

Panel 1: Theoretical Approaches

The Gift in Cross-Cultural Perspective – Anthropology's Endless Enigma

Starting with Malinowski's famous description of the Melanesian *kula* exchange ring, which was also intensively cited in Mauss' seminal essay on *The Gift*, countless ethnographic studies of gift exchange have been compiled in anthropological research. These studies in the course of time have not only contributed much to our understanding of non-capitalist economic systems world-wide. They also show that gift giving (as well as receiving) is a very significant component of many symbolic systems of social reproduction. From a contemporary point of view, some issues are of particular importance with respect to the theoretical debate on gift exchange. The first one concerns the conventionally established contrast between the gift and the commodity, which is paralleled by a presumed contradictoriness of 'embedded' gift economies and 'depersonalized' monetary economies. Recent contributions, however, cast doubt on the assumption that gifts and commodities are characteristics of radically different systems of exchange. Just as gift exchange may be based on strictly rational calculation (hence questioning the notion of 'altruism'), monetary or commercial exchange is always embedded in social and political institutions, and often subject to moral evaluation. A second issue concerns the important concept of reciprocity, which was so crucial for Mauss's argument. Yet there is ethnographic evidence that the obligation to return a gift may be considered impossible if goods, for various reasons, are regarded as inalienable. At the same time, this argument challenges the applicability of the notion of alienability with regard to the gift. Finally, the very idea of the gift in itself may be increasingly debated. While there is already some uncertainty in Western languages with respect to semantic nuances between terms such as *gift-present*, *don-cadeau-présent*, *Gabe-Geschenk*, etc., our understanding of 'gift-giving' will always require reflection upon the basic ideas of human selfishness or altruism.

Martin Rößler

Universität zu Köln

martin.roessler@uni-koeln.de

Is There Such a Thing as a Gift Economy?

The concept of gift economy, frequently used in recent times, is already found in the last pages of Mauss's *The Gift*. The theorists who have taken up the term generally work at the intersection of anthropology, sociology, and economics, and occasionally history. I propose to show that the term is meaningless (even in Mauss, so innovative otherwise), for several reasons. To understand why, we must start with clarifying the concept of gift, which can refer to different categories of gestures that must be clearly distinguished. Unilateral and gracious giving cannot be confused with giving out of solidarity; both of these types of giving are very different from ritual gift exchange. The term gift economy has been used mostly to designate the latter, as if it was an archaic form of trade or an alternative to it. This view demonstrates an obvious misunderstanding of ritual exchanges (which are not a matter of goods, but of symbols). It is true that every type of giving presupposes an economy, but in no way does this constitute a gift economy. We will see why through a discussion of Mauss, as well as Weber, Polanyi, Weiner, Sahlins and a few other authors.

Marcel Hénaff

University of California San Diego

mhenaff@ucsd.edu

The Birth of the Theory of Gift-Giving

When Marcel Mauss developed his famous theory of giving in the 1920s, this contrasted markedly with an excessively utilitarian morality which had its roots in the legal and economic debates of the 19th century. A strictly ethical conception of the economy was predominant in the Historical School of national economists that had been developing in the wake of historicism and that remained essentially limited to the German-speaking countries. Economy was understood in a neo-romantic sense as a social-organic life process, subject to continuous waxing and waning. This, in turn, cast doubt upon the idea of a universal applicability of modern economic categories. The Historical School's critique was thus directed against the moral implications of a concept of exchange which had become dominant with the rise of liberal theory since the 17th century, that is, exchange as a self-interested act aimed at attaining economic advantage. Using the legal concept of making a gift (*Schenkung*) as an altruistic act undertaken for the benefit of another, the Historical School developed a counter-model which conceived of exchange not as a self-interested act, but as being based on mutuality or reciprocity. Defining gift as a contract which consisted of three elements: giving, receiving and giving in return, Mauss placed himself within the framework of a legal concept of making gifts, according to which gift giving required the acceptance by the recipient and – in pre-modern law – its reciprocation in order to be legally binding. My aim is to reconstruct these early debates on non-egoistic kinds of exchange and to prove their relevance for an understanding of actual debates on gift exchange.

