s roles in reproduction” (p. ix). She continues an argument that has appeared in many of her previous works.

The theoretical thrust of this book is the development of a theory of exchange that follows the paradox of keeping-while-giving into the social and political relations between women and men with foremost attention to their involvement in human and cultural reproduction. The traditional theories . . . that view men’s production as the foundation for political hierarchy are no longer tenable. When women are analytically relegated to the sidelines of history or politics, the emergent view is ethnographically shallow and theoretically distorted. (P. x)

In my opinion this statement of purpose expresses fundamental confusion concerning both the motives and nature of both exchange and the role of women in relation to social power. Although important to consider the nature of “keeping” as she does, I cannot subscribe to the way in which she goes about her analysis. In what follows I shall, in a deliberately provocative way, try to unpack what I see as the triviality of the notion of “keeping-while-giving” and the absurdity of the notion that production, men’s or women’s, can be the source of anything other than products. The root of the confusion is that the entire argument is constructed around the concept of possession,

a concept that transforms identity and social being into a collection of external objects, whether they be pieces of barkcloth or ritual knowledge.

The book begins by introducing the concept of reproduction, a notion that has been around for quite some time but which is not discussed in any depth. Reference is made to biological reproduction and to the "cosmological resources" that societies draw upon in their reproduction. Here she makes a point that many, even many Marxists and structuralists, would agree with: that cosmology enters or, as others might say, is a constituent of social relations and material processes. The Noh dancer who becomes the god when wearing his mask, rather than simply "playing" the god, exemplifies an issue that is certainly important. Much the same could be said of "money," which after all is nothing but paper, but paper endowed with enormous power, and not merely representative of that power (Friedman 1974b; Castoriadis 1975). Her principal claim at the start of her discussion concerns what she calls "cosmological authentication . . . how material practices link individuals and groups with an authority that transcends present social and political action" (p. 5). Cosmologies, then, "act directly on social life." Power is "constituted through rights and accesses to these cosmological authentications." Finally, since "through exchange the cosmological domain becomes a significant source of power, its ambiguity and precariousness create difference, not homogeneity": (p. 5).

This all sounds quite reasonable except for the idea that cosmology is translated into power in exchange, which presupposes that cosmology exists first and is then incorporated into acts of exchange, like capital. Surely the relation between cosmology and the nature of valuables is more complex.

European history is invoked from the start to discredit the work of Mauss as being based on an oversimplified "orientalist"-style dichotomization. Against this she argues for a more universal dichotomization of alienable and inalienable possessions, a distinction that is taken from Mauss's distinction between *immeuble* and *meuble*, a somewhat different distinction that, while employing the notion of mobility, does not specify the nature of the relation between person and object. Fixed property, as in "buildings and grounds" are *immeuble*, but not because of their inalienability. In any case, this distinction is declared more fundamental than the nature of the relations established in exchange, in the properties of reciprocity. It is, of course, Mauss himself who sought the mystery of the gift in the so-called "spirit," that is, in its attraction to its original owner.<sup>2</sup> The years of comments on Mauss's essay have stressed one or another aspect of the problem of alienability but almost always in the context of the social relation between givers and takers. In *Inalienable Possessions*, the relation between partners is played down entirely to the benefit of the function of inalienability. While

Weiner's interpretation is suggestive, it implies a definite motivation as well: that the owners or possessors of such objects want to keep them. But it is precisely such objects that can be the means for the establishment and maintenance of hierarchy. The use of goods, their potential power, depends upon the social relations in which they are embedded. In some systems such goods are hoarded; in others they are dispersed even where they "desire" to return to their owners, that is, they are "fertile" in Sahlins's sense (1972). Inalienability suggests unequivocally a possessive desire. This is our category and not theirs, not unless otherwise demonstrated.

