

## GIFTS AND COMMODITIES, PEOPLE AND THINGS

In this chapter I present my interpretation of the model that springs from Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*. As I described in the Preface, a number of anthropologists have elaborated the model, to the extent that it is better to speak of a "Maussian" model, rather than "Mauss's" model. Put most simply, the Maussian model identifies two polar types of social relations: commodity relations and gift relations. At the risk of over-simplifying, commodity relations are transient and impersonal, though certainly not necessarily unpleasant or cold, for they can be cheerful and gracious (e.g. Hochschild 1983). Equally, gift relations are durable and personal, though certainly not necessarily pleasant or warm, for they can involve conflict (Schwartz 1967: 5-7), even the exchange of blows rather than gifts (Schiltz 1987). In commodity relations objects are impersonal bundles of use value and exchange value that are bought and sold. In gift relations objects are personal possessions that are given and received.

Before turning to a discussion of these two sorts of objects and social relations, I need to explain what "gift" means and what can be a gift, for I do not use the word in its everyday sense.

"Gift" is likely to call up images of presents wrapped and tied with a bow, or more broadly of objects given from one person to another consciously and with some degree of ceremony as "a present". This is the usage followed by David Cheal in *The Gift Economy*, his analysis of the giving and receiving of formal presents in Winnipeg, Canada. While almost all presents are gifts in the Maussian sense, "gift" is much broader, for it includes all things transacted as part of social, as distinct from more purely monetary, relations, and it includes labor and immaterial things like names and ideas as well as physical objects. In fact, the common restriction of "gift" to objects strengthens the distinction between thing and labor, and hence between thing and laborer. On reflection, however, this distinction appears suspect. Most people in industrial societies have things only as a result of labor. The wage worker sells labor for a wage, so that the things those wages buy are the result of that labor. Not only does the gift embody the labor of the wage, it also embodies the effort of selection and preparation. Westerners readily make the dis-

tinction between object and labor, but it can be dangerous to adopt it uncritically in an analysis of the social meaning of objects.

A few examples will illustrate the breadth of "gift". If I invite friends to my house for a meal, I am giving them a gift of food and drink. I do not put the meal in a box, wrap it and tie it with a ribbon, but it is a gift none the less. If friends go out together, they may go in one car, in which case the person who owns and drives is giving transport to the others. If a pair of office-mates stops for a drink after work and if one of them buys a round of drinks for both, then that one is giving a gift to the other. Within the household giving gifts is even more ubiquitous and automatic. When I prepare dinner for my family I give my wife and children the effort involved in preparing the meal. However, when my wife buys the ingredients that I cook, she gives the effort of shopping. The point of these examples is to show that it is not the form and ceremony of the giving and getting that make a transaction a gift. Instead, it is the relationship that exists between the transactors and the relationship between them and what is transacted.

### THE REALMS OF GIFTS AND COMMODITIES

The distinction between gift and commodity can be more than just the distinction between different relationships between transactors. For many anthropologists who work in the Maussian tradition the distinction between them marks the distinction between different types of social life and social organization. Here, however, I will apply the distinction to realms of life within a single society, and I will do so in ideal terms. In real social life, there are very few objects, transactions or relations that conform to the pure descriptions of gift and commodity that I present.

C. A. Gregory says that commodity exchange is oriented to the system of the material production of objects, and thus "must be explained with reference to the social conditions of the reproduction of things", which means ultimately "class structure and the principles governing factory organization" (Gregory 1980: 641). His use of "reproduction" highlights an important point. Commodity exchange is not simply oriented to the physical production of objects, for such production is important in all societies. Instead, commodity exchange is oriented to the social production of objects. This includes not just their physical production, but also the creation of their social identity as commodities and the creation of people's unequal relationships with them in the process of production, and consequently elsewhere in society. These unequal relationships include the division of labor, the class structure, the different roles of producer and consumer and the significance of people's positions in these orders.

One consequence of Gregory's account of commodity relations is that they are not in any sense unsocial. Instead, these relations are bound by social rules that can be elaborate and constraining. To say that commodity relations are

social, even if impersonal, is also to say that they are not a residual or primary category that naturally reflects some supposed innate desire to exchange utilities. Instead, commodity relations are made by transactors and the society in which they exist. We do not, after all, engage in such transactions with people who are totally unknown to us. We engage in them only with people who have a specific social identity, whether as store clerks, stock brokers or the gentleman who offers to take our order on the telephone. In transacting with these people in the appropriate ways we reaffirm the identities of each of us as a commodity transactor and of our relationship as a commodity relationship.

At their simplest, commodity transactions consist of a transfer of value and a counter-transfer: the transfer of an object or service from A to B and the counter-transfer of money from B to A. In other words, A sells something to B. These two transfers can occur at the same time (cash on the nail) or the counter-transfer can be delayed (buying on credit, for example). Selling your labor power for a wage, buying a loaf of bread in a store, taking out a mortgage to buy a house – all are commodity transactions. It is not the fact that money is involved that makes these commodity transactions, for money is used in gift transactions in many societies. Instead, these are commodity transactions because of the relationship that links the transactors to each other and to the object they transact. Put most simply, in commodity relations the objects are alienated from the transactors: they are not especially associated with each transactor, nor do they speak of any past or future relationships between transactors. Instead, such objects are treated solely as bearers of abstract value or utility.

In contrast to commodity exchange, gift exchange is oriented to the system of social reproduction, and thus “must be explained with reference to the social conditions of the reproduction of *people*”, which, for the archaic societies that concerned Mauss, means ultimately “clan structure and the principles governing kinship organization” (Gregory 1980: 641). Just as the concern in commodity systems is with more than the mechanics of producing things, so the concern in gift systems is with more than the mechanics of producing people, physical procreation or even socialization in some abstract sense. Instead, it is with the creation and recreation of people as social identities, defined by their identifiable relationships with other individuals and groups in the society.

