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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The Gift – Marcel Mauss and international aid

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Mauss' Gift is a valuable although neglected lens for examining international aid. Having delineated the often misunderstood characteristics of the Gift, the article re-examines development assistance. Whereas the market and welfare state are compatible with the modernity project, the Gift is argued to be incompatible with them whilst still pervasive in human affairs. The article finds that donors downplay the Gift system and yet are dependent upon relationships that only the system of the Gift can provide; they push modernity's market exchange where the Gift is the cultural norm; and they offer aid to promote autonomy whilst buying influence for themselves. The conclusion offers donors some possible responses including the separation of relationship management, humanitarian aid and development investment; providing for reciprocity; providing voice; and tapping into the potential of the Potlatch.

**Keywords:** development assistance; double binds; modernity; paradox; reciprocity

#### Introduction

Authors writing about international development assistance (IDA) have drawn attention to issues that are typically described as paradoxes (Ellerman, 2005; Knippers Black, 1999; Kowalski, 2006, 2010, 2011; Mohan, 2007). There is one in particular, which Berthélemy identified:

The motives of development assistance have been long disputed in the development finance literature. Discussions have been focussed since the 1970s on the opposition between egoistic behaviour, linking aid to the self-interest of the donors, and altruistic behaviour, relating it to recipient needs and merits. (2006, p. 179)

This in many ways recapitulates the paradox at the heart of Marcel Mauss' system of The Gift (Mauss, 2002).

Now concern has been expressed over just how little thinking about The Gift has influenced sociology, which has led to the misunderstanding that The Gift is only relevant in archaic societies. For example Adloff and Mau suggested that:

sociologists have overlooked or paid little heed to forms of social interaction that can be localized neither on the side of self-interest nor on that of morality. In our view, it is the

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logic of the gift... that accompanies and structures all forms of interaction, from the social micro- to the macrolevel. (2006, p. 95)

Clearly if sociology in general has not responded adequately, the inescapable corollary is that this deficiency extends into discourses on development assistance (DA) in that, despite the basis of the whole enterprise being founded upon giving, concepts springing from Mauss' *The Gift* have not been used in any systematic way to explore and enhance our understanding of DA. It is time to address this omission.

### Key points from theories of *The Gift*

Since apparently Mauss' work is not well known, we must rehearse the core theories of *The Gift* before we can use them to examine development practice. In this I take recourse to a seminal work by Godbout and Caillé (2000) as well as Mauss' original treatise (Mauss, 2002), together with a leavening from the writings of a number of other authors:

- (1) The primary concept is that *The Gift* is not positioned where it is traditionally believed to be. Typically the alternative loci for exchanges of objects are proposed as either a mercantile exchange of equivalent value mediated through calculated self-interest (egoism), or a one-sided passage of value undertaken as normative behaviour (altruism). As such, it has been proposed that for a gift to be a gift it must be freely given with no contamination by personal gain (Derrida, 1994). However, Mauss was adamant that *The Gift* is neither part of an exchange of equivalent value nor an act of disinterested benevolence, as Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 14) argued: "It is important to recognize that these tautological dichotomies, which force us to think only in terms of the opposition of two terms, create a smoke screen which prevents us from seeing the truth". They then explained the accompanying paradox thus:
  - The gift expects nothing in return; to give a gift is to be disinterested.
  - But there is reciprocation in any gift system. That is what Mauss observed, to his great astonishment, and it has been at the core of the studies of the gift ever since.
  - Therefore, either the gift is not disinterested or it does not exist. (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 176)

Also, "The essence of the gift, it seemed, was that it was not a gift" (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 92).

Mauss (2002, p. 4) described *The Gift* as: "the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest". Adloff and Mau (2006, p. 107) recognise *The Gift* as: "Being founded on non-equivalence, spontaneity and indebtedness, a gift-based relationship is not explicable by means either of an individually utilitarian or of a normative-holistic approach". Indeed, Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 20) captured the true significance of *The Gift* when they stated that: "Only the gift can actually... transcend the opposition between the

individual and the collective, making individuals part of a larger, concrete entity”.

- (2) Furthermore, Mauss emphasised that what is given is symbolic of the nature of the relationship it fosters. Consequently considerations behind The Gift are concerned with that symbolism, as he encapsulated it:

to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself. ...one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance. (Mauss, 2002, p. 16)

This idea had been captured before by Emerson (1983, p. 536), who said “The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him”, and more recently Benedict XVI (2009, Section 6), in respect of charity, said: “to give the other what is ‘his’, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting”.

