Introduction

I began this book with an interest in writing about civility in politics – about the habits and conventions that can acknowledge the humanity of one's opponent, however bitterly contested the relationship may be. It was a subject that did not fit into any of the ready-made areas of study within my native ground of European intellectual history. As I looked around for a way to give past shape to my present preoccupations, I found myself gradually drawn to Marcel Mauss's famous essay, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925). His essay was my point of entry into the larger history of gift exchange as it disappeared from and returned to the conversation of modern Europe.[1]

Mauss turned to the practices of "archaic" or indigenous societies with an eye to the conflicts of his own time, when four years of total war had gone far toward destroying elementary civilities. What he found in premodern societies was a different principle of social organization. In Oceania and the Pacific Northwest, the central sites of his essay, gift giving was a system of mutual obligations. His famous definition asserted that it was always reciprocal, contrary to the modern assumption that a gift implies something given without expectation of a return. Mauss's analysis wove individuals

and groups into ongoing patterns of giving, accepting, and returning that involved all aspects of the society in a network of shared responsibilities. He sketched this basic pattern of gift giving for indigenous communities around the Pacific, but did not stop there. Instead he went on to point out that gift giving had a long history in Indo-European societies as well. Evidence from ancient India, classical antiquity, and the Middle Ages revealed societies with pervasive and obligatory expectations of gift and countergift. Wherever it was the rule, reciprocal giving was not always a friendly act; on the contrary, entire societies could be devoted to competitive gift giving, with debt, loss of status, or enslavement as the outcome for the losers. Nor did gift giving necessarily imply equality, for subjects regularly affirmed their subordination through tribute to their masters. Mauss also emphasized how the role of gift giving had changed over time, especially in the realm of economics, where the gift giving practices of precommercial societies set them apart from the contract-based logic of their modern successors.

The gift according to Mauss was different, past and remote, but nonetheless urgently relevant: Despite all the contrasts between traditional and contemporary European societies, traditional gift giving had important lessons for his own time. He viewed Europe of the 1920s, exhausted by war and battered by the political differences between left and right, as a civilization in crisis. Gift giving as he had learned about it from island and ancient peoples embodied a wisdom that modern societies could embrace and make their own.

Although Mauss, writing in the aftermath of World War I, provided the initial definition of the gift for the twentieth century and beyond, the history of this discourse overflows the boundaries he set for it. This is not just a book about Mauss, but an inquiry into the larger ways in which Europeans since the seventeenth century have

understood gift exchange. Our story takes its intellectual point of departure from Mauss but is not restricted to his definition of it. In reconstructing the history of the gift, I have not traced a logic of "scientific discovery" culminating and ending in Mauss's achievement; rather I have reinserted his essay into a larger discourse that has existed before and after his time. As part of this discourse the word "discovery" itself suggests a historical irony. Like a European explorer in the Americas or the Pacific, Mauss himself did not "discover" the gift; as he himself emphasized, he merely recovered what people in other times and places already knew.

Moral instruction in the art of giving and receiving has been plentiful in Western letters since Homer and Herodotus and has counterparts in other civilizations. Gift-giving practices have been widespread around the world and widely written about in European travel accounts. But there was a striking poverty of systematic reflection on gift exchange in the century preceding Mauss's essay: From the end of the Napoleonic period to the end of the Great War, it almost disappears from the writings of Europeans thinkers; one looks in vain through the sociological theories of the nineteenth century for anything like a systematic or extended discussion of the gift. Neither Mill, nor Tocqueville, nor Marx, nor Weber, nor Mauss's own master, Durkheim, was interested in it. A few thinkers like Emerson and Simmel noticed it, but not in a revaluation sustained enough to leave an impact on their contemporaries.[2] Why this departure of a hundred years from the collective lore and practice of mankind? To be sure, as we shall see in the course of this book, gift exchange was not entirely forgotten, and more marginal and nontheoretical scholars were feeling their way toward it. And yet the absence remains: A near-silence among the founders of modern social thought about one of the elementary rituals for creating human solidarities.