Gift transactions resemble commodity transactions in that they consist of a transfer and a counter-transfer. And also like commodity transactions, the counter-transfer can take place at the same time as the transfer or it can be delayed. What makes such a transfer a gift transaction is the relationship that links transactors to each other and to the object they transact. In gift transactions objects are not alienated from the transactors. Instead, the object given continues to be identified with the giver and indeed continues to be

identified with the transaction itself (this is presented in social-psychological terms in Belk 1976).

Gift and commodity relations are analytical categories in the Maussian model. Equally, however, they echo the ways that many people in the West understand different parts of their lives. They are likely to think of the household, family, friends and neighbors as defining an area of life characterized by gift relations. Conversely, they are likely to think of the world of work and the store, and economic activities more generally, as defining an area of life characterized by commodity relations. Furthermore, they are likely to understand these two realms in ways that stress and even heighten the differences between them. In this chapter I will describe gifts and commodities as though they were situated in these cultural realms of home and work. However, this is a simplification of a more complex set of experiences and understandings.

I want now to turn to a more systematic consideration of the sorts of transactions that exist in these two realms. The Maussian view is that gift exchange is (1) the obligatory transfer of (2) inalienable objects or services between (3) mutually obligated and related transactors (see Gregory 1980: esp. 640). Accordingly, I will compare gifts and commodities in terms of the key dimensions implicit in this view of gifts: how much and in what way is the transaction obligatory, how much and in what way is what is transacted associated with the transactors, how much and in what way are the transactors linked with and obligated to each other.

### OBLIGATORY TRANSFER

Buying and selling are formally voluntary and free. We can buy or not as we like, wherever we like. All that most of us have to sell is our labor, and we can sell it or not as we like, wherever we like. We are restricted only by whether we have the money to buy what we want or whether we have the skills to make our labor attract the wage we want. In contrast to this formal voluntary freedom of commodity transactions, gift transactions are obligatory, albeit in a special way. In Mauss's classic statement (1990: 13), parties to a gift relationship are under “the obligation to reciprocate presents received . . . the obligation . . . to give presents, and . . . to receive them”. In other words, people in a gift relationship are obliged to give and take and reciprocate. Anyone who fails to conform to these three obligations effectively is denying that he or she is in a social relationship, and hence is rejecting amity and indicating indifference. Thus, even though these gifts are given freely in the sense that there is no institution monitoring performance and enforcing conformity, yet they are obligatory because they are induced by expectation and belief. We have to give to those close to us, even if it drives us into debt (Davis, J. 1992: ch. 4; Lea, Walker and Webley 1992).

As I will describe in Chapter 7, the Maussian point that gifts are obligatory

contradicts an important element of the Western industrial view of the gift, "that (a) it is something voluntarily given, and that (b) there is no expectation of compensation" (Belk 1979: 100). In view of this common stress on voluntarism, it is important to remember that the Maussian assertion that giving is obligatory is a generalization: it does not mean that gifts are never free. Some are, in the sense that the giver is under no obligation to give. This freedom exists primarily when people are creating a new relationship, as when a couple is dating, or modifying an old one, as when a couple is breaking up. The very fact that these gifts are relatively free and the act of giving them relatively self-conscious means that they are more visible than the mundane gifts of established relationships. Those who study or reflect on gifts in American or British society are, thus, prone to fasten on these sorts of gifts and describe them as ways that transactors signal to each other their estimation of and aspirations for their relationship with each other (e.g. Belk and Coon 1993; Camerer 1988).

While these sorts of analyses may be revealing, their conclusions can not be generalized very much because they attend to gifts in just those situations where the links between transactors are problematic. Most gift transactions, on the other hand, occur within stable relationships, in which transacting is obligatory and this sort of self-conscious signalling generally missing. Family and household members are expected to do things willingly for other members and to accept willingly what other members do for them, as Mirra Komarovsky (1987) describes for Glenton and as Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1986) describe for Bethnal Green. Those who are under this obligation are unhappy when they are denied the chance to transact. Thus, one young man reported to Colin Bell (1969: 93): "My father was hurt I think when he knew I went to the bank rather than him for a down payment on a new car".

Those who are related to each other within certain degrees are expected to give to and receive from each other willingly in certain ways in certain situations, as exemplified positively by the strong regularities in the giving of Christmas presents among kin in Middletown (Caplow 1984, discussed in Chapter 8, below) and as exemplified negatively in Rhian Ellis's (1983) description of the marked association between the violent breakdown of marriage on the one hand, and on the other the wife's failure to cook and the husband's failure to accept the meal. Even when there is little affection among close kin, they are obligated to continue to transact with each other, and generally they do so (e.g. Allan 1979: 94-5). As I said, there is no over-arching institution that enforces the obligations that people have in these relationships in the way that the state enforces a contract. We are not bound by law to give; our lives may be sufficiently private and anonymous that our neighbors would not know of our dereliction. But dereliction it would be; and dereliction it appears to those who see the request not made, the favor not reciprocated, the visit not returned, the obligation not fulfilled.

Although gift transactions are obligatory, this is not the kind of obligation that can be discharged by fulfilling it. Instead, fulfilling the obligation recreates it by reaffirming the relationship. If my neighbor helped me move some large stones in my garden, and if later I loan that neighbor a garden tool, I would not simply be discharging my obligation. Instead, I would be transacting in a neighborly way, reaffirming our neighborly relationship, and so reaffirming my (and my neighbor's) obligation to continue to give and receive in this way. (Bulmer 1986, esp. ch. 4, presenting the sociological work of Philip Abrams, describes this sort of neighborliness and its limitations.) This recreation of relationships and obligations in gift transactions is just the opposite of what occurs in commodity relations.

There, transacting as one ought dissolves the obligations that bind the parties to each other. This reflects the cultural understanding that in commodity relations people who are free and independent bind themselves only temporarily when they contract to transact with each other, and that when the transaction is completed the parties resume their former independence. I am obligated to pay the store the money I owe for the shoes that I buy. Once I pay, however, my obligation ends and our relationship is dissolved: I owe them nothing and can go my own way. Indeed, there is the assumption that actors are competent to transact *only if* they are free and independent of each other, for only then will they be able to protect their own interests. But with gift relations this assumption is inverted (or stood on its feet, if you prefer). People are able to transact only if they are *not* independent of each other. The gift transaction affirms and reproduces this mutual dependence, this relationship that links transactors. Their relationship makes them part of each other, and in transacting they express and recreate that relationship, and so recreate their obligation to transact in a similar way again in the future.

