The return of the gift - Richard Thurnwald and Bronislaw Malinowski on reciprocity and primitive economy

The title of this paper comes from a recently published book by Harry Liebersohn. His history of the idea of the gift is a story which begins with Edmund Burke’s struggles against Warren Hastings in the eighteenth century. It ends with Marcel Mauss’s famous essay published in 1925. Liebersohn argues that Burke was the last great European writer to emerge from a world of reciprocal economic and social ties. He understood the importance of gift-giving. Hastings had been amassing wealth in a way that undermined India’s political culture. His acceptance of gifts, really bribes, set a terrible example of despotism in the place of the mutually beneficial interrelationship of ruler and ruled. In the intervening epoch between Burke and Mauss, with the Mills and the marginalists in the ascendant, ideas of reciprocity and gift-exchange were forgotten, or pushed right to the edges of Europeans’ understanding of political economy. Anthropology and anthropologists to return the gift to the present.

According to Liebersohn it was Mauss’s singular genius to have excavated the ideas of reciprocity and gift-exchange from amongst the writings of anthropologists engaging with non-Western peoples across the globe. As Liebersohn writes, “The journey to the far side of the world was part of a circuit that led back to Europe's own archaic past”.¹ Time is transmuted into space. In both dimensions tradition is held up as a symbol of solidarity in opposition to the victory of the money-form. Liebersohn follows Mauss in implying that traditional political economy - an economy of reciprocity and the gift - can challenge the hegemony of a kind of economic thought that merely reproduces, rather than challenges the assumptions of, capitalist relations of production. Rather than follow his lead down the path of the conceptual longue durée, however, I will focus on

two of the anthropologists that form key components in Liebersohn’s intellectual circuit - Bronislaw Malinowski and Richard Thurnwald. I want to do two things in this paper. The majority of the paper will involve an exposition of these thinkers’ ideas about reciprocity and gift-exchange. Then, by way of conclusion, I’ll tackle Liebersohn’s idea that the gift can act as a kind of conceptual boomerang, emerging from tradition through modernity and back again. This will involve a few thoughts about some of the problems and possibilities of retooling Malinowski and Thurnwald’s works and concepts for economic and political applications today.

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In December 1913, Richard Thurnwald journeyed up the Kaiserin Augusta (Sepik) river into the interior of the German colony of New Guinea. He was part of an expedition that by October had amassed an inventory including hundreds of dead animals, over six thousand plants - five thousand eight hundred ethnological artefacts, three hundred skulls, and vocabularies in nine languages and dialects.² Weighed down with goods to trade - axes, knives, glass beads, mirrors and tobacco - he set off attended by fifty two local servants and his mechanic Fiebig.

He wrote up his research while stranded by war in Berkeley, California. The result, Bánaro Society, presents a picture of a community held in balance by a complex network of reciprocal kinship ties. Towards the beginning of the text Thurnwald defined the undergirding principle of these relationships. He wrote, “the principle of social reciprocity or the ‘retaliation of like for like’ […] seems to be the result of what is psychologically known as ‘adequate reaction,’ which is

² Liebersohn, The Return of the Gift p. 109
deeply rooted in man.”

Psychological principles, social organisation and community all reinforced themselves in Thurnwald’s work. The symmetry of reciprocal social ties is represented in the focal point of village life, the goblin hall [slide 2].

In Thurnwald’s view, the most important function of any society lies in its communal reproduction. A detailed examination of marriage and kinship therefore took on a key role in his understanding of Banaro thought, action and community. Banaro marriage was shot through with ideas of reciprocity. It could be found in the mutual reinforcement of society through procreation and the division of labour between the sexes. It was compounded by the attendant practice of what he called ritual ‘orgies’.4

If I was to marry a woman from within the tribe then my wife-to-be’s brother would be expected to marry my sister. Before marriage, my future wife, like all women, would engage in an initiation ritual. She would have sex with a manifestation of the goblin in the goblin hall: the goblin would be played by my father’s mundu, his ritual partner, who sits opposite him in the hall as part of the facing tribal sept. The same would occur, reciprocally, to my sister: my future wife’s father’s mundu taking on the role of the goblin in this case. [slide 3] In turn, when my children are born and married, as a man with a mundu of my own, I would be expected to take part in these relationships with my children’s generation. [slide 4]

Thurnwald tells us that Banaro parents kill successive children of the same sex at child-birth in order to ensure an even distribution of men and women in the community.