- (3) In addition, although we associate gift giving with exchanges between members of an extended family, its real significance is in its support for social interactions between strangers. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the self-interest in The Gift is not in what is given in return, but in the relationship that is opened up. As such, The Gift pre-dates the establishment of market relations. As Mauss (2002, p. 105) made it clear: “To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear”. Undeniably this is the role of The Gift, as Adloff and Mau asserted: “The offering of gifts establishes and maintains relationships of solidarity at the outset before the thus framed and self-interested exchange of goods can start” (2006, p. 97) and “gifts and induced reciprocities are deeply social acts which, though not based on interest, are not disinterested; they establish and perpetuate relations of mutual indebtedness” (2006, p. 100).
- (4) The Gift system is formed by a triple obligation. Bordieu (1992, p. 98) depicted it thus: “the ‘automatic laws’ of the cycle of reciprocity are the unconscious principle of the obligation to give, the obligation to return a gift and the obligation to receive” – and he represented the interaction as leading to one of three outcomes: refusal, incapacity to respond or counter gift (see Figure 1).

In this way, a gift, although freely given, represents a challenge to the recipient that must involve a response (including the possible absence of a counter gift), which will define the relationship between them from then on. Indeed, at one level the giving of a gift proclaims the desire for a relationship – as Adloff and Mau (2006, p. 109) recognised: “Gifts are in this sense signs and manifestations of the demand for commitment as an

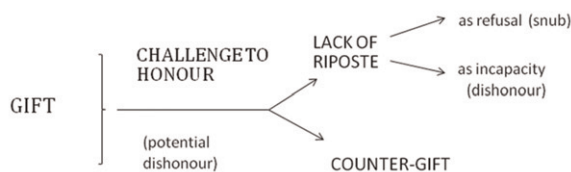


Figure 1. The social system of The Gift. Source: Adapted from Bordieu (1992, p. 100).

end in itself” – and it is the interest in such a relationship that is the driving force of the exchange.

Crucially, in order for a gift to be a righteous act it must presume an ability on the part of the recipient to participate in such a relationship. As Bordieu described it:

The exchange of honour, like every exchange (of gifts, words, etc.) is defined as such . . . that is, as implying the possibility of a continuation, a reply, a riposte, a return gift, inasmuch as it contains recognition of the partner to whom, in the particular case, it accords equality in honour. (1992, p. 100)

Furthermore, a gift and its obligation to reciprocate may involve different individuals within recognised social groupings; for example, one family to another or one community to another. Indeed, Mauss (2002, p. 6) made it clear that “it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other”.

Moreover, the riposte must not be immediate but can remain suspended over the relationship as a useful tension that will ultimately have to be released by a response at an appropriate moment for, as Bordieu (1992, p. 105) noted: “In every society it may be observed that, if it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be deferred and different, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal”. Importantly for our argument Douglas asserted that:

There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient. (2002, p. ix)

- (5) Next, Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 15) recognised the importance of two other systems of exchange that exist in society by declaring that: “the system of the gift is . . . the social system concerned with personal relationships. It is not simply a complement to the market or the state for it is even more fundamental and primary than those other systems”. Indeed, as Adloff and Mau (2006, p. 110) acknowledged: “reciprocal relations are not only of great importance in family and socially close relationships but also accompany or structure all processes of social interaction, including those organized by the state or the market”. It follows that we need to differentiate the nature of those later phenomena; the market and the “welfare” state.

The market stands alongside the system of The Gift and is more purely about the achievement of self-interest in the exchange of objects that have utility value,<sup>1</sup> with the concomitant calculation of winning and losing. As Bordieu portrayed it:

as the relationship becomes more impersonal, that is, as one moves out from the relation between brothers to that between virtual strangers, so a transaction is less and less likely to be established at all but it can, and increasingly does, become more purely ‘economic’, and the interested calculation which is never absent from the most generous exchange can be more and more openly revealed. (1992, p. 115)

The market system is characterised by three features that differentiate it from The Gift: the search for equivalence in the value exchanged; the

required immediacy of the reciprocation; and the freedom to be quit of the interaction once the exchange has occurred. Of course the equivalence of the exchange is in no small measure determined by perception and is now facilitated by the medium of money. To those operating within the market system, the principle is 'caveat emptor' and the system encourages amorality. Bordieu (1992, p. 115) noted that: "informants will talk endlessly of the tricks and frauds that are commonplace in the 'big markets', that is to say, in exchanges with strangers". Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 95) recognise that: "Time is at the heart of the gift and reciprocity, while elimination of time is at the core of a mercantile relationship".