Gift transactors, then, are not autonomous individuals. Instead, they are morally obligated to give, receive and repay. Consequently, gift transactions cannot be explained in terms of economic or emotional individualism, though they may have important economic and emotional correlates and consequences. When I prepare a meal for my family it has an emotional dimension: it expresses the fact that I love my wife and children; it has an economic dimension: we can eat better for less at home than in a restaurant. But emotional expression and economic utility are not adequate explanations of why I cook, what each of us thinks of it or the relationships that link us to each other and to the meal.

Doubtless, if one party to a gift relationship feels regularly and unjustly slighted, he or she will consider ending the relationship. But this need not mean that the transactor is calculating debts and credits, emotional or material. Instead, the repeated imbalance itself marks a repeated violation of the obligation to give, receive and repay, and hence marks the end of the relationship as it had been. Openly ending the relationship in such a situation is just an open recognition that the relationship has already ended.

In this section I have described the idea that gift transactions are obligatory. Underlying my discussion is the point that gift transactions are not dictated only by considerations of utility or the desire to express emotion by independent transactors: in some cases these considerations may be relatively insignificant. In addition, these transactions are manifestations of the personal relationship between the transactors, and hence cannot be encompassed by a model that treats transactors as isolated individuals. Alternatively, in commodity relations the transactions are encompassed by such a model, for in extreme form (as I describe later) transactors are not linked in any enduring or personal way. Instead, they are related only temporarily through the impersonal objects that they transact.

### INALIENABLE OBJECTS

The second element of the Maussian model of gift relations is that the things transacted are inalienable – that they are in important ways bound to people (Mauss 1990: 14). The gift is inalienably linked to the giver, and therefore it is important for regenerating the relationship between giver and recipient. The Christmas present that my mother gives me continues to bear her identity after I receive it, and so continues to affirm that she and I are linked as mother and son. At a more mundane level, the many everyday objects that my wife and I buy for each other as part of the routine of keeping house continually remind each of us of the other, and so affirm and recreate the relationship that links us.

As these examples indicate, I take “inalienable” simply to mean associated with a person, a possession, “part of the self, somehow attached, assimilated to or set apart for the self” (Beaglehole 1932: 134). For the archaic societies that Mauss described, the association was strong and inalienability was pronounced. However, the degree of association, its bases and consequences, will vary according to situations and societies. For example, in English law since the thirteenth century the gift has been formally alienated from the giver: once made, “the transaction is then irrevocable” (Lowe, Turner and Wills 1968: 220). In other words, saying that the gift is inalienably linked to the giver does not necessarily mean that the giver has the jural right to reclaim the object, that such a right could be exercised in practice, or that the recipient has no right to dispose of the object. The nature of these rights and practices is an empirical question. What is important is the central point that the object continues to bear the identity of the giver and of the relationship between the giver and the recipient.

Where does this relationship between possessor and possession reside? At the very minimum, it can reside in the mind of only one person and be a matter of individual psychology. In practice, of course, it is likely to exist in the minds of several people and so be a social understanding of the object. More broadly vet. social structure and practices will affect the ways that

different sorts of people are likely to interact with different sorts of objects, and so affect the ways they are likely to experience those objects and hence think about them.

Although Mauss based his discussion of inalienability on archaic societies, others have described it in industrial societies. Ernest Beaglehole explicitly linked the two:

Animistic feeling is the hidden thread, strong though invisible, which binds civilized as well as savage to the objects he regards as his own. It is the real core of ownership, the psychological basis of the philosopher's cry: “In making the object my own, I stamped it with the mark of my own person; whoever attacks it attacks me; the blow struck it, strikes me, for I am present in it. Property is but the periphery of my person extended to things”.

(Beaglehole 1932: 302, quoting Jhering 1915: 58–9)

William James discusses a similar merging of the self and object. He says (1890: 291) that people see themselves as more than just their body and mind: “Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies.” The range of objects that can be linked to the self is broad: a man's reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account” (James, W. 1890: 291). James elaborates this link between self and object when he says (1890: 293) that the loss of a possession is not just the loss of enjoyment, use or future profit, for “there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness”. Two sociologists, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981: 16), make a similar point, saying that, for most people, objects serve as depositories of personal meaning and identity. Objects are a way that we define who we are to ourselves and to others, so that “[t]he material objects we use . . . constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves”.

Because of the association between person and object, the object has a history and carries the stamp of those who possessed it previously. In possessing the object, then, we possess as well that object's past. According to Annette Weiner, this is the case with *taonga*, a type of Maori valuable heirloom. These objects carry the power and identity of those who possessed them in the past and confer power and identity on those who possess them in the present. These objects are so bound up with the people associated with them that to acquire another's *taonga* “is to acquire another's rank, name, and history” (Weiner 1992: 64). An extreme form of possession closer to home is the relationship of Lois Roget and her ancestral property, described by Grant McCracken. Lois Roget lives in her family's farmhouse in Canada, a house that is “crowded with the objects that have descended from her family and from the family of her husband” (McCracken 1988: 44). Chairs, jars,

plates – all recall the dead who are associated with them and with her. In its intensity, Lois Roget's relationship with her objects shows another aspect of possession: just as she possesses them, so they possess her. They define who she is by embodying the social relationships that encompass the woman herself: "[T]o take possession of these objects is to risk being swamped by meaning. Their simple presence represents a daily, voluble insistence that the family is a lineage and Lois a descendent" (1988: 51). The merging of person, group and object that is apparent in the case of Lois Roget may be extreme in industrial societies, but its extremity is a matter of degree, not of kind. All possessions dissolve to a degree the unique and independent identity of the possessor, merging it into a group identity that defines and reflects the person, the object and those who previously possessed it.

