

## Total Social Fact: Structuring, Partially Connecting, and Reassembling

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1.

“Total social fact,” a concept virtually synonymous with the name Marcel Mauss, has already inspired all manner of fine discussion. However, no matter how enigmatic and difficult to understand this concept may be, as long as heuristic possibilities remain concealed within it, there will be room for further meaningful debate. In particular, I would like to develop the discussion of this concept with the help of Mauss’s conviction that the social life of human beings must be elucidated scientifically, a conviction that led him to the concept in the first place.

Before beginning the debate let us confirm that “total social fact” does not presuppose a parts-and-whole image of society along the lines of anthropology’s functionalism. As far as Mauss is concerned, social life should not be understood through functional associations in the realms of economy, law, politics, religion and so on; it manifests itself at its most condensed in specific situations where various economic, legal, political and religious relationships overlap. The greatest obstacle here is the suspicion that these relationships are merely projections of our social categories. That is to say, it raises the question, familiar to anthropology, of how to overcome cognitive differences between societies. The first clue Mauss offers us in this regard is his insight concerning scientific thought and magical thought. Whether primitive, ancient, or western, human social life is formed when science and magic exist simultaneously; the differences between the two mean only that their relative merits have changed. In our academic discipline a magical residue is still acknowledged “in our notions of force, causation, effect and substance.”[1972:144] We are sufficiently close to the past to debate the past, and it is permitted to elucidate magical thought and practice by means of scientific thought (for which reason he asserts that gift-giving with its magical character acts as a guiding hand on this side, while *homo oeconomicus* exists not in our past but in the future).

On this point Mauss is extremely close not just to the past but to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Actually Lévi-Strauss searched for magical thought as the “gigantic variation on the theme of the principle of Causality” discussed by Hubert and Mauss and elucidated the logic of the concrete presented by the “totalitarian ambition of the savage

mind.”[1966:10-1][1978:17] That is structuralism, which in lieu of explaining overly complex phenomena focuses on the relationships between phenomena: an endless process in which sensible factors fabricate a group of transformations while repeating homology, opposition, inversion and the like. Lévi-Strauss describes this thought as “a sort of metaphorical expression of science.”[Ibid.,p.13] It is true that from the point of view of science the method of replacing the relationship(s) of one sense with the relationship(s) of another sense can only be understood as a metaphor.

Because it is possible to view the “symbolic correspondences” and “the system of sympathies and antipathies”, which Mauss indicated were important characteristics of magic, as also being metaphorical effects, a profounder understanding of gift-giving, sacrifice, self and so on, which he portrayed as magical thought and practice, becomes possible through analysis in the style of Lévi-Strauss. Take gift-giving. It is possible to understand the continually transforming relationships as a series of binary comparisons: group / individual; god / man; mind / matter; generosity / greed; and the various oppositions will be joined together while putting into operation as binary operators mediators such as “the individual who symbolizes the group,” “the chief who has become the incarnation of the god,” “the thing that contains spirit,” “squandering that defeats the recipient”. Gift-giving cannot be understood by considering individual relationships separately; one touches on its essence when seeing it as a chain of substitution with other sensual relationships. Accordingly, “total social fact” is a manifestation of “the totalitarian ambition of the savage mind” and a condition in which specific phenomena are contrasted and given relationships. The cognitive differences between societies can be overcome by scientific elucidation of “the savage mind” that exists ubiquitously across time and space. Lévi-Strauss declares that, as the owner of such a “mind,” he is himself a metaphorical place of transformation and continues with the work of elucidation.[1969:13] In sum, the fact that specific categories differ from one society to another is no more than a secondary problem. What is important are the sensibilities related to the categories, and the elements thereof and the ways in which they will be bound together.

If so, is “total social fact” no more than a prelude to Lévi-Strauss’s analysis? Of course not. As far as Mauss is concerned, social life is always dynamic, and “total” is a concept for grasping “a perpetual state of becoming” and “the fleeting moment.”[2006:142] [1972:77] While it is not impossible to expect Lévi-Strauss-style transformation to play this role, the aspect that Mauss hopes for is different. The distance between the two men concerning this meaning manifests itself in Lévi-Strauss’s mysterious criticism of Mauss’s concept of *mana*.

