

[On giving, trading and ritual sacrifice](#)

Mark Anspach

Global markets, anonymous victims

Interview by Yannick Blanc and Michel Bessières, respectively writer and *UNESCO Courier* journalist.



[Wearing death masks, workers protest a factory closure in eastern France.](#)



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In the great metropolises of market society, hundreds of homeless people die each year. We don't even know their names. For the American anthropologist Mark Anspach¹, the market economy has not succeeded in ridding us of sacrifice. And yet, its rationality was supposed to distance us from ritual violence and those who practice it

You study exchange in primitive societies as well as in market society. Do transactions everywhere match the description of economists?

No. The economists' myth tells us that exchange fulfills a simple instrumental function. You live in a community that produces yams and I live in a community that raises pigs, so we enter into an exchange in order to vary our diets. One fine day, to facilitate our transactions, we invent a system of equivalence between our products—money—and there you have it. But, as anthropologists have shown us, Marcel Mauss in particular, the main form of exchange in so-called "primitive" societies is the gift, which cannot be reduced to economic rationality.

You mean to say that people did not invent exchange in order to satisfy their material needs?

In "primitive" societies, families may be quite capable of producing what is necessary for their subsistence. And yet, they will still enter into exchanges. Why? For the sake of exchanging—of forging relations with others and participating in the circle of positive reciprocity on which social life is founded. To refuse to exchange, to keep what one has for oneself, amounts to a kind of incestuous indulgence, as Claude Lévi-Strauss observes. He quotes a proverb from New Guinea that makes this point: "Your own mother, your own sister, your own pigs, your own yams, you may not eat. Those of other people, you may eat." If you eat your own yams, your neighbour is liable to think they're better than his, and your relationship could turn acrimonious.

Even if my yams are just like his?



[Abraham and Isaac: the birth of an “anti-sacrificial” consciousness.](#)

On giving, trading and ritual sacrifice

Adam Smith (1723-1790) recommended giving free rein to individual rivalries with the idea that their combination produced order. To describe this phenomenon, he invented the metaphor of the “invisible hand of the market.”

Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) described, in *The Gift*, the systems of ritual exchange among native Americans or Melanesians. For him, the gift is a “total social fact,” at once religious, economic, political, matrimonial, legal.... Today, the *Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales* (MAUSS) lays claim to his heritage and criticizes economic reductionism

Even then, there could arise what the thinker René Girard (see inset) calls a mimetic rivalry, based on reciprocal imitation. The neighbour who sees you feasting on your yams will want to do the same as you, that is, he will want to eat your yams. What seems to be desirable to you becomes desirable for him. But if he tries to appropriate your yams for himself, you won't want to surrender them. What is desirable for him becomes equally desirable for you. In this manner people can easily come to blows over nothing. Ritual prohibitions serve to prevent rivalries of this kind. The incest taboo, for example, keeps men from fighting for the women who are closest at hand, those who belong to the same family. A crime of passion could trigger a general crisis. It is hard for us to conceive just how dangerous the slightest dispute can be in a community with no police or judicial system. As with a hemophiliac, any bloodshed could prove fatal. If you kill your neighbour when he tries to grab your yams, his relatives will come after you next. Each act of violence must be avenged by a new act of violence, and the ensuing chain reaction can ultimately engulf the entire community.

Doesn't this approach betray the belief that human beings are fundamentally violent?

People are not fundamentally violent, they are fundamentally social. Once they have satisfied their material instincts—eating and reproducing— they still sense a lack. They desire something more, but what? Since Freud, we assume that desire is the most individual, most intimate thing there is about a person. For René Girard, this is a romantic myth. On the contrary, people do not know what to desire, it is something they must learn. And they learn it in the same way they learn all the essential things in life: by observing and imitating others. Humans are incomplete beings who are born radically dependent on others. It is no wonder they show themselves to be fascinated by others. But it is precisely people's fascination with each other which brings them so easily into conflict, and can sometimes embroil them in the worst forms of violence.

All your explanations presuppose a universal human nature.

I believe one should stand firm on this point: yes, there is a universal human nature. That does not mean that people everywhere are identical. Since people do not know instinctively what they want to do in life, their culture must offer them answers. Obviously, the range of answers varies from one culture to another. It is not such and such a model of behaviour that is universal, it is the need to have models. If people do not know what to desire, if each person tends to desire what others desire, the culture must channel desires in such a way that they do not constantly converge on the same objects. It must defuse the vicious circle of reciprocal desire, where each wants what the other wants, or risk descending into reciprocal violence. The paradoxical law of revenge commands the killing of the killer. And the killer's

(www.revuedumauss.com).