At a more mundane level, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 86) say that people's descriptions of the important objects in their lives are marked by the theme of "kinship, of the ties that bind people to each other – that provide continuity in one's life and across generations", a theme that was apparent in the intensity of the way people talked: "It is the cumulative effect of hearing people talk about their parents, spouses, and children, the depth of their emotion in doing so, that is impressive." For instance, they report how two women explained why different things that they had were important to them and how they embodied the giver and the relationship that bound them. One woman explained what it meant to have a quilt that her relatives had made and given:

It means my whole family, that we all enjoy receiving these things. . . . And if somebody makes it and puts so much time in it, to me it's love that's been put into the object . . . that's more special to me than anything . . . if you know how many hours are put into it. [*Ellipses in original.*]

The other woman put it more succinctly: "Love, love. I can say that love covers it all because the people who have given them to me love me or they wouldn't have given me such things" (1981: 143).

The link between person and object is most visible in gift relations when giving goes wrong, when a present is rejected. For example, around Christmas every year there appear newspaper articles on what to do with unsuitable presents having titles like "Returning Unwanted Gifts Takes Much Tact" (New York Times News Service 1988). These articles are evidence that disposing of useless objects acquired as presents causes an embarrassment that no one would feel about disposing of useless objects acquired as commodities, such as paperback books that turn out to be boring or shoes that turn out to be the wrong style. People are uncomfortable about getting rid of an unwanted Christmas present because rejecting it rejects as well the giver and the giver's relationship to the recipient. This is apparent in extreme form in Theodore Caplow's observation (1984: 1314) of a marked association in

Middletown between open criticism of a spouse's Christmas present to oneself and subsequent rejection of the spouse in separation or divorce. This link between giver and gift – Mauss's point (1990: 12) that to give "is to make a present of some part of oneself" – is expressed by the unhappy parents who wrote to Miss Manners, an advice columnist, of their "concern when a gift [to an adult child] of hand-woven place mats was opened and held up to the wallpaper to ensure that it was a perfect color match . . . . It was, but our hearts were in our throats." These parents go on to ask the obvious question: does this scrutiny of the material nature of their gift mean "a rejection of us or our values?" Your children, Miss Manners replied, "ought at least to conceal from you even the possibility that your presents might not match their tastes". Finally, and appropriately, she says that if the parents want to assure a grateful reception of their presents, they might "give family momentos, whose value is beyond the question of mere taste" (Martin 1988).

In contrast to the inalienability of possessions is the alienability of commodities. I will use "ownership" and "property" to refer to this sort of relationship between person and object. Property, the form of ownership in a commodity system, speaks not of a "close relationship between person and thing", says Daniel Miller (1987: 120–1), but of "abstract relationships between anonymous people and postulated objects". Any person can own any thing, and ownership does not mark the object with the identity of the owner, nor does it mark the person with the identity of the object. Sheer property is without identity, which makes it alienable. This may explain why medieval sumptuary regulations are so incomprehensible. From the commodity view, an ordinary person wearing the clothes of the aristocracy, for example, is nothing more than a variety of emulation. From an older view of the relationship of people and things, however, the act comes to resemble transubstantiation, an altogether more serious matter.<sup>1</sup>

In a commodity transaction the object is alienated from the person who gave it. The bottle of wine that I buy at Safeway is not linked to them in any significant way once I pay my money and walk out the door; and if I do not like it after the first glass I can pour it down the drain. On the other hand, the bottle of wine that my mother gives me is her choice for me. It is a token of her concern and affection for me, a token that she is my mother, and thus bears her identity; and even if it were a wine I did not like, I would not simply throw it out. This is illustrated by the way a householder explained to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 66, emphasis added) the reason why the painting was there above the sofa: "My parents gave it . . . to us. They saw the empty space above the sofa and one day they brought us this picture to fill it. *It's not my style, but they gave it to us so I keep it.*"

This distinction between inalienable gifts and alienable commodities parallels a distinction between the way people think about objects in gift relations and in commodity relations. The object as a gift is unique. What Mauss (1990: 24) says about the *kula* valuables of the Trobriand Islands expresses this in

heightened form: they "are not unimportant things, mere pieces of money. Each one . . . has its name, a personality, a history, and even a tale attached to it." But even the most ordinary object given as a gift is unique because it is marked by the links between the giver, the recipient and the occasion of the giving. As Jean Baudrillard (1981: 64) puts it, "once it has been given – and *because* of this – it is *this* object and not another. The gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging it and the unique moment of the exchange." If I were to lose the cufflinks that my son gave me on my birthday and buy myself an identical pair as a replacement, they would be a cheat. They would not really be the same, for they would not be the pair he gave me and I would know, even if I kept it a secret from him. In contrast, in commodity relationships people think of objects as abstract bundles of utilities and values that are precisely not unique. If I were to lose a company envelope and had to get another from the supply room, it would make no difference because, from my point of view, the two envelopes are the same.

In other words, objects in commodity relations are fungible, a legal term that means capable of replacing or being replaced by another item meeting the requisite definition. Hence, when I place an order for a thousand barrels of Brent crude oil, an ounce of gold, a Mars Bar, I am not dissatisfied because I got this thousand barrels, this ounce, this Mars Bar, instead of that one. Instead, were I to consider the matter at all, I would be satisfied with any item that met the criteria of what I ordered, because each is freely substitutable within its class and hence is fungible. This, after all, is a goal of mass production and the basis of product advertising and mail-order catalogues.

The distinction between inalienable gifts and alienable commodities parallels another important distinction, that between the way people think about people in gift relations and in commodity relations. In gift relations people are thought of or identified in terms of their fundamental, inalienable attributes and relationships, and hence are unique. My brother is my brother because of our very biological substance (as our culture understands these things), not to mention the experiences we have shared, and he cannot be replaced by anyone else, even of the same age, occupation and general characteristics. He is unique. On the other hand, in commodity relations people are identified in terms of attributes that are not inalienably theirs. When I pay for my groceries, I give my money to the person behind the counter because that person occupies a position in an organization. That position is alienable. The person can be promoted or fired or can quit, and still be the same person. If a new face appears behind the counter, I will pay the new person and not the old. When I am trying to find someone to take my money, any competent clerk will do. This indicates that in commodity relations it is not only objects that are fungible; people are fungible too.

