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Reciprocity, hierarchy, and obligation in world politics: From Kula to Potlatch

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Abstract
The observation that agents and structures are co-constituted is now commonplace, yet scholars continue to struggle to incorporate this insight. Rationalists tend to overemphasize actors' agency in the constitution of social order while constructivists tend to overstate the degree to which structures determine action. This article uses *The Gift* to rethink the agent–structure debate, arguing that the model of social relations Mauss outlines in this work sheds new light on basic concepts in international relations theory such as reciprocity, hierarchy, and obligation. Mauss' social theory locates the generative structure of social order in diffuse exchange relations, what he terms gift exchange, and assumes that actors are both socially positioned within hierarchical relations of exchange and reflexive agents who are able to understand and strive to change those relations. In so doing, he avoids reducing social order to either deeply internalized social norms or instrumental interests, navigating between agents and structures to develop a more dynamic model of social relations. This model of social order permits a richer understanding of hierarchy in world politics that appreciates the experience of domination and the possibility of resistance. It also provides a distinct understanding of the nature of social obligation and the "compliance pull" of social norms, locating their force in the reflexive recognition by actors that they are dependent on shared social relations for meaningful social agency. This points toward an ethics of stewardship that opens up new perspectives on the duties that states and others owe to each other, a duty grounded in an acknowledgment of our mutual vulnerability as socially constituted agents.

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What are the potential contributions of Mauss' essay *The Gift* for informing theoretical debates about world politics? At first glance, there seem to be few uniquely Maussian insights. Mauss' central contributions in *The Gift*, especially related to the social nature of exchange relations, have been incorporated into international relations (IR) scholarship (Shilliam, 2013: 168) and political and social theory more generally (Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1944; Sahlins, 1972). Onuf (2013), in particular, draws on Mauss' work to explore norms of hospitality and the practice of diplomacy in world politics (see also Onuf, 2008: 464–466). In this sense, Mauss is already built into our disciplinary vocabulary, making a return to Mauss' original writings seem unnecessary. In fact, it may be counterproductive because Mauss draws on materials from "archaic" societies whose rituals and social systems are idealized and most likely misrepresented, with limited application to international politics (Sampson, 2002).

We disagree. The benefit of returning to *The Gift* is that it presents a holistic understanding of systems of exchange that combines theoretical insights that later theorists separated. *The Gift* is an early, important statement about the nature of exchange and its role in supporting society. Mauss' central contribution is the identification of relationships between social and material exchange, and between structure and agency, that may inform current debates in world politics. Whereas later theorists identify one or a few elements within this holistic system (e.g. reciprocity) and turn that element into the central feature of the social system, Mauss was interested in how the theoretical parts of the whole work together. Doing so requires a more clear-sighted understanding of the relationships between agents and structures and between exchange and hierarchy.

We focus on two broad implications that Mauss' perspective on social relations has for IR theory. First, his model of gift exchange differentiates between two models of exchange: kula and potlatch. The former describes exchange among equals and is similar to prevailing models of exchange in IR. The latter, however, describes competitive exchange by actors who occupy different social positions. This model of potlatch exchange enriches our understanding of reciprocity in world politics by suggesting that exchange may generate unequal social relations and hierarchies as often as it generates relations of mutual recognition and joint gain. In doing so, it has the potential to enrich our understandings of hierarchy and power in world politics. The second insight concerns Mauss' understanding of the relationship between agents and structures in the reproduction of social order. He presents actors as reflexive agents, aware of the consequences that their practices of exchange have for reproducing unequal social structures, but he avoids overstating actors' ability to transform those structures. Mauss' approach thus provides a richer understanding of social agency and the nature of social obligation, offering a potential via media between rationalist and sociological approaches to hierarchy and social order present in IR scholarship.

The more important reason to return to Mauss, however, is normative. The implicit social ontology in *The Gift* allows us to rethink foundational questions related to the

nature of social obligation and ethics in IR. In constituting agents and structures through relations of diffuse exchange, Mauss' model of social order suggests that actors have an obligation to care for the shared practices that construct them as agents capable of meaningful social action. His study thus suggests an ethics of stewardship that opens up new perspectives on the duties that states and other actors owe to each other and to the social spaces they inhabit together, a duty grounded in acknowledgment of our mutual vulnerability as socially constituted agents. In what follows, we deal with each of these implications of Mauss' work in turn, beginning with the importance of his work for rethinking the concept of reciprocity in IR theory.

Reciprocity in IR theory

Reciprocity plays a central role in nearly all existing theories of world politics. In neoliberal institutionalism, the reciprocal exchange of goods, services, or other benefits provides the foundation upon which international cooperation is built. By clarifying the terms of exchange and monitoring compliance with agreements through international institutions, governments can create the tit-for-tat arrangements that allow for de-centralized enforcement and contribute to durable cooperation over time (Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 2005). In neorealism, the balance of power presupposes that states will respond to others' material capabilities with efforts to enhance their own security, be it through alliances or by augmenting their military capacity. This reciprocal exchange of security threats and opportunities generates a balance of power that ensures relative stability in the international system (Morgenthau et al., 2005; Waltz, 1979). For the English School, practices of reciprocity are critical to a number of the "primary institutions" of international society, such as diplomacy and international law. Moreover, reciprocal recognition of the right to nonintervention largely constitutes the fundamental institution of state sovereignty (Bull, 2012). Constructivist theories of world politics also emphasize the role of reciprocity, be it in the behavioral norms that generate shared expectations of behavior or through processes of complex learning in which actors are socialized into new normative standards through the asymmetric exchange of values (Ruggie, 1992; Wendt, 1999).