Charitable giving and precepts of altruism are frequently caught up in The Gift debate.<sup>2</sup> Alms are traditionally targeted at strangers or those at the margins of a community who are perceived as unfortunate victims, deserving of empathetic support. Alms are portrayed as entirely disinterested, as Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 72) captured it: "Unlike the Maussian gift, these gifts are given without thought of return...and there is no obligation on the recipient". Nevertheless at this level there are forms of reciprocal benefits that are capable of taking the place of reciprocity by the ultimate recipients (e.g. reward by a deity).

This moral imperative to give has more recently been usurped by the state. Godbout and Caillé explained that:

where the mercantile system is the opposite of the gift, the development of the welfare state has often been cited as a happy substitute for the gift, one which limits injustice and restores dignity, unlike earlier systems of redistribution grounded in charity. (2000, p. 51)

However, on closer inspection it seems that the welfare state has much more in common with the market than with The Gift. Where The Gift is characterised by spontaneity and generosity, the welfare state is calculating and coercive, as Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 60) recognised: "All the resources that move through state channels got there through constraint. But this is the exact opposite of a voluntary gift – a gift that is imposed [on the giver] is not a gift". Also, please note, Douglas (2002, p. xix) argued that: "Social democracy's redistributions are legislated for in elected bodies and the sums are drawn from tax revenues. They utterly lack any power mutually to obligate persons in a contest of honour".

Indeed, market tenets are often manifested within state systems, for example Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 58) noted that "the egalitarian principle...plays the same role in the state system as that of equivalence in the market place". Or, as Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 74), in the context of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) commented: "The pure gifts [of charity] become, in the end, the currency of systems of patronage".

In summary, the main difference between the system of The Gift and the market or the state is that the former is primarily about establishing social relations, whereas the others are about the exchange of utility. Indeed, Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 195) were emphatic that "the gift...compared to the market and the state, is a metasystem"; that is, it sits at a level above

these economic systems and provides the context in which each is able to function. The market is characterised by the ability to:

owe nothing to anyone, to be able to walk away from a social bond and discharge an obligation just as you change tradesmen when you're not satisfied – this capacity for exit, analysed by Hirschman, is the defining feature of modern freedom as embodied in the market and echoed in the welfare state. (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 63)

They emphasised that “Bureaucracy and market are, from this point of view, equivalent, as both require the producer-intermediary-client model and both deny the gift relationship” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 161), which, as Stirrat and Henkel recognised, has allowed mercantilism to insinuate itself into what would in many respects be an altruistic relationship. Thus: “in order to compete for [donor funded] contracts, NGOs have in effect to work as if they are private companies and adopt modes of operating and even forms of organizational culture that approximate those of the commercial market-oriented world” (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997, 2000, p. 70).

- (6) On a more contentious point, in developing Mauss' ideas, Godbout and Caillé (2000) argued that the project of modernity itself is antithetical to The Gift. They suggest that: “The archaic gift plays itself out against the ‘background’ of social obligation, and it is just this obligation from which modernity wants to free us” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, pp. 161–162). Indeed, Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 77) supported their view, stating that: “The pure gift is indeed the antithesis of those calculated relations that are considered to characterize the modern world”. Actually, Godbout and Caillé went so far as to maintain that an essential outcome of modernity is the annihilation of the system of The Gift, saying that: “Doing away with the gift is modernity's utopia, a pervasive illusion dear to the modern mind” (2000, p. 162).

In contrast to this attempted eradication, Godbout and Caillé recognised that The Gift is resilient and continues even in the most modern societies, stating that: “What must now seem perfectly plausible is that the gift, far from being dead or moribund, is very much alive” (2000, p. 12) and that “despite all the reasons to believe in its final and irrevocable disappearance, the gift is everywhere” (2000, p. 11). “And so the gift slips through the cracks everywhere, spills over, finds its way, adds something to what the utilitarian relationship tries to reduce to its simplest expression” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 165).

- (7) Of course, the system of The Gift that Mauss described is not without its drawbacks. The first is contained within the roles of Giver, Recipient, Reciprocator for, as Carr, McAuliffe, and MacLachlan (1998, p. 189) captured it, “How does it *feel* to be an aid ‘recipient’?”. Emerson (1983, p. 536) averred that “It is not the office of a man to receive gifts... We wish to be sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver”.

The whole approach of altruism is dogged by resentment; for example, Emerson (1983, p. 537) suggested that “all beneficiaries hate all Timons, not at all considering the value of the gift, but looking back to the greater store it was taken from”, which chimes precisely with the view expressed by Gergen and Gergen (1971, p. 101) that: “when a state appears to be highly affluent, its aid is less impressive to the recipient”. We can see that in the tripartite



system of The Gift, of Giving–Receiving–Reciprocating, receiving reinforces giving, but more importantly reciprocating reinforces receiving. But this emphasises the importance of being able to take on each of the three roles and the iniquity of abrogating to oneself the role of giver. The impoverishment of the ability to reciprocate impinges on the nature of receiving and impedes the relationship of mutuality that The Gift seeks to foster.