The point I have made in the preceding paragraphs is that in gift relationships the people and the objects involved are thought of as unique and inalienably linked to each other. As Mauss (1990: 33) says of gifts in archaic

societies, they "are never completely detached from those carrying out the exchange. The mutual ties and alliance they establish are comparatively indissoluble", just as Lois Roget and her ancestors are never completely separated from the objects that they have in common and that bind them. On the other hand, in commodity relationships both the parties and the objects are fungible rather than unique and are alienable rather than inalienable: they are linked to each other in no enduring, personal way. I may like the old supermarket clerk more than the new one, but if I pay the new one, the groceries I buy become my property just as much as with the old one. The consequence is that commodities are alienated not only from the people who transact them, but even from the people who buy and own them.

My point that commodities and commodity relations are anonymous is a generalization, for the different things we buy are more or less perfect commodities, and so are more or less impersonal. In fact, Keith Hart (1986: 642) argues that in many circumstances even money is increasingly "bound up with tokens of personal identity", though appropriately these tokens are themselves impersonal: credit cards may bear our names, but they are awarded only after an impersonal assessment of our financial history and prospects. Some objects bought and sold do bear a personal identity, particularly of those who made them. Works of design, art and craft fall most easily into this category, and it is appropriate that they usually bear the maker's name or mark. The special relationship of creator and object is recognized in copyright law, as well as in continuing claims that creators should have a say in what they create even after it is sold: artists and writers should have a say in the use of their art, architects should have a say in the extension or modification of their buildings and so forth (see, e.g., Morrison 1988; Sutherland 1990). However, these qualifications do not contradict the point that commodities are impersonal. Instead, they show that not everything that we buy and sell is a pure commodity.

I have used the links between person and thing as a way of explaining how people transact those things. Because link and transaction are related, however, we can reverse the explanatory process and use the form of transaction to indicate how people see the links between person and thing. In particular, legal prohibition or moral censure of the buying or selling of something is a sign that the thing is so closely a part of the possessor that its alienation is not permitted. For example, one cannot sell one's vote, which is inalienably one's own as a consequence of one's citizenship: a person cannot go to a polling place four or five times and claim the right to do so based on the purchase of the franchise of three or four other people. Equally, one cannot sell one's decision on how to vote: the law will not enforce a contract in which Jones is obliged to vote as Smith directs in return for the payment of a sum of money. One can, however, give that decision as a gift. One cannot sell oneself, for that is slavery: one cannot, then, be alienated from oneself. But one can sell one's labor power, and that with relatively few restrictions.

In the United States, one cannot sell one's sexuality, for in almost all states that is the crime of prostitution, but one can give it as a gift. This list could be extended, but doing so would not add to the basic point, that restrictions on what can be sold indicate how society sees the link between people and certain sorts of things.

Thus far I have contrasted the inalienability of the gift relationship with the alienability and impersonality of objects and people in commodity relations. This leads to Mauss's (1990: 47) more general point that the evolution of society entails an increasing de-socialization of objects, their growing cultural separation from people and their social relationships: "We live in societies that draw a strict distinction . . . between . . . things and persons." With this evolution, people increasingly think of objects in terms of abstract and impersonal frames of value, particularly exchange value, of which monetary amount is the definitive, anonymous marker (Gregory 1980: 640). This is simply another side of what Karl Polanyi (1957) described as the spread of commodity markets for land, labor and capital in the nineteenth century.

In the extreme form of commodity transaction, the circulation of capital, this abstract impersonality means that only exchange value matters: a check, a bank draft, cash, debentures and electronic interbank transfers for the same amount all are the same, and the value of each is fully distinct from the instrument that bears it. In asserting this I do not mean that a customer seeking a loaf of bread will be satisfied with any commodity of an equal cash value. I am suggesting, however, that with the growing importance of commodity relations the customer is increasingly predisposed to reduce all loaves of bread to this single measure of value: money cost. This, after all, is the point of consumer-oriented reforms like unit-pricing in food stores: products of different qualities are reduced to the uniform measure of pennies per pound. Money is the great leveller, good for all debts, public and private. As Marx observed in *Capital*, "[e]very one knows, if he knows nothing else, that commodities have a value-form common to them all . . . I mean their money-form" (in Tucker 1978: 313). In this sense, in this orientation toward exchange value, the transactors are indifferent to the concrete identity of the object used to meet an obligation.

I have described the second element of the definition of gift relations, that they involve inalienable objects. Objects as commodities are neutral and impersonal tokens of abstract value, given or withheld by autonomous individuals as calculation and self-interest dictate. However, objects as gifts bear, together with their use and exchange value, the identity of the giver and the relationship between giver and recipient, an identity that is not encompassed by the more conventional sociological views of objects that I described in the Introduction. Implicit in the issue of alienability is another issue, the ways that people think of people. Those who transact and the objects transacted in pure gift relations are viewed in terms of their basic,

inalienable identities and relationships, so that they are uniquely specified and linked to each other. In pure commodity relations, on the other hand, they are viewed in terms of their accidental identities and relationships, so that they are identified in terms of abstract and general structures, whether of utility or of exchange or sign value, and so are fungible rather than unique.

### RELATED AND MUTUALLY-OBLIGATED TRANSACTORS

I turn now to the last element of gift relations: gifts are exchanged by related and mutually-obligated transactors. In a gift relationship, the parties are linked by their inalienable attributes, so that the relationship is part of their basic identity, as is their obligation to give, receive and repay gifts in appropriate ways. My mother and I are linked by what our society sees as inalienable attributes. Our blood relationship defines each of us and imposes on each of us the obligation to transact in certain ways in certain circumstances. Thus, gift transactors are social persons defined in significant ways by their inalienable positions in a structure of personal social relations that encompasses them. This is the import of Jonathan Parry's (1986: 456) observation that for Mauss "[i]t is not individuals but . . . *moral persons* who carry on exchanges."