In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzes marriage as a form of reciprocity between kin groups, but he does not explain its origin (see Lucien Scubla, Lire Lévi-Strauss, Odile Jacob, 1998).

René Girard has taught in the United States since 1947. His writings take us back to the violent origins of exchange. In all human relationships, he discerns the mechanism of mimetic rivalry, set forth in his first major work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. We desire only what others desire. When this contagious rivalry seizes hold of a whole community, it is not appeased until the "all against all" is transformed into an "all against one." One antagonist is killed and peace returns. The victim then appears all-powerful since he or she was able to restore order. His following book, *Violence and the Sacred*, shows how the sacred arises out of sacrifice. In *The Scapegoat*, he develops the idea that the Christian scriptures inaugurated a long process of questioning this founding violence. Latest book: *I Saw*

killer? Here one falls into a new vicious circle.

And is there any way out?

What interests me is precisely to see how the shift is made from vicious circles to virtuous ones, from the negative reciprocity of violence to the positive reciprocity of the gift. With vengeance, each person responds to an offence committed by the other, each reacts to what the other has already done. This comes down to letting oneself be dominated by the past. In gift exchange, on the other hand, one turns toward the future and anticipates the desire of the other. Instead of waiting for your neighbour to come steal your yams, you offer them to him today, and it is up to him to do the same for you tomorrow. Once you have made a gift, he is obliged to make a return gift. Now you have set in motion a positive circularity.

One which makes it possible to escape the circle of violence?

Yes, but through one last act of violence. By killing a "sacrificeable" victim, meaning one whose death will not trigger further acts of vengeance within the group: a slave, an imprisoned enemy, an animal... In a peace ritual described by anthropologist Raymond Jamous, the murderer leads his people to the territory of his victim. His hands bound and a knife in his teeth, he offers himself as a new victim, he anticipates the desire for revenge of his adversaries. But rather than killing the murderer as they would if the cycle of vengeance were to continue, they take the knife and sacrifice an animal in his stead. To seal the end of hostilities, the members of both camps join together in eating the animal. Not only will this victim not be avenged, but it provides the feast which launches a new cycle of positive reciprocity. The rite which puts an end to a vendetta facilitates the transition between the reciprocal violence of vengeance and the non-violent reciprocity of the gift.

But how does market exchange come to take the place of the gift?

First let's see what distinguishes them. When you offer me so many sheep, or shells, or shields, you make a display of your prestige, and I must at least match your generosity with a return gift. On the contrary, a monetary payment nips the relationship in the bud: it relieves one of any return obligation. A market transaction leaves the seller and buyer free of any ties. Just as the gift breaks the circle of vengeance, money breaks the circle of the gift. I asked myself how such a transaction could arise within a ritual context. In Vedic writings from ancient India, we see that monetary payment begins with the compensation of the sacrificial priest, a brahman who carries out a dangerous task and whom one prefers to keep at arm's length. In the Greek world, money is associated with the figure of the tyrant. He is a usurper, a king whose legitimacy does not derive from traditional structures. To get around the system of reciprocal obligations which he

Satan Falling Like Lightning (Orbis, in press). The journal Contagion publishes the work of "Girardian" scholars (<http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover.index.html>).



challenges, he must resort to employing mercenaries, whom he pays off with money. War, a ritual activity, becomes a professional one. In our monetary economies, all transactions involve this distancing mechanism which originally targeted those charged with carrying out ritual violence.

So you trace market exchange back to sacrificial rituals?

In these examples we already see the beginning of an impulse to thrust away the operators of sacrifice. Later, sacrifice itself will be banished. All our history is a long process of awakening an anti-sacrificial consciousness. First, an animal replaces the human victim, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Then the day comes when people hesitate even to butcher the animal. René Girard attributes the origin of this awakening of consciousness to the Biblical texts, the Gospels in particular. One may also find anti-sacrificial messages in other traditions, in Buddhism for example. But one does not have to be Christian to acknowledge the force of René Girard's analyses, or to follow him in reflecting on where the decay of religious myths and rituals may lead. If sacrificial rites, while producing victims, made it possible to avoid even greater violence, what will happen in the absence of rites? We know that human progress has always been fragile, with steps backward accompanying every step forward. I believe it is important, nevertheless, to defend the notion of progress. Even if we continue to persecute victims, we are now ashamed to do so: that is progress.