Secondly, there is the matter of hierarchy for, as Blau recognised: “reciprocity – and this is a central idea – [is] a mechanism for the generation of asymmetries of power” (Adloff & Mau, 2006, p. 104). Certainly, Bourdieu suggested that:

A man possesses in order to give. But he also possesses by giving. A gift that is not returned can become a debt, a lasting obligation; and the only recognized power – recognition, personal loyalty or prestige – is the one that is obtained by giving. (1992, p. 126)

And the recipient feels that they are under some obligation. In this regard Mauss noted that “The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it” (2002, p. 83) and emphasised that: “To give is to show one’s superiority, to be more, or to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*)” (2002, p. 95).

Such inequalities force recipients into other forms of reciprocity. Thus, in certain circumstances the reciprocity may be directed towards third parties, which in some way completes the circle of The Gift. Failing such alternatives reciprocity can be achieved by submissive behaviours, giving way in various social settings that communicates to everyone the relative social standings (Adloff & Mau, 2006). Indeed, Gergen and Gergen (1974, p. 133) maintained that “Aid has so often been used by donors to bend recipients to their will”.

The third drawback follows in that in certain circumstances The Gift is used precisely to gain hierarchical ascendancy. Mauss (2002) argued that, whilst The Gift is a system of exchange that enables and fosters social relationships, it has, nevertheless, the propensity to be expressed as an agonistic relationship that promotes rivalry and destructive forms of behaviour. The clearest manifestation of such agonistic behaviour is ‘The Potlatch’, or as Mauss (2002, p. 7) referred to it, “the system of total services” – in which everything is effectively caught up in the exchanges. It is evident that a system of behaviour based upon the three steps of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, and where the latter is delayed and the scale of its generosity is necessarily greater than the original gift, is a positive feedback system reminiscent of symmetrical schizogenesis (Bateson, 1972), bringing with it the prospect of armaments’ races that can be: “slowed down by acceptance of complementary themes such as dominance, dependency, admiration, and so forth, between them” (Bateson, 1972, p. 324).

Fourthly, there is the way in which a gift is made. Gifts can be deeply patronising, casting recipients: “in the same kind of role as infants or the infirm” (Carr et al., 1998, p. 191). As Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 8)



stressed: “presents are especially poisonous when the way they are given or those who proffer them are in one way or another noxious”. Bordieu captured it thus:

The “way of giving”, the manner, the forms, are what separate a gift from a straight exchange, moral obligation from economic obligation. To “observe the formalities” is to make the way of behaving and the external forms of the action a practical denial of the content of the action and the potential violence it can conceal. (1992, p. 126)

And the greater the disparity between the power of the donor and the recipient, the greater the likelihood that what Bordieu (1992, p. 127) called “symbolic violence” will be intended and/or perceived.

- (8) A further stumbling block in the path of smooth relations stemming from The Gift is the impact of misalignment of the cultural symbolism underpinning an exchange of gifts. Any meeting between strangers has the propensity to be a collision between different cultures. Sykes (2005, p. 100) exemplified the challenge in the encounter between cultures in North America: “Indians and the early Americans misunderstood who and what they were looking at, as they peered at each other through different viewfinders”. Bateson (1972) proffered three alternative outcomes of such collisions; complete fusion of cultures, elimination of one culture or both, or persistence of the cultures in dynamic equilibrium within one community.

The greatest disparity would seem to be between a culture of The Gift and one operating from the perspective of the market. Sykes, in the case of the acquisition of Manhattan Island, described the unequal exchanges between the native Americans and the settlers thus: “the Europeans may well have thought they had bought the land by contractual agreement, the Manhattan Indians probably thought they were confirming the peaceful arrangements for a beneficial association with the Europeans that would continue into the future” (2005, p. 99). The outcome of the exchange would appear to be a vindication of the observation that: “to operate within the system of the gift is tantamount to being taken advantage of all the time” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 38).