In many societies dominated by gift exchange the structure of kinship provides the basis for people's identities and their relations with each other, and thus their obligations to transact with each other. In industrial societies it is typically the structure of the household and family, and to a lesser extent friendship and neighborhood, that does these things (Barnett and Silverman 1979; Schneider, D. 1979, 1980). This moral personality within an encompassing structure is manifest by Lois Roget, the descendent in the encompassing lineages defined by the ancestral objects that she possesses. It is illustrated in a more mundane way by several of the English couples that Penny Mansfield and Jean Collard interviewed in their study of new marriages. These two sociologists wanted to interview husbands and wives separately, but met with objection: the couples "felt our request indirectly suggested a bias on our part toward perceiving them as two separate individuals rather than as a married pair, an issue about which we discovered a high degree of sensitivity" (Mansfield and Collard 1988: 38).

To stress the links and obligations between gift transactors is not to deny that people in commodity relations may also be linked and obligated to each other. But they are so in very different ways. Because commodity systems rest on "the social conditions of the reproduction of *things*" (Gregory 1980: 641), the parties to commodity transactions typically are defined and linked by their complementary positions in the system of production and distribution, which is to say the class system and the division of labor. Though people recognize that these positions are important, the fact that they value improving

one's position in the occupational order indicates that they are not inalienable bases of identity. Those who transact commodities, then, are linked to each other only in an impersonal, abstract and general sense. Thus, I buy from Sally Jones because her position is store clerk, and I buy at all because my position as wage worker means that I do not make things to satisfy my need. My need to buy is a general one, and I need not transact with Sally Jones herself, for, as I have pointed out, she is fungible and fully substitutable by any other store clerk. She and I are linked only abstractly and fortuitously: she can change her job, I can shop elsewhere.

Likewise, the obligations between people in commodity relations do not bear on their inalienable beings, but on their accidental and alienable aspects. For instance, if I fail to make my mortgage payments the bank may be able to seize my property to recover its money, but it has no claim on me as a free and independent person: debt servitude does not exist. Similarly, completing the mortgage contract satisfactorily does not bestow upon me or the bank or any of the people who work there the right to make further claims upon each other. The bank and I may come away from our transaction with a good opinion of each other, which may increase the likelihood that I will re-mortgage my house with them. But the successful completion of the transaction itself does not mean that I have a link with the bank and its money or that the bank has a link with me and my house.

In gift transactions the bond of mutual obligation and relationship is reinforced by the inalienability of the gift, which gives the giver a continuing claim upon the object and the recipient. The extent of this will vary in different societies, and in extreme cases the giver will have a claim on whatever accrues to the recipient through the use of the object. Thus, in a famous passage Mauss reports the words of a Maori, Tamate Ranaipiri. To paraphrase what Ranaipiri said: if you give me a valuable item that I then give to someone else, and if that other person then reciprocates with a second item, I must return that second item to you, for it embodies the spirit of what you gave me. If I fail to do so, "serious harm might come to me, even death" (Mauss 1990: 11; see also Parry 1986: 462-6; Sahlins 1974b: ch. 4). On the other hand, the mutual independence of commodity transactors is reinforced by the fact that the object transacted is alienated. Once I receive a commodity, it is mine to do with as I please. I can destroy it wantonly, consume it or use it to create wealth, all at my own discretion. Those involved with the commodity's production or with the transaction in which I acquired it have no claim on it or me once the transaction is completed. I do not expect a letter from my bank, politely reminding me that it was with their money that I bought my house way back when, that they noticed that now its value has doubled and that they want their share of the increase. ("We aren't being unreasonable. Look, we only want a half of the increase! Not at all greedy, considering you wouldn't even have the house if it hadn't been for us.") On the other hand, in places where gift logic is more powerful, those who originally possessed

something can and do make claims on the benefits others have gained from the use of that thing. Thus, in Papua New Guinea, indigenous land-holding groups who, so settlers thought, sold their land decades ago, presently lay serious claims to "compensation", a share of the wealth generated through the use of their land.

I have said that in commodity relationships the link between the parties is based on alienable attributes, while in gift relationships it is based on inalienable identities. People tend to see some sorts of identities as alienable and others as inalienable. For example, generally people see a job as insubstantial, and they expect people to change jobs freely if opportunities arise. People would not turn a hair if they heard someone discuss a job change like this: "You know, I fought it. I love this job, and I've been here for over ten years. But what could I do? The new job pays a whole lot better, it's in a really nice town, it's a big-name company, and it will give me the chance for better jobs later on. What could I do? I had to make the change!" Conversely, people generally take being married as an identity that is inalienable. They would not know what to make of a man who discussed his divorce and new marriage like this: "You know, I fought it. I love my wife, and I've been with her for over ten years. But what could I do? The new wife is a whole lot better in bed and kitchen, she's in a really nice town, she's from a high-society family and it will give me the chance for better marriages later on. What could I do? I had to make the change!"

There are, however, important exceptions to such generalizations. People distinguish between a real marriage and a marriage of convenience, even though the mechanics of getting married are the same in both cases. Equally, some jobs are different. For example, people see the work of artists as the result of an inalienable "vision" or "gift". Likewise, some people in more mundane fields see their work as an expression of their inalienable identity (see, e.g., Ronco and Peattie 1988). A striking example is provided by an entrepreneur, Paul Hawken (1987: 9), who says that he started a health-food store because of his core biological being:

Hindered by asthma since I was six weeks old, I had begun experimenting with my diet and discovered a disquieting correlation. When I stopped eating the normal American diet of sugar, fats, alcohol, chemicals, and additives, I felt better . . . I was left with a most depressing conclusion: if I wanted to be healthy, I'd have to become a food nut. I bid a fond farewell to my junk foods.