Beate Wagner-Hasel

Leibniz Universität Hannover

wagner-hasel@hist.uni-hannover.de

The Blessings of Giving and Receiving – Michael Walzer’s Theory of Justice and the Gift Relationship

Michael Walzer is a contemporary political philosopher, well-known particularly for his theory of distributive justice. What can we learn from him when we deal with “gift giving and the ‘embedded economy’ in the ancient world”? And what can we learn from a theory of justice, i.e. a theory that aims at normative claims and not just analytical understanding? In fact, it is for several reasons interesting to have a closer look at Walzer’s political thinking. Although it is clear that contemporary economy is not based on gift relations, but on market exchange, it still seems worthwhile to ask for the normative place of gift relationships in society, and by this the contrasts but also similarities between ancient societies might become clearer. Furthermore, Walzer’s political theory is itself culturalist and interpretative, and thus does not develop normative claims by referring to abstract principles but to the “shared understandings” of a common culture. It thus stresses embeddedness as a requirement of normative claims. With Walzer two features of gift relationships in modern society can be highlighted: first, market economy is “embedded” in social relations which can more or less be sustained by gift relations, and this embeddedness is important for the decent functioning of market exchange, too; second, gift relations are embedded in patterns of inequality, and this embeddedness is important for the decent functioning of gift relationships. Walzer presents a vision of an egalitarian society in which gift relations are decoupled from the inequalities of market success and contribute to a new version of Aristotle’s virtue of political friendship. Put that way, the linkage between the ancient and the modern world in Walzer’s political theory seems remarkable. The aim of the paper is first to reconstruct Walzer’s view in the light of his theory of justice and so to provide for a systematic approach of the normative place of gift relationships in a (just) modern society; second, to discuss the plausibility, the implications and the relevance of this approach.

Michael Haus
Universität Kassel
haus@uni-kassel.de

The Signaling Power of Anonymous Contributions

When a group of people are donating towards a cause, the fear of sanctions from society may cause even selfish individuals to donate more. Recent research seems to support this view and shows that publicizing contributions increases contribution rates. However, many social institutions allow and encourage anonymous contributions, or obscure the identity of the contributor. We seek to explain this discrepancy using economic theory and a lab-based experiment. This experiment suggests that allowing anonymous contributions early on does a better job of “outing” the more self-interested members of a group. This leads to higher average contributions in a later, more important stage, as people better understand how much they can trust those around them. We give examples of relevant anonymous “rituals” and contribution environments, including “Secret Santa,” religion, music and dance, voting, charitable donations, and military institutions.

David Reinstein
University of Essex
drein@essex.ac.uk

Panel 2: Gift and Exchange in the Bronze Age

Circulation, Collection and Alienation of Bronze Artifacts in Late Bronze Age Europe. The Hoards Phenomenon as Ritual Gift

In the Late Bronze Age Europe is clearly observed a substantial increasing in intentional deposition of bronze objects disguised as hoards. They are composed of axes, swords, sickles and other objects deprived of their original function, broken, reduced to scraps, collected in big quantity and buried together. The hoards represent an outstanding quantity of wealth voluntarily alienated from the economic circuits of the prehistoric communities, fact that gave rise to different interpretations of their economic and symbolic significance. This aspect is made more challenging from the pre-ponderal value recognized in the metal fragments and in the ingots of different shapes that appeared in the same archaeological contexts at the closing of the Bronze Age. The interpretation of hoards as evidence for ritual gift giving in Late Bronze Age is made in light of anthropologic studies and contemporary gift giving practice observed in Late Bronze Age Aegean, Egypt and near East.

Maja Gori
Heidelberg-Paris
gori@stud.uni-heidelberg.de

Greeting Gifts in Cyprus at the Beginning of the Late Bronze Age

The development of complex society on Cyprus in the later second millennium BC is usually related to increasing exploitation of the island's copper resources and her participation in international maritime trade. Discussion has largely concentrated on the coastal towns of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC, in particular Enkomi. In this paper, however, I will focus on the earlier part of the LBA, prior to the development of towns, and the first appearance of exotic prestige goods in a small number of wealthy burials. Cyprus will be explored as a new contact situation analogous to Gosden's model of the colonial Middle Ground (2004: 30-2). This argues that social interaction between two distinct cultural groups is mutually beneficial and takes place through the exchange of culturally appropriate and valued gifts; both sides exploit the differences to their own social advantage and their interaction, through the medium of a mutually structured exchange system, ultimately creates new social structures and practices with a mutually understood system of values. Specifically, I will explore how high status objects from the Near East made their way not only to the proto-towns of Morphou and Enkomi, but also to the small farming and mining communities of the Cypriot interior. The objects themselves will be examined as greeting gifts made to foster social relations between new trading partners. The power of these objects derived from their origins in or references to distant places; furthermore they gained prestige and renown through their circulation and association with important or charismatic individuals.