- (9) Because the system of The Gift is paradoxical, gift-giving contains deep ambiguities, as Osteen (2002, p. 14) emphasised: “Gifts at once express freedom and create binding obligations, and may be motivated by generosity or calculation, or both”. So how is one to discern what lies behind a gift? Mauss (2002, p. 99), noted that: “The most ordinary and seemingly routine exchanges of ordinary life, like the ‘little gifts’ that ‘bind friendship’, presuppose an improvisation, and therefore a constant uncertainty, which, as we say, make all their *charm*, and hence all their social efficacy”. Again, as Adloff and Mau (2006, p. 107) stated: “a gift-based relationship contains irreducible uncertainty, indeterminacy and risk; it tends to remain in a state of structural uncertainty, such that trust can thus be generated”. Accordingly, for the main purpose of The Gift to be fulfilled it seems inescapable that there can be no certainty of motive, of time frame, nor of appropriate response. As Sykes (2005, p. 100) captured it: “exchanges made to open new relationships open each party to ‘more than they bargained for’ in the trade”.

One of the by-products of paradox, such as that exhibited by The Gift, is the creation of double-binds (Kowalski, 2004). Bateson (1972, p. 208) provided a detailed description of a double-bind, maintaining that the three characteristics of a double-bind situation are as follows:

- (1) When an individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately.
- (2) And, the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other.
- (3) And, the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a metacommunicative statement.

Indeed, we can see these characteristics manifested in The Gift, for it is always and entirely about important relationships conducted in situations of ambiguous intent. As Godbout and Caillé (2000, p. 187) pointed out: “There is no lack of comprehension, but there is an active and conscious refusal of explicitness on both sides, a hypocrisy that is dual and symmetrical and so, logically, absurd and with no foundation” and there are strong prohibitions that prevent reference to obligation – that is, the gift must be freely given; “The more things are made explicit, the closer we get to a contract, the less the act of reciprocation is free, and the less value it has in the context of the relationship” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 188). Indeed they are clear that hiding what is actually happening is necessary so that the goods that circulate embody the bond of obligation; “But this must not be made specific, because the very fact of doing so means the message has not been understood! An explicit language for the gift is contradictory” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 190). Furthermore, this strategic obfuscation requires effort, as Bordieu (1992, p. 112) recognised: “the labour required to conceal the function of the exchanges is as important as the labour needed to perform this function”.

With enforced spontaneity, time delays, disparity between words and actions and, above all, the imperative of maintaining workable social relations, it is clear that circumstances of The Gift contain all the necessary ingredients for double-binds, with all the positive and negative possibilities they encompass (Bateson, 1972).

### **So how does international development assistance look from the point of view of The Gift?**

It is possible to identify a number of points of contact with the practices of DA and their contexts:

#### ***Modernisation agenda***

As Escobar (2004, p. 15) noted: “Development was the name given to the strategy of modernization”. So we may conceive of Development as a sub-strand within the overall essay of modernity. Because IDA is thus embedded in the modernity project, so donors both act from a position in which The Gift system is downplayed and

which seeks to annihilate its existence whilst illogically being entirely dependent upon relationships at both state and personal levels that only the system of The Gift can provide, for as Gergen and Gergen noted: “most States will not even accept initial overtures for aid from a country that does not otherwise maintain friendly relations” (1971, p. 90) and “Assistance programmes do not exist apart from the relationships among the participants” (1971, p. 88). The western cultural agenda underpinning IDA is strongly influenced by a market approach to exchanges (even of humanitarian assistance [HA]) that places great store on the formalisation of the exchange, on the importance of delivering value to the donor, and on the short-term nature of the commitment. As such it cannot foster those positive attributes of The Gift; in particular, the trust, the spontaneity and the mutuality that focuses upon the nature and characteristics of the other party in the exchange.

### ***Impact of cultural mismatch***

Sykes (2005, p. 110), in discussing cultural collisions, asked: “Is it dangerous to assume in all colonial encounters that the persons involved share a belief in the primacy of homo economicus, of the rationalist economic person?” Furthermore, Carr et al. (1998, p. 158) acknowledged that: “hosts may find themselves being pulled and pushed in *differing* directions, say by a foreign system of working, on the one hand, versus a ‘traditional’ system of social conduct and moral obligations on the other”. For again, it is clear that in IDA the protagonists’ greater acceptance of the basic premise of modernity, and indeed immersion in it, on the one hand, and the probability of the recipients’ cultural adherence to The Gift, since recipients inevitably operate within a culture that still accepts its legitimacy, on the other, must provide very different ‘view finders’ through which to perceive any given situation and respond to it. So we may infer that the system of The Gift is part and parcel of those cultural misunderstandings that Hofstede (1984) highlighted. Under these circumstances misperceptions are inevitable in regard to issues such as parsimony, calculation, individualism, blunt speaking and corruption.