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4 Ibid. p. 261
Yet despite this practice, the requisite exchange of brothers, sisters and father-in-laws’ *mundus* from across the different communal sub-groups was not always able to be completed. Enter the economy. When wife-exchange was not possible, valuable goods were traded in the woman’s place. Thurnwald wrote:

> Certain goods, so it seems to me, acquired buying power because they were taken in exchange for women, and thus became primitive money. [...] the buying of women might have been an outcome of difficulty with the above-mentioned system, wherever there was a lack in the number of participants. This, in my opinion, led to a simplification of the marriage system by the giving of economic valuables in requital, instead of proceeding to “natural exchange”.

With one fell swoop Adam Smith’s trucking and bartering savage is undone. It was the seeming tension in that term ‘natural exchange’ that Thurnwald diffused, showing that behind the existence of money lay the existence of the community. Exchange exists at all levels of society, but it is subsumed in the biological basis of social reproduction. A picture of primitive peoples as self-interested agents bartering goods based on utility was transformed. Barter and the use of money to exchange private property were not ‘natural’ in the first instance but the outcome of an unbalanced eugenic economy. Value finds its basis in society and society in biology. Money, a commodity to mediate private bargaining, was a recent invention in civilisational terms. It did not figure in primitive economies. However, lack of money did not preclude the creation of a complex society.

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5 Ibid. p. 274
Thurnwald developed the themes of *Banaro Society* in his 1932 monograph *Economics in Primitive Communities*. By this time he was Professor of Ethnology and Sociology at the University of Berlin. In *Economics in Primitive Communities* he reasserted the importance of the reproduction of the household, and of the community, as the basis of economics:

Economics is concerned not merely with the direction of instincts, with the plans and calculations of the individual: it is a social affair, dealing with different men as parts of a piece of interlocking machinery. The economics of the community practically consist of the economics of individual households.\(^6\)

The singular *Homo economicus* of ‘classical’ political economy has turned into what Thurnwald called, in the plural, *Homines Economici*.\(^7\) It is only with the creation of what Thurnwald termed an ‘associated commonwealth’ that money takes on its acquisitive role and individuals acquire their particular status. He wrote: money and wealth become “means for power and also means of subsistence of all the persons who function in the complicated mechanisms of the state. In this manner a new individualistic method of economy comes into being.”\(^8\) In the section ‘Notes on terms employed’ the state is placed on the same conceptual plane as the family: “*State*: A term employed for an aggregation of clans, castes, &c., under a dominant family, sept, or clan”\(^9\): no contract, no representation. Yet the associated commonwealth was only one route out of the primitive economy. The other form of non-primitive economy could be found in autarkic, autonomous, authoritarian ‘manors’.\(^10\)

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\(^6\) Richard Thurnwald *Economics in Primitive Communities* (Oxford University Press, 1932) p. xi-xii

\(^7\) Ibid. p. 4

\(^8\) Ibid p. 280

\(^9\) Ibid. p. viii

\(^10\) Ibid. p. 279
In his book *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* Bronislaw Malinowski hailed Thurnwald as the “one writer who fully appreciates the importance of reciprocity in primitive social organisation” and he praised Thurnwald’s work on the Banaro as “perhaps the best account of the social organisation of a savage tribe extant.”¹¹ Malinowski was a Polish-Born emigre and Professor at the LSE. Like Thurnwald he had studied with the German economist, and member of the ‘historical school’ of economics, Karl Bücher, in Leipzig. By the mid-1920s Malinowski was quickly becoming one of the most important and influential anthropologists in Britain. Malinowski and Thurnwald shared a fundamental insight: that communities are held in a fragile institutional tension that ensures their survival and reproduction. The role of social analysis is to uncover the structures that function to ensure this reproduction. His 1922 book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* played a large part in promoting, and propagating, the new approach of this functionalist method and is considered a classic of ethnographic writing.

