PART V

GIFT AND SACRIFICE
In modern societies the gift, together with the nexus of social relations that surround it, has become a relatively marginal institution. We still encounter gifts in the intimacies of interpersonal life, as well as in ceremonial celebrations such as those that mark the life course, or the birth of a new year. It is also present in voluntary work and in the myriad charities that solicit donations. But the main circulation of wealth is determined by the market and the wage-relation, and the giving, receiving, and exchange of gifts is normatively confined to the personal and private sphere. Administrative and political systems strive to exclude gifts as corruption. Gift-giving itself—one only has to think of Christmas—is readily absorbed into the market economy.

In his celebrated *Essai sur le don*, Marcel Mauss drew from ethnographic reports and ancient religious texts to depict another kind of world entirely. Here, in contrast with the gift-poor world of modernity, we find an archaic form of society in which the gift is central and pervasive. In such societies intricate chains of gift-giving (and counter-giving) determine not only the distribution of wealth, but also, through competitive expenditure, the ranking of households and the legitimacy of tribal rulers. We should not be tempted to idealise all this. Symbolic worlds are cruel. Wedded with patriarchy, the gift also structures kinship systems through the exchange of women themselves regarded as gifts. In any case the gift is ambiguous, it is a challenge as well as a benefit, since the gift must be reciprocated, and if possible exceeded. In gifts and counter-gifts competitive hierarchies establish themselves, including those that emanate from the glories of war. There can indeed be negative gifts—deliberate insults, injuries, thefts, despoliations—their own responses ‘with interest’, and terrible feuds. Gift societies are prone to conflict as well as to solidarity. The same mechanism leads to both.

Mauss’s aim was partly genealogical. He wished to demolish the mythical origins that partisans of the free market like Adam Smith had given it. In the beginning was not barter but gift-exchange. At the same time Mauss advanced a provocative hypothesis. The gift (including