### ***The incompatibility of agendas and the alternatives***

There are three agendas at play in the IDA business: gaining working relationships to promote a willingness to deal – as in The Gift between strangers; promoting systemic development to support economic growth, international trade and wider policy agendas associated with national interests – as in the market system of pursuing self interest; and combating the impacts of natural and manmade (*sic*) disasters and alleviating extremes of poverty – as in HA and the state system of social redress. From the foregoing it becomes clear that these purposes are incompatible if pursued through one, mixed approach. For, as Gergen and Gergen (1974, p. 125) observed: “Aid may also be used to secure more immediate ends, such as favourable economic concessions, political influence, protection of business investments, and military bases” – and they follow it with an understated footnote that: “These various aims may not be mutually facilitative”. If aid is used to buy influence it risks being resented or rejected on the one hand or to do damage to the self-esteem (self-efficacy) necessary for development on the other (Gergen & Gergen, 1971).

Now, as Hagen maintained:

most of the history of foreign aid relations might be read as a continual search by the donors to find ways to maximize the returns to their funds as judged by them, with recipients trying to make sure that their spending priorities – which have not always been the same as the donors' – prevail. (2006, p. 267)

This sounds like a straightforward description of a market exchange model. However, confusion of approach has long been present, as Gergen and Gergen (1971, p. 87) affirmed: “Donor States have long been aware that technical assistance can be employed as an instrument of statecraft, and that political outcomes can be secured with what are ostensibly economic gifts”.

A market approach to IDA is contractually explicit and linked to immediate exchange of value. It is cold and calculating of interests and it justifies a variety of doubtful behaviours, for example Gergen and Gergen (1971, p. 92) noted that “Several aid personnel mentioned modes of deception which enable their agencies to retain control while appearing to give it away at the same time”. Moreover, Stirrat and Henkel (1997, op. 75–76), in the context of international NGOs, commented that: “there is still an asymmetry between givers and receivers, and he who pays the piper not only calls the tune but attempts to make sure that it is performed”. Thus a market approach is manifested in conditionality and, as Ellerman (2005, p. 211) noted: “The point about conditionalities is not simply that they might be ineffective but that they undermine the goal of autonomous development”. The only way to operate within a market based approach is to conform to the desires of the donor – to recognise their power and status in the hierarchy, to subjugate oneself, with all the bad feelings that this entails.

The proffered alternative is HA – systems that seek to deal with disasters, from whatever causes, or to redress the extremes of disadvantage generated by capitalism and the market (Herbert, 1991), often characterised as charity, altruism, moral imperative, and the good Samaritan. But there is precisely a moral hazard in such aid that Buchanan (1977) refers to as the Samaritan's dilemma by which help creates dependency, as Ellerman (2005, p. 14) captured it: “Eleemosynary aid to relieve the symptoms of poverty may create a *moral hazard* situation to weaken reform incentives and attenuate efforts for positive developmental change to eliminate poverty”. Which in turn links to Say's Law applied to DA, where: “the presence of the offer of aid then *creates* a new scenario where the problematic situations are partly incentivized by the aid offer. The order of causality is reversed” (Ellerman, 2005, p. 113).

The attempts to channel resources through erstwhile charitable conduits fare little better. As Stirrat and Henkel noted: “the transfer of the gift from a Northern to a Southern NGO does not exemplify disinterest but is marked by calculation, negotiation, and, at times, suspicion” (1997, pp. 75–76) and “it is clear that the development gift is no longer a free gift but the object of calculated systems of exchange and negotiation” (1997, p. 77), once again blurring the distinction between alms and the market.

As a result of this indiscipline and mishmash of approaches, no one can be sure whether any particular transaction falls under the rules of The Gift, the market or formalised alms. The consequences of such inconsistency and ambiguity are deeply damaging for relationships, and for the achievement of sustainable well-being, on the one hand, and for those dubious practices of economic development, whether

concealment, advantage taking, manipulation, procrastination, fungibility of resources, rent seeking, or outright corruption, on the other.

### ***Gift-driven double-binds in development***

The inconsistency and ambiguity associated with The Gift, when coupled with relationships of power based upon reward and punishment, are fertile grounds for double-binds. It is not that the difficulties posed by the impossible choices of a paradox are damaging, although they are, but that double-binds are particularly potent because the paradox is felt at two levels. The first is the paradox itself, and the second involves a further bind that precludes making a choice about or resolving the first paradox.