Louise Steel

University of Wales – Trinity Saint David

l.steel@tsd.ac.uk

The role of silver in the embedded economies of the ancient Near East during the Bronze Age: An archaeological approach.

Gift exchange has an important role in the embedded economies of the ancient Near East since the 3rd millennium BC, as revealed by the administrative texts from Syria and Mesopotamia. Circulation of valuable goods at interregional and international levels can be explained according to a reciprocity model, although it is evident that the complex system of long-distance exchanges was based on an interlaced web of economic procedures involving also the redistributive and archaic market spheres. The detailed registration of weights and values of the goods indicates that through gift exchanges more wide trade systems and networks could be strengthened or created. In this regard, an evaluation of the silver circulation (objects, ingots, rings, scrap metal), which takes into account the archaeological and epigraphic evidences can be useful to shed light on the relation between gifts and trade, since the precious metal was used as a reference-value and a medium of exchange in the pre-coinage economies of the Near East. Specific silver items (i.e. bowls, rings) were exchanged as gifts but they were manufactured according to standardized weights and shapes, thus their 'value' was precisely identified and always indicated in the written record. In other cases (i.e. the Egypt-Alashiya exchange of gifts during the Late Bronze Age) the silver 'value' of the gifts was indicated, probably revealing that international trade was presented as gift-exchange according to specific socio-ideological and diplomatic mechanisms shared by the elites. The main objective is therefore to analyze the silver economic functions, starting from the material evidence, in relation with the different interaction modes of exchange, ancient mental maps, social and ideological constraints and public and private agencies.

Luca Peyronel

IULM - Milan

luca.peyronel@iulm.it

The Gift in Ancient Diplomacy

This paper discusses the function of gift giving in diplomatic relations. It highlights the economic and social value of gifts as status markers as well as their legally binding character. At the same time it focuses on the uses the recipients made of such gifts, such as preserving them as tokens of social standing, returning them into circulation by passing them on as gifts in a performance of status, or even using them to acquire funds to attack the original giver. The geographic area under investigation spans the Ancient Near East and Greece.

Silke Knippschild
University of Bristol
clzsk@bristol.ac.uk

Panel 3: Gift Giving in the Greek World

The Ratio of Gift-Giving in Homeric Poems

Although in the homeric poems the practice of gift-exchange is not the “global institution” described by Marcel Mauss – an institution related to every kind of social relationship (from religion to economy) – but is simply an individual/familiar connection, it is evident that in a “closed economy” such as the homeric one, based on self-supply and *oikos*, gift-exchange represents the only way wealth can circulate outside the community. The specialization of the homeric vocabulary on gift-exchange is a proof of the variety of situations where the practice takes place (relations of hospitality, marriage relationships, settlement of wrongs, ransom, tribute to kings). The unifying ideology hinges on the extolling of “*timé*” of the man or family, strongly related to the aristocratic status of both the donor and the receiver. The duty of reciprocity is the feature which links the homeric culture to the general theory of this institution in primitive societies, but there is a difference. In fact, in the homeric poems it is not possible to say certainly that this rule was based on general beliefs about the “mana” of the given object, but the most important thing is the idea of social prestige of the two men who through gift-exchange aim at keeping, or increasing, the public evaluation of their “*timé*”. This explains the frequent reference at the intrinsic value of the gifts exchanged. From the economic point of view, the gift – a property accumulated and saved – represents the core of personal/private property of the *oikos*, that finds visual expression through the “*keimelia*” kept in the most internal part of the house.

Lucio Bertelli

Università degli Studi di Torino

lucio.bertelli@unito.it

Religious Gifts in Ancient Greece

Greek sanctuaries at any time were full of gift for the gods, in form of fruit, cake, milk or wine offers, as well as of statues and metal objects which could be very precious. Archaeologists have not only found many material traces of these gifts, but also long lists of carefully recorded “possessions” of the gods. My purpose is to show some examples of the most common “gifts to the gods” during the archaic and classic al age, and the transformations of the use during time, in order to answer the question about how much price and material value of the gifts were or not important factors in the economy of offer giving.

Irene Berti

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

ireneberti1@yahoo.it

Gift-giving to the poor in ancient Greece: a form of social aid?