The main subject of Malinowski’s *Argonauts* concerns the exchange of shell necklaces and armbands that circulate in trade-routes running in opposite directions around a number of islands off the North-East coast of Papua New Guinea [slide 6] known as the *kula*. Objects were traded whose exchange-value was based on prestige, history, tradition and magic. Trading partners were tied together across the archipelago, often continuing to exchange with each other throughout their lives. An object’s value increased depending on the prestige of its previous owners. Reciprocating for a given item with objects of similar value was a matter of respect, and solidarity, and ensured the ongoing partnership between the parties involved. Gift and counter-gift were expected to weigh

equally and ensured the feelings of sympathy and community that held the complex network together.

In a paper published in *The Economic Journal* in 1921 Malinowski wrote that in the Trobriands “everyone is working for somebody else. […] this] enmeshes the whole community into a network of reciprocal obligations and dues, one constant flow of gift and counter-gift”.\(^\text{12}\) Despite the wide and extensive trading of the people he studied, and their use of specialised objects of exchange to cement reciprocal social ties, Malinowski was at pains to point out that the highly-valued necklaces and arm-bands traded by the Trobrianders in the *kula* were not a form of primitive money.\(^\text{13}\) Money, according to Malinowski, implies the existence of a commodity which can represent value as a common measure regardless of origin and that can be used as a standard of deferred payment. In the South Seas no payment was deferred. Gift, in Malinowski’s terms, immediately implied counter-gift.\(^\text{14}\) All value was social and all exchange was regulated by custom. [slide 7]

Malinowski thought that his teacher, the German economist and anthropologist Karl Bücher, was wrong to presume that just because some primitive peoples did not possess money their societies must consequently exist in a pre-economic state.\(^\text{15}\) Likewise, the classical political economists, who saw exchange occurring amongst all primitive people, were wrong to conclude that money and private-property must therefore exist in all societies. Attacking the equation of economy with money and money with economy united both Thurnwald and Malinowski with a

\(^{12}\) B. Malinowski, ‘The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders’, *The Economic Journal*, 31 (1921) p. 8

\(^{13}\) Ibid. p. 15

\(^{14}\) Ibid. p. 9

\(^{15}\) Ibid. p. 1-2
common intellectual purpose. Malinowski persistently argued that primitive societies were structured in a form akin to what the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies meant by the term Gemeinschaft translated into English as ‘community’. And like another contemporary German sociologist Georg Simmel, he maintained that the development, or introduction of, money into a society had the effect of loosening communal ties and quickening the emergence of Gesellschaft - ‘civil society’. This was a uni-directional process; it was a transformation that could not be reversed.

Reading both Malinowski and Thurnwald alongside these two sociologists, and in conversation between themselves, would seem to suggest that a one way mirror exists between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. While we can perceive aspects of Gemeinschaft in the modern world - in the family, in churches and charity - we cannot look through the divide that separates the primitive from the modern and read back into traditional societies the ideals of modern Europe. Primitive societies are bounded communities with social structures that reflect the needs of the whole society. Overriding the differences between different kinds of societies was taken by Malinowski to lie at the heart of economic, and anthropological, errors when dealing with what he termed ‘tribal economics’, and therefore with Europeans’ colonial dealings with subject peoples. Malinowski certainly thought that an engagement with primitive communities would expand the imaginative repertoire of Western economic categories and concepts but insisted that we should be careful when translating terms and ideas from one domain into another. As with all things, a one-sided exchange can lead to possible misunderstandings.

If my reading of Malinowski and Thurnwald is correct then they both sought to draw a hard line between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’. Thurnwald and Malinowski certainly thought that their work on
reciprocity and gift-giving punctured the complacency of liberal political economy. Yet this was not because they contradicted its premises \textit{per se}, but because they disagreed with its applications in what they considered to be pre-modern societies. The key contribution which they made to the history of political economy was to argue that in primitive societies we do not see the dynamics of classical economics at play. Both warned against treating South Pacific economies as part of a simplistic evolutionary schema. For instance, Malinowski argued that the lack of a concept of ‘private ownership’ in the \textit{kula} did not mean the presence of ‘communism’. Likewise the existence of exchange did not mean that the Trobriand islanders acted like city traders. While a highly complex society, Papua New Guinea lacked the dynamic motors of Western economic development, the interplay between town and country that was so central to Adam Smith’s work, and between ‘housecraft’ and ‘statecraft’ so important for Aristotle. Many of the most familiar economic and political concepts used in the West simply did not apply.