The gap of a century in social theory is even more striking when one turns to the subsequent stream of writings. Mauss was a legendary teacher and scholar in the 1920s and 1930s. A steady succession of the most famous French scholars took the insights of his essay into their own work; British anthropologists befriended Mauss and admired his essay; in the decades after 1945 American anthropologists took up *The Gift* as a classic to use and to challenge; in many countries around the world classicists, medievalists, early modernists, analysts of gender, and other historians and literary scholars made imaginative use of Mauss's suggestive work.[3] In recent years there has been yet another wave of writings on the gift. Despite repeated attempts to assimilate the gift into other theories like structuralism or Marxism, Mauss has lately been revalued as a great thinker in his own right whose essay is best understood on its own terms. There has also been a growing recognition of the large role of gift economies in contemporary societies, both Western and non-Western, in addition to their more widely acknowledged role in traditional societies.[4] Others have made creative expansions of Mauss's theory of the gift to gender, aesthetics, and religion.[5] Mauss initiated a discussion that has restored the gift to what it has been for most times and places: a perennial topic of conversation like love or honor or power – all of which may be embodied in gifts.

This historical return of the gift to the discourse of European thinkers invites closer historical questions about how a social institution of such fundamental importance could escape notice for a century and then seem widespread, indeed pervasive, in human societies. Answers may begin with recent scholarship that has laid out some of the most important contexts for a historical localization of Mauss's essay. Marcel Fournier's biography of Mauss provides important political and personal contexts for *The Gift*: Mauss wrote

as a democratic socialist who after World War I confronted a deep crisis in French and European socialism to which his essay is in part a response. Other scholarship too, like Gérald Berthoud's admirable essay on one of Mauss's forerunners, Felix Somlò, illustrates how fruitfully one can turn to Mauss's sources and can situate his essay between liberal and communist theories of economic anthropology; while others have pointed out that medieval studies in Germany did not lose sight of the gift and offered sources for Mauss's research.[6] We shall return to these political and scholarly contexts, which permit us to grasp Mauss's intentions and the originality of his essay with greater clarity. Yet there is more to be said about this rich and complex idea if we go beyond its local contexts and study it at the convergence of European traditions and overseas encounters.[7]

During the nineteenth century the creation of mutual obligations through material and symbolic exchange was still a thriving practice in European societies that valued status as much as wealth or power. Yet this status orientation directly conflicted with modern habits of commerce and government: Possessive individualism that respected the individual maximization of profit and guarded private property rights, and bureaucratic power earned through merit on the job and exercised through the impersonal application of rules. Without ever disappearing, gift giving as a reciprocal practice, uniting disparate partners in networks of mutual obligation, underwent a demotion in economy and government that made it seem irrelevant to the workings of modern societies and even difficult to grasp when contemporaries looked beyond Western Europe to remote places where gift exchange continued to structure economics, politics, and society.[8] Yet when nineteenth-century Europeans sought out contact with extra-European societies, gifts remained an unavoidable means of interaction. They could not rule, they could not trade, they could

not begin to have social relations of any kind without entering into a gift economy. In one way or another throughout the nineteenth century, Europeans might overlook their own extensive gift exchange networks at home, but they had to come to terms with them abroad.

These extra-European encounters revealed the disruptive power of the gift. As Nicholas Thomas has pointed out in *Entangled Objects*, power relations pervaded colonial gift exchanges. The gift in this critical perspective was a language inseparable from authority and self-assertion, part of a larger struggle for political and economic control between colonizer and colonized.[9] Misunderstanding and violence become more visibly a part of giving in these exchanges between cultures. The nineteenth-century example suggests a more general feature of these personalized exchanges between cultures: Gift giving is an alternative to verbal means of communication, but one that is slippery at best. The stranger the cultures to one another, the greater the importance of the gift, as verbal language becomes difficult to use and gestures fail to convey their intention; yet the gift at the margins requires the guesswork of a gamble, likely to be misread on either side, its intention hard to gauge, its impact uncertain. The volatility of the gift exists within the bounds of any society, too, and may grow during times of political instability – but during Europe's self-confident century of global expansion, alien encounters more fully exposed its risks.[10]

The discourse on the gift within and beyond Europe, then, involves the *return* of the gift in several senses. First, the gift in question is the reciprocal gift. Western societies conventionally think of a gift as a voluntary offering that does not anticipate a return; the theory of the gift since Mauss has argued just the opposite – that in our society as in other times and places, seemingly altruistic

generosity hides a deeper expectation of reciprocity. Second, there is the chronological dimension: the gift disappeared from and returned to Western thought. A part of the everyday experience of early modern Europeans, the gift vanished from theoretical view at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it returned at the beginning of the twentieth century in a gradually accumulating stream of observations. Finally, there is the geographic return. Unable to recognize their ongoing gift practices in their own societies (which continued throughout the nineteenth century), European overseas travelers, above all some of the founders of modern anthropology, recovered the idea of gift exchange at the colonial margins. From Pacific islands and the American Northwest they brought it back to their contemporaries in places like New York, Paris, and London. Mauss's essay synthesized their ethnographies and set in motion a conversation about the gift that continues to our own day.