The exchange of gifts in the ancient world has been interpreted as a way of building long-lasting relations at different levels and of different kinds, ranging from political alliances, economic contacts, and mutual assistance in case of material need. The mode of this relation presupposes that the recipient will outdo the gift with an equivalent return. For this reason, gift-giving as an action directed towards the destitute should raise questions on the nature of the return and on the meaning of the action itself. Can gift-giving be thought of as a form of social aid? In a small peasant community of the archaic Greek world, this possibility seems to be fairly limited, according to Hesiod's words: "Do not give to whom cannot return" (WD, 354). However, literary evidence from both the archaic and the classical age points to the fact that giving food, clothes and shelter to beggars and vagabonds was an usual practice, and that the action of giving to the poor was regarded as a just social behaviour. This paper will explore the plausible reasons beyond these actions and the nature of the reward for the gift-giver.

Lucia Cecchet

Università degli Studi di Trento – Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

lucia.cecchet@unitn.it

Philosophy as *leitourgía*. Sophists, fees, and the civic role of *paideía*

Fourth century philosophic criticism of sophistic teaching for pay has oft been commented upon, in particular under two aspects: on the one hand, it has been included in a broader vision of aristocratic resistance against the displacement of traditional gift-exchange by the emergence of currency-based, and thus supposedly more egalitarian, forms of trade. On the other hand, the self-profiling of philosophers as teaching (or ‚midwifing‘) the incommensurable good of virtue – a value that precludes any payment – has been interpreted as a means of securing philosophic teachers both control over selecting their students and the possibility to establish social bonds with them. The paper will focus on the civic dimension of anti-sophistic stances towards teaching for pay. Demonstrative refusal of payment by philosophers, who at the same time maintain philosophy’s civic usefulness, can be understood as a means of acquiring (or securing) symbolic capital in the community. Facing their legacy as heirs to Socratic ethics, philosophers were in constant need to reassess philosophy’s civic role without disassociating themselves from Socrates. Socrates’ pauperism and the reputation of the sophists as ‚traders‘ of wisdom are thus contrasted with each other: Socrates’ refusal of taking fees is depicted as an anti-sophist statement and a voluntary contribution to the ethical welfare of the state. Philosophy, instead of being challenged as a threat to society, is thus presented as an occupation useful to the polis. Commitment to teaching virtue without pay not only helps to substantiate the distance between philosopher and sophist – a distance unknown to the 5th century – but also strengthens the notion of philosophy as *leitourgía*, as a specific elite contribution to civic welfare, as a distinguished citizen’s personal effort not measurable in definite sums of money. Philosophic criticism of payment for teaching, therefore, does not only redefine the relationship between teacher and student degraded to a contract-situation by the sophists, but it is no less meant to redefine the relationship between philosopher and community, a relationship not even extant in the contract-like relationship between sophist and student.

Thomas Blank

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

blankt@uni-mainz.de

Panel 4: Gift Giving in the Roman World

'Like bait on a hook'. Ethics, Emics and Etics of Gift-Exchange in the Roman World

The principles of gift-exchange occur in so widely different cultures throughout time that some genetic basis must be assumed. However, they are articulated in behavioral codes in many different ways. Culturally evolved institutions and behavior absorb or reject the principles of gift-exchange in various ways. In Roman culture gift exchange was emphatically part of aristocratic life and closely connected to honor and social status. In the absence of bureaucratic procedures, gift-exchange relations – such as instrumental amicitia and patronage – regulated access to centers of decision making and to the allocation of offices and resources. I want to look at three different aspects of gift-exchange in ancient Rome, which each help to understand how the universal principles of gift-giving were articulated in Roman society and how they influenced the formation of formal and informal institutions : (1) the 'ethics' of gift-exchange – the explicit moral prescriptions concerning gift-exchange ; (2) the 'etics' of Roman gift exchange – the material processes we may observe ; (3) the 'emics' of gift-exchange – the meanings and significance attached to gift-giving by contemporaries. I will argue that the constraints created by gift-exchange have little to do with explicit morality but rather with the unequal distribution of entitlements to resources that have to change hands for Roman society to exist (the 'etics') and with the mental models pervasive in Roman cultures to interpret this need to exchange resources.

Koenraad Verboven
Universiteit Gent
Koen.Verboven@ugent.be

Putting the “E” of Economic in Euergetic: Did Economy have a Role or Place in the Euergetic Practice in the Greek City during the Imperial Period?