In this light, the recent resurgence of interest in the gift by intellectual historians like Harry Liebersohn and by anthropologists like David Graeber and Keith Hart could look rather problematic. ‘Gift-exchange’ and ‘reciprocity’ appear to be useful concepts to combat neoliberal economics because they challenge its foundation on individuals and their self-interest. This is, in part, why Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi found Malinowski and Thurnwald’s work so compelling in the first place. If we believe Malinowski, it is useless to apply the terms of classical economics through the one way mirror into pre-modern societies, but, while not impossible, it may prove insuperably difficult to do the reverse - to apply insights from supposedly traditional societies into the fractured, fragmented, kaleidoscope world on the other side of the glass. The difficulty lies, in Tönnies’s terms, in distinguishing between those parts of ‘community’ that continue to exist and those aspects of ‘civil society’ which thrive precisely because the sociality which sustains them is not the kind of bounded relationship which is found in Banaro kinship or the \textit{kula} ring.
Another problem presents itself if we try to read these documents for presentist insights. This is a rather simple, historical, point. Recent archival research shows that Thurnwald had, in fact, only spent one tense afternoon on the fringes of one of the Banaro villages, unable to enter because of the hostile reception of its inhabitants. His description of the baroque profusion of their social reciprocity relied on interviews with two, most likely uninitiated, young men as he waited to travel to America after German New Guineau was invaded in 1914. In short, it is far from clear whether Banaro society functioned in the way he supposed given the paucity of his sources.

Malinowski’s work looks problematic in a different way. In a memorandum deposited in the LSE archives dated Christmas 1927 he argued that imperial powers should use colonial peoples’ already-existing social structures and cultures to modify primitive economics in line with metropolitan interests. He called this ‘indirect exploitation’. He wrote, “under competent initiative and anthropological guidance […] it could still be arranged on a large scale […] to develop indirectly the industries of some African tribes.”16 He presented his work in the Trobriand islands as an example of how to understand native economics and as a resource that could point out the areas in which subject peoples’ passions and interests could be ‘indirectly’ redirected. The kula was a case in point.

None of this means that I think the gift should be returned as damaged goods, only that we should be as careful and self-reflexive as we can when applying concepts across cultures and across wide ranges of time and space. It seems to me that if we are going to find new pathways in our political economy it is not by following Mauss and taking a tour of New Guineau - at least not

16 ‘Memorandum on Colonial Research - Christmas 1927’ LSE, MALINOWSKI 9/3 - Rockefeller Papers
immediately. In many ways we confront a world where ‘country’ has increasingly disappeared and
the ‘town’ is a space connected through new channels and informational super-highways, devouring
steel and coltan and data - bridging networks of agencies from Congolese mines to facebook users
and high-frequency trading algorithms. These are more often than not deeply un-reciprocal
relationships. We face a new environment if we believe that we have entered the ‘anthropocene’.
We face governments which are reputedly neoliberal making long-term economic plans and
implementing large-scale command and control measures over money supply, international trade
and global emissions. The connections in our modern political economy are as much about conflict
as they are about cooperation and often involve links between diverse communities and
corporations bound together by profit, geo-politics and fibre-optic cables not by biological kinship.
While we might appreciate the force of their arguments and the novelty of their methods, I would
argue that the complex contexts of Thurnwald and Malinowski’s theorising do not provide any
ready arguments against capitalist, or, more to the point, post-capitalist, relations of production and
exchange as some recent theorists of the gift seem to suggest. The gift emerged as a concept as the
result of attending to social reproduction. Theorising social reproduction in Britain today may lead
to other concepts. I suppose all of this means that I think that relying on a heavily theorised notion
‘tradition’ or ‘primitivity’ as the ground of your critique of modern economic forms may result in
building on shifting sands if all traditions are invented. In so far as the history of political economy
can be of some aid to contemporary economic theorising it might reveal some of the more
promising avenues of enquiry for current thinking, but it might also play a negative, or critical, role
in pointing out those paths that look like they could be irremediably overgrown. [slide 8]