We begin at the critical moment in the late eighteenth century when challenges to traditional European conceptions of gift giving came from industrial and political transformation at home and colonial quandaries abroad. It was vitally important for Europeans to master the practice of gift exchange as they traveled around the world, yet their grasp of it by the end of the age of privilege was unsure. One famous conflict over Britain's nascent rule in India will dramatize the dangers of the gift; this conflict in turn set off loud debates about the larger meaning of gift giving. It is a starting point for understanding how European theorists in the nineteenth century could no longer comprehend the gift.

1. The Crisis of the Gift

Warren Hastings and His Critics

Historians have singled out the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a period of broad cultural transformation. In addition to the obvious changes of the period – the "dual revolution" (Eric Hobsbawm) in politics and economics that go by the names of French Revolution and Industrial Revolution – this was a moment when ancient European habits and assumptions about the world were undermined and gave way to new ones. Even before 1789, when the world visibly turned upside-down, old ideas took on meanings that presaged a new era for Europeans and the rest of the world. More recently global historians have argued that this was a watershed moment not just for Europeans but also for civilizations and peoples around the world: C. A. Bayly has delineated the decay of old empires and invention of new ones in China, India, and elsewhere, out of a mixture of internal crisis and response, often innovative, to pressures from European merchants and arms.[1] These changes were the setting for uncertainties and dramas in the face-to-face encounters between European and non-European cultures and how those encounters were interpreted on both sides. One way of acting out these controversies was through the kind of reciprocity that we now broadly identify as gift exchange.

Hastings and the Gift on Trial

One day late in the eighteenth century – the century of wigs and silk stockings and privilege based on birth – English society took the measure of its destiny at home and abroad in a public trial. The date was February 13, 1788; the place was Westminster Hall, where dignitaries assembled for a trial in the House of Lords; the prisoner, as he was called at the time, was Warren Hastings, formerly governor general of Bengal; his chief accuser was Edmund Burke, later to become famous as author of *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) but already a celebrated speaker, writer, and member of the House of Commons. Burke had behind him a great victory, for the lower house had already impeached Hastings in 1787 on charges of high crimes and misdemeanors during his tenure as highest British authority in India. Now the case moved to the upper house, where Burke opened his prosecution with a four-day speech.[2]

About eleven o'clock on the first day, the queen and three princesses entered discreetly, "a few with feathers and variegated flowers in their head-dress, but nothing so remarkable as to attract public attention," followed by a procession of earls, bishops, viscounts, dukes, marquises, and barons, and great officers of state, all in their parliamentary robes, and finally the peers. Hastings, who entered only after the lords had been seated, had a sickly appearance and was dressed in a plain-looking suit. In the gallery to his left sat members of the House of Commons – very few of them in full dress, noted an unsympathetic contemporary, and some in boots. After the charges were read, Burke got the case for the prosecution under way with a speech that lasted two and a half hours, outlining India's history and calling Hastings's rule a disgrace. So began the long test of arguments that one contemporary called "in the emphatic language of

the Sacred Scripture, a *Fiery Trial*." The volleys of accusation and defense went back and forth until 1795. By then public opinion had long since swung against Burke, and the peers voted to acquit Hastings on all charges.[3]

One of the chief crimes on trial in parliament was the giving and taking of gifts. Hastings was accused of many kinds of corruption and misgovernment, but none was more central to the case Burke and others brought against him than the gift exchanges that were supposed to have amounted to an illicit system of misrule. Burke brought twenty-two charges before the House of Commons but for the sake of legal effectiveness reduced them to four charges for the trial in the House of Lords. He accused Hastings of extortion, forced settlement of debts, awarding contracts as patronage, and accepting large presents for personal enrichment. The acceptance of gifts went to the heart of the matter because it was such a clear violation of law with a general principle at stake. In 1764 the Directors of the East India Company forbade their employees from accepting presents. The Regulating Act of 1773 gave this ban the force of parliamentary law. Hastings himself in his testimony before the House of Commons declared that he had signed a statement accepting the Company's prohibitions against accepting "any Gift, Reward, Gratuity, Allowance, or Donation, from any of the Indian Princes, or any of their Ministers" beyond allowable amounts without Company permission and denied that he had ever violated its rules. He recognized, then, the *principle* that there were licit and illicit forms of exchange. But which acts of giving and receiving were gifts? And which kinds of exchange distorted, which ones strengthened relations between Indians and Britons? Disagreement about the nature and meaning of the gift, as much as the record of his rule, hung over the Hastings trial.[4]