Taking euergetism as practised in the cities of Western Asia Minor during the Imperial Period as a starting point, the paper will try to outline to what extent and in what way economy and euergetism may have interacted and have been interconnected. An initial point of interest will be the available sources. Because of their honorary nature inscriptions documenting euergetism stress the qualities of the giver, accounting at the same time for his/her motivation to contribute. They tend to be rather silent on or oblivious of more practical issues, that precede or follow the actual euergetic initiative. Some epigraphic documents however contain stipulations or conditions that point indirectly as well as directly to a more economic approach. The information revealed (or the lack thereof) in euergetic inscriptions will be combined with literary sources, such as the letters of Pliny or orations of Dio, in an endeavour to further trace economic aspects underlying euergetism. In some cases the choice for and execution of a specific euergetic action in the field might be more telling on economic matters than the actual wording of the inscription. Throughout the paper several questions will be addressed: can the use of certain economic mechanisms or principles be observed in the euergetic process or vocabulary? How could an economic environment influence the way(s) euergetism was to be realized? Can concepts as investment and profit be applied when analyzing euergetism and how, to what extent? Furthermore, to which domains in society could these concepts relate? Did euergetism develop an economy of its own involving offer and demand, gift and reward? Can looking at economic issues in the context of euergetism enlighten economic principles in the society of the Greek city and society at large? Even if no unequivocal answers to these questions can be expected in the scope of this paper, formulating them may contribute to our way of looking at euergetism, economy and their mutual impact.

Sabien Colpaert
Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Sabien.Colpaert@vub.ac.be

The *peculium* – a Legal Device for Donations to *personae alieno iuri subiectae*?

The *peculium* is a separate estate dedicated to slaves and other *personae alieno iuri subiectae*, that is, persons that are subject to the authority of a *pater familias*, the head of the family. The *peculium* has two facets: For those who are under paternal power, the bestowal of a *peculium* gives to some extent independence and autonomy, while for those who exert authority, granting a *peculium* offers the prospect of participating indirectly, and therefore at lower risks, in business ventures that the beneficiary may elect to conduct. So far so good—that is the theory that emerges from the legal sources. But what was the *peculium*'s function in practice? Over the last couple of decades, the *peculium*'s second facet—allowing the *pater familias* to share in businesses with limited liability—has become a more and more popular explanation. This perception, though, faces two objections: First, no sources have come down to us that support the idea that the *peculium* was actually used to organize larger business ventures, and second, the legal regime of the *peculium* seems less than optimal or even ill-suited to fund such enterprises. Therefore, if the *peculium* furthers the beneficiary's interests more than the grantor's, its first facet comes back to the fore: Is the *peculium* primarily a legal device for donations to *personae alieno iuri subiectae*?

Andreas M. Fleckner

Max-Planck-Institut für ausländisches und internationales Privatrecht

fleckner@mpipriv.de

Between Reciprocity and Obligation: *Donatio sub condicione* in Roman Law and Practice

The essential feature defining the *donatio* in Roman law was the non-expectation of any reward, reciprocal gesture or legal obligation from the donee. This principle of gratuity that authors such as Cicero, Seneca and Pliny the Younger praised as exemplum of *liberalitas* seems however to contrast with the juridical regulations of this practice. Several clauses included in chapter 39.5 of the Digest (*De donationibus*) envisage a series of circumstances in which the donor could express and establish certain conditions to be fulfilled by the donee. Such was for instance commonly the case of funerary foundations or trusts. The condition was expressed and formalised through a *stipulatio*, a contract that obligated the donee and conceded the donor a legal instrument to fulfil his wish. The imposition of a legal duty in the *donatio* leads to query about possible paradoxes and dysfunctions in the forms gifts were made and performed. To what extent could the *donatio sub condicione* challenge and violate the scope of generosity through actions involving reciprocal transactions? Was the *condicio* also an open gate to practices searching for *beneficia* and *utilitas* rather than *liberalitas*?