But we shall not go along with him when he proceeds to seek the origin of the notion of *mana* in an order of realities different from the relationships that it helps to construct...[1987:56]

Contrary to Lévi-Strauss's indications, in *A General Theory of Magic* Mauss emphasizes the points that *mana* is "a milieu" that makes magic possible and an idea that manifests the essential character of magic. In other words, to borrow Lévi-Strauss's expression, *mana* is a word that appeared in order to understand "the relationships that it helps construct," and does not have its origins in "an order of realities different" therefrom. Mauss was cautious about bringing substantive concepts such as power, cause and effect into science. If this gives the impression that *mana* is not free from such concepts, that is because it is the destiny of the word to take on the work of portraying "a perpetual state of becoming" without reducing it to anything. While standing as a witness at the scene where things link together, *mana* continues to demand that evidence for itself be found. If one were to constrict the generation of relationships to the unconscious and symbolic thought, in the manner of Lévi-Strauss, although one might obtain that evidence one would have to abandon the real sense of being there that belongs to "the fleeting moment."

2.

Focusing on the generation of relationships distances Mauss from Lévi-Strauss, but at the same time brings him closer to someone else: Marilyn Strathern, who—based on cases from Melanesia, which is the birthplace of *mana*—managed to give autonomy to the changes in the generation of relationships to such an extent that *mana* becomes unnecessary. Her success results from her construction of a unique method of "analysis as a kind of convenient or controlled fiction"[1988:6] in order to deal with the cognitive differences between societies. Which means being steadfast in the position that "One culture is only to be seen from the perspective of another"[Ibid.,p.311], building up *as if* correspondences between "us" and "them" and setting one's sights on the goal of enriching our internal dialogue. Mauss provisionally employed the word gift, while recognizing the necessity for reconsideration; however, Strathern uses this term to its utmost as an "artifact" that is an *as if* found object. When incorporating a wide-ranging perspective on gift, Melanesian social life also becomes an artifact and brings to the surface a dynamic form that transcends the divisions of the quotidian and the extraordinary, the political domain and the domestic domain, production and consumption.

In Melanesia as portrayed by Strathern, the person is generated and given gender in the nodes of the various relationships that are mediated by gifts. Essentially a person exists as a potential androgyne by means of gifts from both father and mother, just as when the fetus is fed by the father, and the infant is raised on the milk from the mother that originates in her semen. Although the question of whether the person is male or female is fixed, females become masculine as members of clans that receive feminine property while males become feminine when being presented with masculine property. The object itself, which constitutes the gift, is neither a man nor a woman; however, it is made masculine when viewed as an extension of the activities of men and made feminine when recognized as being disposed of by a man and given as a gift. Or, if we begin not from the object but from the person, it is reasonable to think that because a part of the giver separates and adheres to the object, that object assumes the same gender as that of the giver. Whatever the case, the objectification and genderizing of the person and the personification and genderizing of the object continue to be generated through a wide variety of gifts.

Melanesia's "a perpetual state of becoming" that was proposed as an artifact is highly suggestive. Person, object and gender, which are supposed to be the basic constitutive elements of society, are each themselves ambiguous and situated in a process of perpetual transformation: from a comprehensive standpoint it is impossible to assign them the same old customary roles. All three are parts of social life, but it would be difficult to say that they compose the total system. They can only be observed in the chain where one part joins with another part, in exactly the same way that part of a person adheres to an object imbuing that object with gender. This "partial connections" point of view proposes methods for studying other societies and raises problems with regard to the concept of social life.[2004] As regards the former: it offers methods so that "we" can analyze "them" by bringing "our" categories into "them" and by building bridges between the two sides that originally should be incomparable, which shows the reasonableness of exploring partial connections, with "our" whole and "their" whole left indistinct. As regards the latter: it is a rejection of the pre-existing concept of "society." In other words, the view that by undertaking fixed positions or roles indivisible persons constitute parts of a society that is a total system is nothing more or less than a reflection of the commodity economy in which persons and things obtain unified attributes and values via the market.