But what is the nature of inalienable possessions? Here we are quickly introduced to questions of group identity and the objects that represent that identity. Ancestral valuables or wealth stamped with prestigious names, personal or collective, from heirlooms to sacred knowledge: such are the major objects in this category. Inalienability expresses transcendence as opposed to the transience of exchange. Here we are reminded of Bloch's earlier discussions of the transformation of the dead into ancestors, that is, into permanence as opposed to the impermanence of the everyday and of the life cycle itself. Bloch and Parry carry this into the realm of exchange as well, detailing ritual versus secular exchange as an expression of the basic principle of the long versus the short term. The examples used by Weiner suggest yet another classic distinction, between descent and alliance, as expressed in the structural functionalist literature where descent was about the permanent, about society itself, certainly about social identity, whereas alliance was conceived as accidental and unsystematic. The inalienable here would be equivalent to the existence of submerged descent lines born by people in marital movement from one descent group to another.

I state these parallels because they lead to what I see as the trivial aspect of the argument. The coexistence of alienable and inalienable possessions, of giving and keeping, is a simple deduction from the concept of exchange. Exchange is something that goes on between units, the parties to the exchange. Now, if the inalienable is about identity, it follows, by implication, that such objects cannot be consumed by others without creating a serious loss of identity. If social identity were just as negotiable as other exchangeables, the units of exchange would disappear altogether. Exchange presupposes difference. This is a simple question of logic. And the difference, of course, is the distinction between exchange units. So when Weiner insists on the bold new idea that exchange marks "difference" via that which is not exchanged, she is merely stating the obvious. The triviality of the "paradox of keeping while giving" is that it is merely another way of describing exchange itself. On the other hand, the inalienable is always relatively alienable, the latter being a question of relative power. This is expressed in

numerous Melanesian and other myths that describe a scale of substitution from people to symbols. Those who cannot pay are indebted and must retreat along the scale until they are forced to give up themselves or their children either in debt bondage or even as cannibal victims. If we compare this to the alliance relation, we can see that while marriage establishes lines of affiliation, "enslavement" and cannibalism eradicate such links. The "alienability" of the "inalienable" reveals the nature and extent of relative power and authority.

Weiner seems quite obsessed with the fact that anthropologists, both male and female, have underestimated the real power of women in traditional societies. This may be true, but she does little to provide an alternative understanding. It is claimed that women, as producers of cloth that contains *mana* or cosmologically defined life-force, are central to the status of their kin groups, especially their brothers, and that this makes them powerful as well. What is overlooked is that production itself implies nothing about the social relations in which it occurs. Otherwise Inca women who supposedly produced the famed *cumbi* cloth (p. 12), industrial workers, plantation slaves, and so forth have the real power in the world. Need I say this? Isn't it obvious? Surely the control over wealth and its distribution, rather than its production, has always been understood to be the major issue. It would appear that this is denied by the author, who has also rediscovered the critical role of cloth in hierarchical societies: "But even with this example [Inca] of cloth produced by women, the production and accumulation of such wealth has never been considered an essential resource in theories of political evolution" (p. 12).<sup>3</sup>

But the role of both cloth and other prestige goods has been central to many years of research on what have been referred to as prestige-good systems and their transformation (Ekholm 1972, 1977; Friedman and Rowlands 1977; Friedberg 1977; Friedman 1981, 1982; Liep 1991).

The apparent importance of women's production launches Weiner into a discussion of the overlooked significance of brother-sister relations and especially incest. If women are an important source of "power," then incest is a means of creating a repository of rank. In comparing the Trobriands with Samoa with Hawai'i, she argues that the brother-sister relation is the core of the emergence of hierarchy. The Trobrianders attempt to procure children for their matrilineages. The Samoans have their sacred sisters to whom access by incest would prove an excellent solution. The Hawaiians institutionalized incest precisely as a means to create rank. The problem with this discussion is that incest can never create rank as such. It can only maintain it. Low-ranked incest does not produce high rank. Gaining access to higher rank is usually related to strategic exogamous marriage combined with suc-

cessful conquest. And being a sacred sister cannot in itself establish the social rank of the person concerned.