Marta García Morcillo
University of Wales – Trinity Saint David
m.morcillo@tsd.ac.uk

Tithes and Markets in Roman Palestine

The Hebrew Bible contains a complex, if sparsely detailed, system of “tithes,” usually understood as mandatory gifts given to God through the agency of the priests. Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman periods took this system seriously. Jewish intellectuals developed these sparse biblical prescriptions into extensive legal codes, best exemplified in the detailed and systematic legal system of the rabbis (ca. 70-500 CE). Tithing, however, was not merely an academic concern. There is significant textual and epigraphical evidence that at least some, and probably many, ordinary Jews in Roman Palestine gave tithes, even if they had little knowledge of or regard for the rabbis themselves. From an academic perspective, the phenomenon of tithing seems to confuse the boundaries between “gift” and “market” economies. This paper will focus on the mechanics of tithing in Roman Palestine as it was actually practiced. What evidence do we have for this practice? How might ordinary Jews have understood what they were doing within the context of their wider social world? What effect would tithing – which, after all, was a form of tax – have had on the functioning of the markets and the economics of Roman Palestine?

Michael L. Satlow
Brown University
Michael_Satlow@Brown.edu

Panel 5: Late Antiquity and the Christianization of Economy and Society

The Evolution of Social Altruism in a Changing World: From Pagan to Christian Euergetism

In this contribution I delineate the passage from pagan to Christian euergetism in the period between the third and the sixth century. This was by no means a rapid and uniform phenomenon, which, indeed, varied greatly both in time and in manner according to its location. In many of its aspects the public largesse of the Christians followed on from that of pagans; however, it also introduced innovations which were coherent with their own way of thinking. I should like to show how the euergetism in public buildings of the Christians (both of the clergy and the laity) in the construction of churches, monasteries, hostels, hospitals – but also of ‘lay’ public buildings such as porticoes, thermal baths, bridges, workshops and so on – was substantially a continuation of the ‘monumental’ pagan euergetism (which was directed especially towards the building of walls, circuses, amphitheatres, temples and public basilicas) and maintained the same effect of bringing about an amalgamation among differing cultures and social strata. However, the Christian purposes, at least in theory, rejected any dimension which was not entirely charitable. But it was above all the Christian emperors of the fourth and fifth centuries and, later, the barbarian kings such as the Goth Theodoric (who claimed to be the successors of the Christian emperors in the West) who continued the lay euergetism for purposes that were still entirely political, inasmuch as they aimed to achieve a broad consent among their subjects; whereas the private munificence tended towards spectacles, often accompanied by public distributions of money. This was the expression, at least until the Gothic-Byzantine war in Italy, of a transformation and a progressive decline in that civic spirit that, till a certain point in time, had sustained ‘monumental’ euergetism, rather than a manifestation of an economic crisis already in existence – as is still often it is often claimed today.

Lellia Cracco Ruggini

Università degli Studi di Torino – Accademia dei Lincei

lellia.ruggini@unito.it

Giving in the Name of God: Roman Aristocrats and the Economic of Salvation

From the beginning of the fourth century onwards, members of the Roman aristocracy transferred enormous resources to members of the Christian community in general, and especially to the Church. Although aristocratic donations were never comparable to the vast sums lavished on the new religion by members of the imperial family, taken as a whole they represented an important source of income, which came to play a structural role in Rome's Christian life. Recent studies have considered the practice of giving either from a juridical point of view, stressing the issue of Church property, or from a sociological perspective, debating the extent to which aristocrats could be seen as patrons of the Christian community. Although important, both perspectives oversee the crucial fact that the religious preoccupations of aristocrats played a defining role in this practice. This is something that can be better understood when we incorporate the contributions of modern anthropological theories of gift-giving. The aim of this paper is to analyze the practice of aristocratic giving in a Christian context, considering its religious, social and political implications.

Carlos Machado
Universidade Federal de São Paulo
carmachado@gmail.com

Exchange and the Saints: Gift-Giving and Commerce of Relics

Relics assumed from the early times of Christianity an important meaning as objects detaining a special *dynamis*, or power, and charged therefore with a particular sacred and symbolic value. In spite of their embodying a particular form of capital, deeply connected with the religious sphere, relics assumed very seldom the character of “inalienable possessions”, i.e. objects which are substantially kept outside circulation. In the case of relics, this applied only to some particular examples; most relics were on the contrary circulating and the forms of passage of property were different. On the one side there were forms of violent appropriation, such as the theft of relics, which will assume great importance in the centuries of the Early Middle Ages, and which are not incompatible with a supposed inalienability. But most relics changed hands either in the form of gifts (or more generally, according to a “voluntary” passage of property, including e.g. also heirlooms) or through commercial transactions. Aim of the paper will be to analyze the differences and the interactions of these forms of passage of property in the centuries of Late Antiquity (4th to 7th CE), i.e. in parallel to the process of institutionalization of Christianity as official and then as State religion in the Roman Empire and in the successor States. A relic could first of all award its owner prestige of different kinds not only through its own existence but also according to the ways of its acquisition and to the history of previous ownership. On the other side the evident “short circuit” coming into existence between the sacred nature of the object itself and the tentative of attributing it a (generally monetary) price, as clearly visible in the contemporary debates and also in the official regulation of canons and laws, is an interesting case study for a better understanding of the interactions between commercial exchange, monetary transactions, possession and exchange of “status symbols” and “élite markers” and their social and juridical regulations.