Double-binds are part of The Gift system itself for, as Fukuda-Parr, Lopes, and Malik (2002, p. 8) noted: “the asymmetric donor-recipient relationship [contains] the belief that it is possible for donors ultimately to control the process and yet consider the recipients to be equal partners”. The main dangers are contained in the inability to withdraw and the inability to comment upon the inconsistency. Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson maintained that:

A person in a double bind situation is therefore likely to find himself punished (or at least made to feel guilty) for correct perceptions, and defined as “bad” or “mad” for even insinuating that there be a discrepancy between what he does see and what he “should” see. (1967, p. 213)

They went on to comment that: “This shift away from the real issues becomes all the more plausible if it is remembered that an essential ingredient of a double bind situation is the prohibition to be aware of the contradiction involved” (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 218). Within IDA, to discuss at all the motivations of what Chambers (1997) called ‘Uppers’ will either be construed as mad (you would destabilise the whole system!) or bad (you are maligning a system whose intention is to do good!).

Furthermore, as Watzlawick et al. (1967, p. 214) pointed out: “If... a double bind produces paradoxical behaviour, then this very behaviour in turn double-binds the double-binder”. The helpers cannot withdraw from helping nor can they comment upon the paradox to which they are party. Thus donors are themselves unable, in many ways, to see what is happening let alone take steps to rectify matters (Kowalski, 2004).

### **How taking a gift approach might work**

There are a number of aspects of the practice of IDA that might be modified as a result of the understanding provided by Marcel Mauss’ assertions. The most important amongst them is the need to recognise the difference between development, humanitarian aid and relationship management, and I make bold to put forward some suggestions of how we might approach the challenge.

### ***Deal with the dis-interest agenda***

As Gergen and Gergen (1971, p. 102) noted: “Bilateral aid is basically aimed at increasing the power or welfare of the donor State”. Since, as Offerman (2002,

p. 1424) observed: “deviations from selfish behaviour are driven by assessments about the negative or positive intentions of other players”, it seems that, like Dale Carnegie (1936), if we are genuinely to pursue the national interest of gaining influence with strangers then only an approach through The Gift will work. Any contamination of that system by naked or covert self-interested agendas negates the relationship-building. Thus a first suggestion is for the separation of the three agendas into relationship-building, HA, and DA, mirrored by a separation of the agencies that pursue them.

This places The Gift as the primary role and the system of behaviour for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose proper agenda is to build the relational platform upon which other agencies can operate. The features of The Gift will be exhibited strongly in that what is given will match both the recipient and the giver in regard to their nature and character. Gifts will be spontaneous and generous without exceeding the ability of the recipient to reciprocate appropriately, remembering the caution that: “a one-way relationship, disinterested and motiveless, would be no relationship at all” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 7). The gifts will tend to be infrastructure, cultural objects and/or opportunities. This would not preclude them from being targeted towards disadvantaged groups. However, it is imperative that such gifts do not come with high maintenance costs attached that become a burden upon the recipient.

### *Dealing with altruism*

The most dangerous of gifts are those in response to dire need.<sup>3</sup> In the face of disaster, our humanity demands that we respond. As Ellerman (2007, p. 153) pointed out, the cry that “Children are dying!” is about humanitarian assistance, not development *per se*. However, the joint problems of the moral hazard and Say’s Law, on the one hand, and the temptation to attach conditions to the aid provided that address donor interests, on the other, make such aid more problematic than it ought to be. Thus one suggestion that addresses this is to channel HA solely through multilateral agencies (e.g. the United Nations, the European Union, international NGOs), which would remove any taint of self-interest (Gergen & Gergen, 1971). Such agencies would operate much as the welfare state systems operate at national level, but would require enhanced oversight to ensure that instances of HA were not crowding out local self-help (Ellerman, 2005), that they provided value for money to the tax-payers of the donor countries, and that they took into consideration true opportunity costs (Ellerman, 2007).

Again, remembering that “Only a god can receive without ever having to reciprocate” (Godbout & Caillé, 2000, p. 41) and taking note of comments made by Carr et al. (1998) and Bierhoff and Klein (1990) regarding the importance of reciprocity, it is important to build into this aid system opportunities to contribute, according to one’s means. Thus the aid system proposed might take on the form of a mutual insurance fund to which nations could openly subscribe what they could afford and draw upon, at need, and that could become part of a state’s disaster management planning. It must be noted that the ability so to contribute to HA should be perceived as a desirable outcome of the process of development.



### *Separating development assistance from humanitarian assistance*

When assistance is received through the system of The Gift, it is ameliorated by the overwhelming nature of the need at that instant, on the one hand, and a presumed ability to reciprocate such assistance once normality has been restored, on the other. However, development does not hold this urgency nor currently require reciprocity by the beneficiaries in the future. Furthermore, as Ellerman (2007, p. 151) recognised: “the difficulties in development assistance have prompted many agencies to quietly refocus their work towards poverty relief – all the while describing it in developmental terms”. Development is an undertaking that is neither rescuing nor gift-giving, but is rather about the engagement in an active process of economic and/or social change that has rewards for both donors and recipients. Again, Ellerman (2007, p. 153) recognised that “Genuine development assistance... is a slow, subtle and painstaking process”.