It is of course true that women can and do become chiefs, not least in Hawai'i. This is not because of their sex or gender but because of their rank--rank that is probably very often dependent upon the male warrior chiefs in their own groups. That gender is central in the very definition of power is clear for Oceania as for other areas of the world. The dualism of sacred and secular power, common in Indonesia, Africa, and Western Polynesia, is less about the power of women and more about gendered power itself. The male sacred chiefs of the Wehali in Timor, just as the priest-chiefs of the Kongo kingdom, represented fertility and peace, and were defined in female terms, just as the female elite of the Kongo kingdom were defined socially as males in relation to male commoners. The very constitution of the categories of power in many hierarchical societies says a great deal about the importance of female attributes, but this is a question of the gendering of social categories and not an expression of the relative power of women and men. Otherwise any woman can be a chief and no man can occupy a position defined in female terms.

In chapter 4 Weiner argues that the different ways in which inalienable possessions are distributed determine the degree of hierarchy that can be established. The cosmologically authenticated objects, inalienable because they are constitutive of group identity, are either kept inside a restricted group or circulated more widely. The variation runs from the Aranda who circulate such objects within a wider kinship network, thereby creating hierarchy, to the Melpa who circulate objects widely but do not provide them with cosmological authenticity, thus rendering differentiation and thereby hierarchy impossible. Here again the stress on BZ relations and the ideal of incest to avoid the loss of inalienable objects are invoked. That the Melpa maintain an ideal, among many others, of sibling incest to avoid giving need not be interpreted as a desire for inalienable possessions. It might instead be a statement about the conflictual nature of exchange. In chapter 5 this is applied to the Trobriands. Sisters make banana-leaf bundles that authenticate the specificity of their lineages, but there is no way of converting the status attained by the possession of *kula* valuables into lineage status. And if such production is meant to differentiate one group from another, some banana-leaf bundles ought to be more valued than others, but this, as I understand, is not the case. On the contrary, the evidence of hierarchy that is patently organized around clientelistic relations to those in control of *kula* valuables and the set of transactions that link harvest gifts to such valuables is evidence of the potential for extensive ranking, which has, according to what can be gleaned from archaeology, varied in degree over time. There is

evidence that other societies of the current *kula* ring (perhaps not so old) have had more hierarchy in the past. A great deal of male wealth--distributed in relation to mortuary celebrations in which female-produced cloth is given to related lineages-- certainly cannot be argued to curb hierarchy in Kiriwina. Even the Melpa are said to have had a great deal more hierarchy in the not-so-distant past when monopoly over the shell trade from the coast still existed. There was apparently a system of ranked shells, the most valuable of which were retained by men of high rank. The fact that certain shells tended to be inalienable is a product of the rank system itself and not its cause. The alternative explanation that suggests itself has to do with the relation between degrees of monopoly, that is, control over such prestige goods and their transformation via alliance relations into ranking among groups. In reading all these examples one is struck by the almost tautological nature of the interpretations. The present state of a social situation is accounted for in terms of one of its elements: the X have no hierarchy because they don't exchange their inalienable objects; the Y *have* hierarchy because they don't exchange their inalienable objects. In Hawai'i there is little exchange of inalienable objects but plenty of hierarchy. In Tonga there is plenty of both. Something is clearly wrong here.

The argument of keeping-while-giving reflected in the nature of the gift, as well as in the paradox of siblingship combined with exogamy, is simply that what is given is part of the social self, so that it is, in some metaphorical way, identity that is transmitted via the circulation of people and things. The modalities of these transfers have been central to anthropology. It is certainly advantageous, in my opinion, to treat such relations in a framework of reproduction, something that has been going on for a great many years (Ekholm 1972, 1977; Friedman 1974a, 1976, 1979; Rey 1971). For my own part, I recall having argued many years ago that social "systems" like that of the Kachin were organized in social reproductive terms in such a way that produced wealth could be transformed into prestige and then rank by couplings between production and the circulation of both goods and people and the way in which such relations were organized cosmologically, and that the form that this took was the formation of ranked lineages linked by generalized exchange. This was all done in Marxist language, of course, no longer fashionable, but the content was perfectly clear. First, cosmology was not to be understood as secondary representation but as directly organizing social processes of reproduction, not all cosmology, but central aspects of that cosmology. Second, the social reproductive process was about the way in which specific distributions of people into categories occurred and was maintained, so that gifts and commodities were always moments in a larger process. These discussions went on for almost a decade, but no mention of them is made.