Filippo Carlà

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

carla@uni-mainz.de

Christian Gift and Gift Exchange from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages

The issue of the gift in ancient Christianity needs to be addressed with regard to the subject of a Christian economy. In structural and genealogical terms the gift in Christian theology is concerned with a system of exchange between God and man. Following the creation of the world, and thanks to the pact between God and his chosen people (Old and New Testament), the divine economy – namely the governing rules for the ‘house’ inhabited by divine Persons – became the paradigm of historical evolution (the history of salvation) and therefore, in principle, the model of exchange relations within Christian society. Since the apostolic age every Christian community has claimed to be founded on the charisma – spiritual gift of grace – that God bestowed through his incarnation and resurrection and which he continues to lavish on his believers through the sacraments and signs of his power, miracles. The relations of gift and exchange between God and believers are not only concerned with the ethical-anthropological field (the Christological model of gratuitousness, which counters pagan sacrifice, based on the reciprocity of *do ut des*) but also the economic sector of the exchange of material goods. Indeed, from the beginning believers formed a religious community within the broader Roman-Imperial society and were therefore subject to twofold conditioning. On one hand, the Christological apparatus powered by pastoral activity fuelled the concept of the gift as gratuitousness so that it became associated with alms and the pardoning of sins. On the other hand, Christians were also subject to the political-social ties of a civilization in which the system of the archaic gift (euergetism, munificence, sacrifice, vengeance) was one of the cornerstones (if not the main foundation) which supported and explained the political-social order and the pivotal system of mythical-ritual representations (religion) which reflected and established it. Ancient and traditional cultures based their identity and oriented their social dynamics and system of exchange towards an ideal of stability, preserving a form of organization whose reference model lay in a mythical past. Through ritual, image and word, cultural memory once again focuses on this past as an interpretive key to the present. Instead, Christianity is based on a mythodynamic principle of the transformation of the world founded on an economic apparatus. As the heir and continuation of Hellenistic Judaism, this new religion develops a theology, a rational discourse on the divine, in which the dynamics of the

exchange of goods and the circulation of gifts play an essential role. In this way, Christianity purports to establish an economy of gratuitousness, at the same time justifying it through material expediency and spiritual benefit. The evangelical economy and its successive rereadings by the Fathers of the Church, provide multiple reworkings of the paradox according to which one can only become rich by becoming poor, divesting oneself of the superfluous and donating it gratuitously to those who need it, in keeping with the model of the poor Christ – poor not so much in the sense of being devoid of material goods as in the sense of being incarnated in our flesh with the human condition of need and suffering, from which we are redeemed thanks to the divine gift of his perfection. Because of this, he is seen as the only one who can pardon our sins. The spiritual and material life of the Christian is reflected and explained in this complex interplay of economic metaphors, which are concerned with the semantic fields of commerce, money, market, treasure, gift, pledge and redemption. The words and gestures of the theological economy represent and establish the tie that binds this world to the future kingdom of salvation thanks to an ambiguous system of pledges, gifts and counter-gifts (sacraments, relics, deeds of charity). It is a veritable metonymic chain woven into history, whose fundamental first link is the body of God incarnated. In light of recent sociological thinking, it could be claimed that Christianity purports to test and make explicit all the implicit paradoxes in the system of the gift, or the interest of disinterest. Naturally, in the concrete nature of historical life the interference of the Christological apparatus in the ancient paradigm of reciprocity (archaic gift) led to many different formations of compromise. I intend to examine some examples of this ambiguity both with reference to the conceptual and discursive field (*credo, charisma, caritas*) and the field of ritual and devotional practices (alms, ecclesiastical euergetism, offerings to saints, miracles and relics, votive offerings) and see how they developed in the centuries of transition between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Luigi Canetti

Università degli Studi di Bologna – Sede di Ravenna

luigi.canetti@unibo.it