I. Introduction

In an 1829 dispatch addressed to the Count de Portalis, temporarily in charge of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Mathieu de Lesseps, the French consul general and chargé d’affaires to the Ottoman Regency of Tunis, pointed out the advantages that presents had in diplomatic communications, even as the ministry was planning to suppress their use in relations with Muslim courts.\(^1\) In Lesseps’ view, by exchanging gifts, consuls integrated themselves into local networks and established their rank in societies that did not separate the private from the public: “In the Orient, presents have always honoured the one who gives as much as the one who receives; the absence of this formality in all political, commercial and simple societal transactions was, and will be, not only a sign of the absence of all benevolent sentiment, but also of a lack of courtesy, knowledge and propriety, and a reason for suspicion regarding the future intentions of the contracting parties.”\(^2\) In these terms, the consul described what Marcel Mauss has called the “system of total prestations” (“système des prestations totales”): an act whose signification transcended the exchange of economically useful objects because it created and confirmed enduring mutual ties and obligations.\(^3\)
Consul Lesseps also proposed rules so that presents, by their regularity and absence of reciprocity, would not take on the appearance of tributes; rather, they should enhance the prestige of the giver and so overwhelm his interlocutor that he would not be in a position to return the presents in kind. It was necessary to view the giving of presents, "from time to time, but not on fixed occasions [...] as a way to oblige Eastern peoples to revere and regard the power of Christian sovereigns." This was to be achieved by the cultural representations attached to presents of little value, making them, "a sample of the products of the two peoples from the soil, agriculture or industry" ("un échantillon des productions du sol, de l'agriculture ou de l'industrie des deux peuples"). Thanks to knowledge of his counterpart's customs, the French giver would be able to bring the exchange to a fruitful conclusion in the potlatch.

As for the refusal to send presents that could be seen as tributes, the consul summarized the practices that his predecessors had already attempted to establish in the eighteenth century. Unlike the ambassadors' and consuls of the Ancien Régime, however, Lesseps believed that he was obliged to justify gift-giving as such. In France, the impersonal logic of the market and the state was delegitimizing the use of gifts in the evolving public sphere. For Lesseps, gift-giving distinguished oriental societies from France: what would have been "dishonorable and regarded as an instrument and proof of corruption" ("deshonorant et regardé comme instrument et preuve de corruption") in France, was "a title of honor" ("un titre d'honneur") in the Orient.

The episode to which we refer constitutes a good starting point from which to consider the evolution of diplomatic present-giving between 1700 and 1840. Although it recognizes the omnipresence of different modalities of gift-giving, anthropological research since Mauss' *Essai sur le don* remains focused on certain geographical and social spaces to the