We have learned to recognize the victims. But our morality adapts quite well to the market economy, which also produces victims of another sort.

Monetary transactions sever the bond between exchange partners; they eliminate all obligations of reciprocity. If your neighbour is hungry, you have no obligation to feed him; if he is evicted from his home and freezes to death, you have no obligation to avenge him. As Canadian philosopher Paul Dumouchel observes, the elimination of the obligation of revenge keeps violence from spreading from one individual to the next, but at the same time it universalizes the category of "sacrificeable" victims, those whose death will not result in vengeance. In this sense, we continue to sacrifice anonymous victims. In his book *Le sacrifice et l'envie* ("Sacrifice and Envy"), French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy shows the extent to which the spectre of sacrifice haunts the thinking of the major theorists of the market economy.

Why not set ourselves the objective of returning to the gift?

We have not completely left it, fortunately. Gifts, including services within the household, still hold an important place. In France, by the conservative estimate of one economist, Ahmet Insel, gifts are of a magnitude equivalent to about three-quarters of GDP. We should aim for a balance between the gift sector and the market sector. But this balance is threatened today by the imperialism of

market logic. It is that logic therefore which must be questioned. Obviously, we will not go back to archaic forms of exchange. These presuppose a ritual framework which has vanished. A new religion cannot be made to order.

But hasn't the market economy taken the place of religion?

The ritual framework of primitive exchanges entails the presence of invisible mediators. The spirit of the gift obliges the recipient to make a return gift, Marcel Mauss tells us. Adam Smith, the father of liberal political economy, likewise invokes a hidden spirit when he talks about the invisible hand of the market. Of course, he means this as a simple metaphor: the market is supposed to be self-regulating, functioning best without visible intervention on the part of the State. But nothing guarantees that, left to itself, the market will converge on a satisfactory equilibrium. History tends rather to prove the opposite. In this sense, the doctrine of the invisible hand does depend on quasi-religious faith. It serves mainly to absolve people of the consequences of their actions. When a jumbo jet falls to the ground, there is an investigation to determine who is responsible. But every day, the number of people who die of hunger in the world is equivalent to the number who would perish if several hundred jumbo jets crashed. No investigation is needed: the market is responsible. Which is another way of saying nobody. Nobody is individually responsible for a violence which is collectively accepted, just as the violence of sacrifice is collectively accepted.

The opponents of market globalization advocate the establishment of "fair trade." Isn't this a contradiction in terms, if the market is by nature irresponsible?

Why not develop fair trade? In reality, the partisans of market globalization claim that they themselves want to promote the interests of poor workers. This is a good illustration of the ethical progress we were talking about: everybody recognizes the central importance of the victims. But the alibi is pretty flimsy because poor workers are perfectly able to determine what is in their own interest. Their union representatives could organize an international summit to negotiate a fair framework for trade themselves—at Davos, for example. Just as war is too serious a matter to be left to the generals, trade is too serious to be left to the captains of finance.

Montesquieu said that the natural effect of trade is to lead to peace. Your analyses do not seem to confirm this adage.

Globalization means the development of market exchange among nations. Now, despite the existence of the United Nations, the international arena still displays one of the essential features of primitive society: the absence of the State. In true primitive societies, where gift exchange predominates, one sometimes finds transactions quite similar to market exchange. These transactions are practiced solely with foreigners towards whom no duty of

solidarity exists. With them, one has the right to cheat, steal, or wage war. Lévi-Strauss alludes to markets of this type where buyers and sellers are ready to fight at the slightest provocation and goods are offered at spear-point. That reminds me of a New York Times journalist, an advocate of globalization, who explained that the invisible hand of the market must be accompanied by an iron fist. I am skeptical about the idea that an expansion of international trade leads to peace. The same idea was expressed the last time a comparable level of economic integration between countries was reached, early in the last century.

And?

And then the First World War came along and dispelled this illusion.

1. Mark Anspach studied at Harvard and Stanford. He obtained a doctorate in anthropology from the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. He is a research scholar at the CREA (Centre for research into applied epistemology), Ecole Polytechnique. His book, "A charge de revanche, les formes élémentaires de la réciprocité," will be published by Seuil (Paris), this year.



For further reading:

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