Strathern's discussions of this kind are helpful in gaining a deep understanding of the "total social fact" emphasized by Mauss. He too linked "us" and "them" on the assumption of the provisional nature of his analytical concept of "gift." [op.cit.,p.70] However, what he expressed as "total social" was not "fiction"—he did not discard science

and he further insisted on “fact” not “artifact”—but a circumstance in which one fact is linked to another fact and a hybrid situation is built up, without the total system’s being visible. Although this kind of life is social, perhaps because it does not readily call to mind the overall image of society, that research in the end goes on to become analysis of “total phenomena” covering all of biology and psychology as well.

When these arguments concerning “gift” are placed side by side, Strathern’s appear to be more consistent and better organized; however, the matter is not simple. If the proposed “us” and “them” are a batch of artifacts, how are we to judge their workmanship? Strathern has no choice but to cite “aesthetic impact” and “resonances” as a standard for evaluating “fiction.” To be blunt: just how necessary is it to propose not “hypothesis” but “fiction” and not “fact” but “artifact”? The work to which she applies herself is searching out, selecting and logically connecting what other colleagues refer to as “facts”. As one undertaking the same work, Mauss continued to fix his eyes on the process in which all sorts and types of facts—on occasion some that directly contradict one another—simultaneously intermingle and are generated. Rather than search out a method for organizing “total social fact” he proceeded in the direction of making clear how far this phenomenon deviates from consistent explanation. It appears he wants to say that “Total social fact” must be understood via an even more “total” modality. We must consider how reasonable this impression may be.

3.

When discussing science and facts it is impossible to avoid Bruno Latour. As is well known, to him science is the same as other phenomena, not just engineering: a process in which people and other diverse elements as “actors” form various associations, which they join together, separate, and reassemble. Divisions such as nature and society, subjectivity and objectivity, rationality and irrationality, and facts and non-facts are all constructed when actors are in the process of building up specific associations; they must not be thought of as a given reality. If one traces the actors’ networks it becomes clear that there are two types: “intermediaries”, who can predict output based on input and “mediators” who cannot make such predictions. Latour rather views intermediaries as exceptions and understands the links between actors as mediators, and he asserts that it is necessary to pursue the questions of how mediators “translate” the meanings and elements that they themselves carry and how new intermediaries and mediators are to be produced as a result of that. Latour’s studies of science and technology can be invoked as such in all relationships in which persons and objects and other elements are built up. Not just that, as

members of networks scientists and engineers also take part in translation in the same way as other actors and engage in the generation of intermediaries and mediators. Accordingly, for Latour the question of overcoming the cognitive differences between societies does not exist. What does exist is the analysis of how the category of society is constructed together with various other categories: transcendence of differences is substantially achieved by universalizing the argument of *Science in Action*. [1987]

In the analysis advocated by Latour it is necessary to reject society as a given and to pursue the links of the various elements as actors while staying close to informants right to the end. [2005] This itself must make clear how “the social” appears in the process in which non-social persons, objects etc. assemble together. This assertion is close to the work that Mauss actually did. It is true that Mauss took up society as if its existence were a given and didn’t question the constructed nature of facts; however, the content of his analysis anticipated the essence of Latour’s assertions. He refused to accord special status to specific elements and, without privileging any one of those things, continued to observe how persons and objects and knowledge and techniques were specifically assembled to form the social. As a result of which he proposed, for example, “a milieu” that produced the effectiveness of magic (*A General Theory of Magic*), dense networks formed by chiefs, fortunes, spirits, family and tribe, masks, character, status, gift-giving, battle (*The Gift*), the necessity for research into a specific society to cover animals and plants (*Techniques, Technology and Civilization*) etc. It would not have been strange at all for a Latourian to have written the following sentences.