Of course the notion of a calling (e.g. Weber, M. 1958: ch. 2) points to an older link between work and inalienable identity. However, like Hawken's explanation, with calling it is important to distinguish between the sort of work one does (calling or, less archaically, occupation) and the specific institution in which and people with whom one does it (job). For most people,

especially wage workers, the latter is much less likely to reflect inalienable identity than the former (see Nakane 1986: 170–3).

Although a gift relationship entails inalienable identities, relations and obligations, these are not the automatic consequence of the core identity of the parties to the relationship. Instead, what is transacted, and how, can be important for defining transactors and their relationship to each other (e.g. Piot 1991: 411–12). As Marshall Sahlins (1974a: 186) puts it, “[i]f friends make gifts, gifts make friends”. The task of establishing a friendship, for example, entails large amounts of the appropriate kind of give and take (see, e.g., Hunt and Satterlee 1986). Similarly, etiquette books and common understanding agree that the giving and acceptance of personal clothing between a man and a woman tends to define the relationship in a particular way, as one of intimacy. Alternatively, the rejection of such a present is a denial of that definition, as is the failure to give such a present when it is right to do so. This is recognized in the aphorism that “a man should not dress a girl unless he also undresses her” (in Shurmer 1971: 1244). More decorously, “Emily Post”, an arbiter of etiquette, allows a boyfriend to give a girlfriend accessories like gloves or a belt, “but not ‘personal’ clothing” (Post, Elizabeth 1969: 604). To an earlier generation an earlier Post was more articulate about what the bride-to-be could accept from her affianced and what accepting the wrong present would mean. The woman can accept

anything he chooses to select, except wearing apparel or a motor car or a house and furniture – anything that can be classified as “maintenance.” . . . [For] it would be starting life on a false basis, and putting herself in a category with women of another class, to be clothed by any man, whether he is soon to be her husband or not.

(Post, Emily 1927: 311)

I said that for most Britons and Americans the core relationships that link them inalienably to others are those of household and family, especially marriage and parentage, and transaction is central to these relationships. This is most obvious in marriage, which requires more than just a formal ceremony. The couple also must transact, must give and take in an appropriate way, but although this may resemble transaction between individuals, it is more complex. The couple’s relationship entails a communal existence, a structure that encompasses and defines the two people and makes them “moral persons” within the marriage. One spouse does not merely transact with the other, but at the same time contributes to that communal existence, that “us” that transcends and redefines “you” and “me”. For example, in their study of newly married couples, Mansfield and Collard (1988: 113, 151) found this underlay much of what people said about their joint efforts to set up a home, as it appeared in the way working husbands came to see their work in terms of their obligation to contribute to their marriage. Even settled couples often experience the things they do as part of the creation and

maintenance of a group and a communal existence. As one woman from a London suburb described her housework to Peter Willmott and Michael Young (1960: 132).

I often feel at the end of the day that all my efforts have been of no avail. I remember all the polishing and cleaning, washing and ironing, that will have to be done all over again, and like many other housewives I wish that my life could be a bit more exciting sometimes. But when the evening fire glows, when the house becomes a home, then it seems to me that this is perhaps the path to true happiness.

Culturally, the husband and wife who live separate lives and go their separate ways and so have no “us” have a marriage as false as a marriage of convenience. In fact, the give and take and the creation of that “us” is, in some regards, more important than the legal form of marriage. In many industrial societies the rights to “palimony” by a *de facto* spouse (Oldham and Caudill 1984) and to inheritance by children born out of wedlock (Anderson, S. 1987) show that such relationships are coming to generate legal rights and obligations indistinguishable from those in formal marriage.

Transactions are even important in creating relations of parenthood. Many Westerners are predisposed to see parentage as a biological relationship that naturally entails affection and mutual identity. In extreme cases, people claim to feel this affection and identity on being united with the child that they had put up for adoption as an infant years ago (Modell, Judith 1986). However, David Schneider argues (1979, 1984) that in most societies, including the United States, parenthood is not just an expression of the consequences of sexual intercourse. Father and daughter are not so only and wholly because the germ plasm of one was instrumental in constituting the other. Rather, the relationship contains transactional elements as well. Parents look after their children, feed, clothe and house them, activities that bind the children to the people who care for them. One adoptive parent said: “There is only one reality. And that is the definition of parenting . . . That is an action. It is not a title given to anyone because you have blood. It’s a title given because you care, nurture and bring a child up” (Daily Progress 1993). As Diana Barker (1972: 585) put it in her analysis of the ways that parents look after their older children, in these activities “material goods and physical services are translated into lasting relationships” (see also Corrigan 1989). Thus, the relationship is inextricably linked to the transactions that take place within it, for those transactions express and recreate the relationship and thus the identities of the people and even the objects that are encompassed by it.

Indeed, in some ways transaction creates the very identities of those involved in it. For instance, my identity springs in part from my relationships with those around me. This is most clear with my relationships with my wife and children, my parents and brother. It is also true, to a lesser degree, with the relationships I have with colleagues in my department and elsewhere, and

even with students I have taught. In an older and somewhat discredited terminology, I have distinct statuses and roles with relation to these sets of people, and over the course of time I internalize – think of myself in terms of – those statuses and roles. My identity, then, springs from those relationships. And those relationships in turn are not timeless things; rather, they are created, recreated and modified by the give and take that goes on within them. Although I have sketched the link between exchange and identity in very general terms, there is nothing mysterious about the processes involved.

### VARIATIONS IN ACTION AND MEANING

The Maussian model provides a framework that allows us to consider transactions in terms of three variables: what is the degree of the obligation to transact; how is the object associated with the transactors; how are transactors linked and obligated to each other. While this model describes transactions, it also indicates the importance of a form of people's conceptions of objects that is distinct from the public structures of meaning and identity that have attracted sociological attention. While people see objects as bearers of sign or status value, they also see them as more or less impersonal, as possessions or commodities.

