WHY WE GIVE: A MINUTE WITH™ HARRY LIEBERSOHN, A HISTORIAN OF GIFT GIVING

Editor’s note: There’s more to giving gifts than just the giving, says Harry Liebersohn, the author of “The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea” (2011). It’s not a one-way thing, he says, but rather part of what he calls a circuit of obligation and a language. Liebersohn, a University of Illinois history professor whose research centers on encounters between Europeans and other cultures, also has written about travel, religion, literature, art and music. He talked about gift giving in an interview with News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain.

You talk about the language of gift giving. What does that mean?

We usually think of gifts as expressions of friendship or love. Birthday and holiday gifts are the first ones that come to mind. But gifts can express a wide range of feelings and thoughts: Think of the gifts between countries that demonstrate tribute or respect, the extravagant wedding gifts that show off the giver’s wealth, or deceptive gifts going back to the Trojan horse. Like speech, the gift has many uses; whoever masters the art of giving controls a powerful means of persuasion.

What do you mean by the “return” of the gift in your book title? Was there a point when gifts went out of fashion?

The title is a pun. Americans and Europeans for the past two centuries have thought of gifts as one-sided, like parents’ gifts to their children. But the great sociologist Marcel Mauss, in his famous 1925 essay, “The Gift,” showed that the gift is threefold: It involves an obligation to give, to accept and to reciprocate. At one level the gift is free, at another level people expect some kind of return.

There’s another meaning to the title: Europeans forgot about the full meaning of the gift during the 19th century. It returned after anthropologists discovered how basic it was to non-Western societies. Franz Boas, the key founder of American anthropology, observed the competitive gift-giving of the Kwakwaka’wakw and other native peoples of the Pacific northwest coast, while Bronislaw Malinowski charted how the Trobriand Islanders off the coast of New Guinea made exchanges of gifts in a vast circle and reinforced the givers’ social status. Mauss synthesized findings like theirs into his theory; ever since he published it, there has been a torrent of writing on gift exchange.
You note that gift giving includes everything from philanthropy to the potluck. What role does it play within a community or society?

Imagine a society entirely without the spirit of the gift, in which everything had a price tag. It would lead to a general mean-spiritedness that nobody would want. Our charitable giving, our extra hours for the church or the soccer team, our philanthropy for a park or a swimming pool, create a spirit of generosity that percolates through our public life.

Look to Homer’s “Odyssey” for the role of gifts in remote antiquity, when the Greek poet imagined them as a counter-force to chaotic violence; look to the historian Natalie Z. Davis’ book on the gift in France in the 1500s for the gift as an expression of friendship, love, neighborliness and power in early modern Europe. In different ways, gift exchange still pervades our lives today; we can garner wisdom about managing gifts by turning to examples from our own past as well as non-European societies.

We complain endlessly about the commercialism of the holiday, and there’s a sense that many may feel as much dread as joy in the required hours at the mall. Do we risk losing the point?

Every one of us makes a choice about how to give. The right start is to think about the recipient. Maybe the proud new parents need cash, not a silver spoon. An unexpected phone call, visit or letter – these too are gifts. Used well, gifts can heal an old wound, make a new connection, deepen an existing one, or reaffirm a romance. When we get it right, the gift furthers endless rounds of giving and receiving. Yes, our holiday gift giving is intertwined with commerce, but gifts have always involved mixed motives. By giving well we recognize the humanity of those around us. Their thanks are the first and best return.

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