Social phenomena have between them the most heteroclitic affinities. Habits and ideas project their roots in all senses. The mistake is to neglect these numberless, deep anastomoses. [Mauss 1969:215]

The commonality with Latour makes it possible to approach the Mauss of the 1920s and later, who wrote and lectured on the subject of techniques. For him technique was from the start an important element composing the “total social fact.” This is because magic is accompanied not just by sacred things like religion, but also by empirical, personal rational scientific technique. The feature that divides technique from magic and religion is epitomized in the following sentence: “With techniques, the effects are conceived as produced mechanically” (translation amended) [1972]. Technique is the model for what Latour calls intermediaries. Although it is possible to discover elements similar to intermediaries in magic as well in the form of “sympathetic formulas” and “social

conventions”, Mauss considered those properties that cannot be divided even by these things to be the essence of magical rites. His interest was concentrated on constant-deviation-from-intermediaries of the kind expressed in the word *mana*. In later years he turned his attention to techniques, which are typical intermediaries, but certainly not because he intended to elucidate the relationship between cause and effect. Rather, techniques were a suitable object for analysis of how the relationships of cause and effect are composed and were an appropriate subject for elucidating the character of actors as mediators. This goes hand in hand with his interest in even more diverse actors, and is not unrelated to his taking as themes for study the realms of body and mind.

What separates Latour and Mauss is the fact that while the former always analyzed science from a fixed angle of view, the latter continued to practice science in an unending search. The “total social fact” is the guiding thread for that search, and Mauss relies on these words for the power to elucidate the way in which concrete and separate facts can be realized. For Mauss, who was not an analyst of science but a practitioner—Mauss, who was always open to mediators who are endlessly on the run from the construction of intermediaries—it was not possible to depict social facts except in “total.” “Total” is a word that asserts—in the same way as Latour—that the links between the various elements cannot be cut away, and at the same time is a code that conveys admiration and warning concerning the reality that continues to betray the intermediaries on which science sets its sights. At this point facts and society—which he discusses as if they were a given reality—can be grasped as the immanent understanding of one who practices science, and can also be said to be actors who extend unlooked-for links to other societies and facts, organizing a new assemblage. Adopting this attitude, Mauss attempted to overcome the cognitive differences between societies.

4.

Let us organize what has become clear through the above inquiry. In Mauss’s scientific quest concerning social life it has been possible to propose “social facts” as manifestations of thought that establishes binary-comparison-type relationships and transforms by means of mediation. At the same time they have also emerged as compositional elements allowing one relationship that is in “a perpetual state of becoming” another relationship to be constructed by means of partial connections. Further, “social facts” have not been able to avoid continually calling attention to the point that they bring themselves into existence. These words resourcefully mix diverse elements in the manner of “a complex notion” proposed by *The Gift* [70]. Which is “total” in the sense of forming

an unexpected chain of "...and...and...and..." And one comes to realize that both the keynote that sounds throughout Mauss's text and Mauss himself, who is the place where this investigation was born, exist on a chain of "...and...and...and..."

Indeed, like Lévi-Strauss he made free use of science as an apparatus for elucidating the metaphorical nature of magic; like Strathern he developed analysis in accordance with the provisionality of the theme he had himself established; and like Latour he demonstrated the constructed nature of science by means of his own practice. Like Lévi-Strauss he himself became the place where magical thought manifests itself and experienced the chain of relationships; like Strathern he presented his own research not as an answer but as an indication and brought to light the social characteristics of oneself and others; and like Latour he pursued association that makes facts possible and reassembled the social. Just as we are fascinated and our intellectual desires are excited by gift-giving as "legal and economic and religious and aesthetic..." and by *mana* as "an action of a certain kind, and a kind of ether, and a milieu..."[112] so Mauss as "Lévi-Strauss and Strathern and Latour..." tempts the writer of this study to deeper understanding. Mauss is "living" as long as he is "total."

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