This identity of objects is shaped by the relationships and transactions in which they exist. However, objects have a past and hence have an identity before they are transacted. An object exists not only as it is transacted, but, in Igor Kopytoff's (1986: 68) words, also as "a culturally constructed entity endowed with culturally specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories". This meaning can spring from the specific history of the specific object, its provenance: who owned it previously, what their relationship was to it, how I got it, what the nature of that transaction was. However, in the absence of specific knowledge it can come as well from a general understanding of a class of objects, an understanding that people use to interpret the specific object they confront and that springs in part from people's individual and collective experience with different classes of objects. Thus, while I may not know the history of a specific shirt or painting, I have a general sense that shirts are produced in factories by anonymous wage workers while paintings are personal expressions of individual artists. Thus, I am predisposed to see the shirt as an impersonal commodity and the painting as a possession.

Although it is convenient to speak of general understandings it can also be misleading, for people vary in the ways that they think about objects and social relationships. I deal with these throughout this book, but it is important to recognize them at the outset. Perhaps the most striking variation is between men and women, who appear to be oriented differently toward the realms of gift and commodity, though even the description of variation by gender obscures variation within genders. Kinship, the core instance of gift relations

in industrial societies, is the province of women rather than men, for it is they who arrange the visits, write the letters and remember the relationships that those visits and letters mark and maintain (e.g. Firth 1956; Komarovskiy 1987; Loudon 1961; Robins and Tomanec 1962; Willmott and Young 1960; Young and Willmott 1986). Similarly, Christmas, probably the most important celebration of family and kinship, is largely women's work. They are the ones who draw up the lists, buy the presents and cook the Christmas dinners (e.g. Caplow 1984; Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983: 188–92; Cheal 1987). Given this, it is not surprising that women appear to think of the objects that surround them somewhat differently than do men. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg Halton (1981: 60–1) found that while both adult men and women talked about objects in terms of a "concern for other people" and "responsibility for maintaining a network of social ties", men rather than women also tended to talk about objects in egocentric ways, in terms of "personal accomplishment, or an ideal they strive to achieve". (Helga Dittmar [1992] and Sonia Livingstone [1992] describe similar differences between men and women.) However, these differences did not appear among the children and adolescents they interviewed, who tended to talk uniformly about the sensual pleasure that objects gave them. Further, older adults, regardless of gender, tended to talk primarily in terms of social relationship.

These gender differences can involve more than who does what. For instance, Francesca Cancian has argued that adult men and women differ in the ways that they think about one of the strongest of personal attachments, love. She says that women tend to equate love with the emotional expression that comes with "talking about feeling", while men are more likely to express attachments through actions, and especially instrumental actions such as "providing help, sharing activities" (Cancian 1986: 692). Not only can this difference lead to misunderstandings between a man and a woman, it means that men are less prone to draw a sharp distinction between instrumental and expressive activities – a lack of distinction that, Cancian (1986: 695) says, also is more common farther down the economic scale.

In addition to these gender differences, and perhaps partly underlying them, are differences in people's experiences with objects in commercial realms, my subject in the next three chapters. Those chapters are not concerned just with the changing formal aspects of production and circulation, such as whether workers are wage employees or family members and whether purchasers pay with cash or barter for objects. These are important, but from my perspective they are so primarily as factors that affect the experiences that people have with the specific objects in their lives, experiences that are likely to shape their understanding of different sorts of objects in general. These experiences have changed markedly over the past three centuries, though changes have affected people of different social locations differently.

John Rule (1987: 104) points to the distinction between people's formal

relationships with objects on the one hand, and on the other their interpretation of objects. He does so when he says that a skilled shipwright in the nineteenth century

could often recognise his own work [in part of the ship] and describe it still as "his" work even when it had been alienated from him by sale. This hidden form of property, an element of continuing "creative possession" is missed by a concept of property limited to a nation [*sic*: "notion"?] of alienated material rights, yet it describes the property that skill invents.

Workers who experience the things they make in this way are likely to understand manufactured objects differently from those whose experience is more impersonal – a population where skilled work is the norm is likely to understand manufactured objects differently from a population where unskilled machine tending, much less office work, is the norm.

As I show in the following chapters, people's experience of the production and circulation of objects in Western societies has not always, or so uniformly, been one of commodity relations and commodity transactions. Instead, this experience is a relatively recent one for the bulk of the population, and for some the world of work is still overlaid with personal and family relations, as Betty Beach (1989) describes for homeworkers in the Maine shoe industry. These changes make it clear that the distinction between gifts and commodities such as exists in the modern West is an historical rather than a universal fact. In describing these changes, the following chapters help explain the changes that have occurred in the ways we think about people, objects and social relations.

## CHANGING PRODUCTION RELATIONS

I said in the last chapter that the cultural distinction between gifts and commodities is affected by historical changes in the ways that people experience objects in production and circulation, my concerns in this chapter and the next two. The overall trend of these changes has been a growing alienation of objects from people.

In production this alienation has two distinct dimensions. One is the degree to which the individual producer controls and shapes, and hence is embodied in, the production process and the product. This is an element of the classic Marxian model of alienation, and Zygmunt Bauman (1982) argues that it is more important for understanding labor history, at least in England, than is the control of surplus product. At one extreme, the producer controls and determines totally what is to be produced, how it is to be produced and what is to be done with it; at the other extreme, the producer works at the direction of others in a production setting totally determined by others. The second dimension, which has attracted less attention, is the degree to which production takes place in the context of enduring, pervasive and personal structures and relationships. At one extreme, production occurs among those bound permanently and inalienably to each other in all aspects of their lives before, during and after they cooperate in production; at the other extreme, it occurs among strangers who come together only fleetingly to produce.

Understanding the changing nature of production is important for understanding the changing ways people think about objects. The common experience of production becomes transmuted into a common cultural understanding of the nature of production and of manufactured objects. When production is not alienated from producers, people are likely to think of objects as possessions, whether or not they know how any particular item is produced. Alternatively, if production is commonly alienated from producers, people are likely to see objects as commodities, anonymous and impersonal. This is the point Daniel Miller (1987: 115) makes when he says that "manufacture" has become "reified as having a separate and particular connotation", with the result that "manufactured objects" come to symbolize "a particular form of production and its attendant social relations".