In her conclusion the author combines the triviality of inalienability with the absurdity of women's supposed power: "In Oceania the development of ranking and hierarchy depends upon the work of women in their economic roles as the producers of wealth and, most important, in the power of their sacredness in confirming historical and cosmological authentication" (p. 153).

Two arguments lie behind this conclusion: (1) that inalienable objects are those most closely associated with group identity and status, and (2) that it is women who produce such goods. My criticism is simple. First, inalienable possessions are a gloss on valuables closely associated with the constitution of social identity and thereby rank, if such is the case. Such possessions are only inalienable because Weiner has labeled them as such. The conceptual apparatus alienable/inalienable is certainly no better than the gift/commodity distinction. Goods that are given to others but possess the identity of the giver and even a history of previous transactions are not simply alienated. Nor are they, obviously, simply inalienable, since they *are* given away. The problem is the categories themselves and not the people to whom they refer. The Maussian gift is given away because of what it yields. Weiner argues as if everything were private property at first and then somehow people were forced into exchange. This is just as much a myth as any Maussian distinction. Second, the fact that women produce such valuables does not give them power as such, nor does their toil lead to ranking. No evidence is offered here at all. On the contrary, the origins of hierarchy in Oceania as elsewhere must be located in an accounting for the processes of hierarchization, which I suppose implies an accounting of how specific products come to have such high values that they cannot be easily put into circulation.

I said at the start that the source of the confusion lay in the concept of inalienable possession itself. If so-called gifts were inalienable the fact that they are given can only be understood as a loan. But such gifts embody the life-force of the donor or that to which he has access and the fact that they are relatively inalienable is a function of their status rather than the reverse.

Is there a more congenial interpretation of this work? If we drop the notion of inalienable possessions and concentrate on the specific forms of social reproduction, then we can perhaps connect the processes of accumulation of status with the configuration of mobile and immobile goods over time. That which is given away, especially Maussian gifts, are instruments of the constitution of social relations, establishing lines of affiliation. In the Kongo kingdom, for example, the movement of men downward established a movement of prestige goods, the highest of which were imported, as well as a movement of people. Local matriline were linked by chains of F-S relations, the latter forming the patrilineal structure that was the political structure of the kingdom (Ekholm 1977). Thus, the kingdom's patriline were



constituted in the practice of exchange, and their structure was held together by means of a monopoly over imported prestige goods. Cloth and copper and shells (where imports always had the highest value) were the major prestige goods and their control was instrumental in the structure of the kingdom. The vertical flows were also flows of life-force and, consequently, of differential rank. In all of this the establishment of rank is simultaneously the creation of a differentiation of value. Thus gifts are not just about some abstract relation of reciprocity. They are about the constitution of social relations and of cultural forms, not as disembodied objects but as moments in the larger process of social reproduction. I subscribe wholly to the necessity of such claims against an overly reductionist view of exchange as a thing in itself. But this is certainly nothing new.

### NOTES

1. For a what I consider a surprisingly interesting critique of the work of Mauss, see Derrida 1991.

2. Mauss is clear enough concerning the relationship between personhood and exchange: "To give something is to give part of oneself. . . one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance" (1980:10).

3. Weiner goes to extremes here in misrepresenting the work of Murra, who details the work of both men and women in cloth production. Specialized dependent weavers were either *acla*, women, or *cumbi camayoc*, men, both of whom produced highly ranked cloth (Murra 1980:72-73). And both categories were *dependents*, who could not use the cloth for gaining power. This is no oversight, but a simple falsification of the source material.

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