Bearing this in mind, and drawing upon ideas from The Gift, it seems clear that bilaterally and multilaterally supported development initiatives could be undertaken through a market approach by distinctive, designated agencies and with explicit, transparent contracts and conditions, and in which the nature of the reciprocity is set out, with the prospect of “opportunity to *pass on* benefit, by helping a third party” (Carr et al., 1998, p. 196). Or to reciprocate in kind, as Adloff and Mau (2006, p. 115) commented, “the services of the general public establish a relationship of debt which demands activities of redress from the debtor which are co-operative and conform to norms, such as efforts to re-enter the labour market”. Under these circumstances the exchange can be tied in any way that the partners see fit. Both sides are able to pursue their interests, negotiate and manipulate as necessary and withdraw at any point should the situation dictate.

However, this should be accompanied by measures to avoid the temptation to portray IDA as some form of disinterested and benevolent practice, particularly by using erroneous language (O’Connor & Kowalski, 2005), but rather to make explicit the market-based and potentially exploitative nature of the relationship. To this end it seems inappropriate to continue the practice of calling it “development assistance” and in future it would be more fitting to refer to it as “development investment” (Baker, pers. comm.), thereby removing connotations with altruism and replacing them with links to respective self-interest.

This proposed, final separation of the different exchange agendas is not advanced in order to give naked self-interest unbridled dominion over the development process, but is rather to encourage transparency and provide no fig leaves of altruism to obscure the need to make real progress towards social justice. The adoption of a market-based approach to development investment would also allow a more open realignment of mercantile value systems through initiatives like Corporate Social Responsibility, Tri-sector Partnerships, Fair Trade and Stewardship Certification schemes, on the one hand, and the rule of law and rights-based approaches to improvements in governance, on the other.

### *Dealing with donor hubris*

Mohan (2007) discussed the challenge of the hubris of donors, which inevitably arises from the superior position of giving. The triple role of The Gift normally precludes superiority, particularly as it acts against the core purpose of fostering relationships.



The market, likewise, is characterised by an exchange of equal value and seldom encourages superiority, although power relations ultimately dictate the terms of the exchange. Somehow it is the disparity that benevolence conveys to the relationship that fosters a sense of self-righteousness and that is incongruent in interrelationships founded upon democracy and positive unconditional regard.

Nevertheless, there is a way to counteract hubris. This is by giving voice to the recipient role, by countenancing Dalyell's (2000) call to provide a 'thorn in the flesh' of the rulers. Indeed, this theme was taken up by Ellerman (2001, p. 29) when he proposed that: "devil's advocacy might not only be tolerated but fostered in a development agency functioning as an open learning organization". In a similar vein, Fukuda-Parr et al. made reference to:

the Government of Tanzania...agreed with the donors as a group on a radical change of rules and roles between the partners in development, which included what subsequently became 18 specific steps on which progress in the relationship could be monitored by an independent assessor. (2002, pp. 15–16)

There is a strong case to be made that this particular aspect of giving voice to balance the asymmetrical donor–recipient relationship is actually a matter of applying good governance. It also goes straight to the heart of double-binds. As such, the appointment of an ombudsman for development (Kowalski, 2004) within all donor agencies to whom any stakeholder can go to seek redress might be an appropriate step to take.

### *Utilise the Potlatch*

An aspect of Mauss' study that encompasses pridefulness is the Potlatch. This is a social system that establishes status through extravagant hosting of events; through the provision of sumptuous gifts; and on occasion the actual destruction of wealth in a cycle of outperforming rivals. In an era of super-rich individuals, society should encourage philanthropy of an extreme kind and the emergence amongst the rich of something akin to the Potlatch.<sup>4</sup> The wealthy could be further stimulated to engage in a "contest of honour" with each other to see who can sponsor the greatest events and gifts (e.g. feasts, cultural events, clinics, schools, hospitals, universities, prizes for achievement in entrepreneurship, etc.) – the recipients of which should be predominantly communities in the developing world.

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### **Notes**

1. "Giving in order to acquire" (Benedict XVI, 2009, section 39).
2. "Giving through duty" (Benedict XVI, 2009, section 9).
3. For example, Benedict XVI (2009, section 21) lists these needs as: "hunger, deprivation, endemic diseases and illiteracy".

4. See Tom Leonard in New York – retrieved October 8, 2010, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/7927500/American-billionaires-pledge-fortunes-to-charity.html>

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