Despite the ubiquity of reciprocity in international theory, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the concept in IR scholarship. Keohane (1986) provides one of the earliest, and most thorough, explorations of the concept, grounding his analysis in the distinction between specific and diffuse reciprocity. The former concerns "situations in which specified partners exchange items of equivalent value in a strictly delimited sequence," whereas the latter involves situations in which "the definition of equivalence is less precise, one's partners may be viewed as a group rather than as particular actors, and the sequence of events is less narrowly bounded" (Keohane, 1986: 4). Keohane (1986) acknowledges that both types of reciprocity play a role in international society, but he gives priority to the principle of specific reciprocity, arguing that it "is an appropriate principle of behavior when norms of obligation are weak—the usual case in world politics" (1986: 24). He uses Mauss to clarify that "[r]eciprocal behavior returns ill for ill as well as good for good," quoting Mauss' statement that "people should meet smiles with smiles and lies with treachery" (Keohane, 1986: 6). This treatment of Mauss turns him

into an early theorist of tit-for-tat strategies to encourage cooperation. Diffuse reciprocity, in contrast, "is only feasible when some norms of obligation exist: that is, when international regimes are relatively strong" (Keohane, 1986: 25). Indeed, specific reciprocity is assumed to be the practice that enables cooperation under anarchy. By disaggregating cooperation into discrete exchanges through the creation of international institutions, governments are better able to respond in kind to the actions of others—reciprocating compliance with compliance or punishing defection with defection.

Liberal theories focus primarily on practices of specific reciprocity, but many constructivist scholars have shown more interest in diffuse reciprocity as a core practice of international society. Ruggie (1992) identifies diffuse reciprocity as one of the constitutive properties of multilateralism, arguing that it enables cooperation without the need for tit-for-tat arrangements. Governments' willingness to forgo their interest in immediate gains from exchange "makes both cross-sectoral and intertemporal trade-offs and bargains feasible" (Ruggie, 1992: 594). Building on Ruggie's insights, subsequent constructivist scholarship argues that multilateralism and the practice of diffuse reciprocity upon which it rests are grounded in a collective identity that includes a mutual identification of self and other. This mutual identification is seen as a necessary condition for the trust that forms the foundation of diffuse reciprocity to emerge (Wendt, 1994: 386; cf. Rathbun, 2012). For some, governments act toward each other on the basis of shared expectations about what behaviors are appropriate, and when actors share a collective identity, those expectations enhance the "willingness of governments to bear costs without selective incentives" (Wendt, 1994: 386). Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002), for example, argue that it was the collective identity of "western civilization" shared among the United States and European states that made multilateral institutions possible in postwar Europe. No such collective identity existed among the East Asian states and the United States; consequently, multilateralism and the practice of diffuse reciprocity did not emerge.

Many rationalists and constructivists thus seem to agree on the basic logics underlying the practices of specific and diffuse reciprocity. Relations of specific reciprocity are assumed to predominate in conditions where shared norms are sparse and where mutual distrust is high and is sustained by a logic of consequences in which actors expect transactions to involve short-term equivalent exchanges of benefits. Diffuse reciprocity, in contrast, is found where shared norms exist and the practice of deferring equivalence is sustained through a logic of appropriateness. In other words, it is only through a commitment to shared norms that actors will accept the obligation to forgo the demand for immediate equivalence that is associated with diffuse reciprocity.

Mauss' theory of diffuse reciprocity

Despite the insights of scholars such as Ruggie and Wendt, the extant description of diffuse reciprocity is underdeveloped. First, their discussions presuppose a thick form of collective identity in which parties occupy the same social position with relation to one another. In this view, states with sovereign equality are the core units of the international system, and their shared sense of equality, or a shared understanding of civilization, underpins exchange. As a consequence, no theory of social position can extend to

exchange between states or other units that are unequal in status. Second, these scholars tend to overemphasize the causal power of social structures. While paying lip service to the view that exchange and identity are mutually constitutive, the emphasis is strongly on the view that collective identifications precede exchange relations. There is no theory about the role that exchange plays within the system.

In this section, we emphasize Mauss' understanding of reciprocity, which provides a useful lens with which to view features of the social foundations of international politics. A gift, for Mauss, is not the equivalent of a present. Carrier (1991) defines Mauss' gift as "any object or service, utilitarian or superfluous, transacted as part of social, as distinct from purely monetary or material, relations." (1991: 122). It is premised on the idea that some social relationships are built on lasting obligations between parties. In this interdependent system, the gift is constitutive of those relationships because the gift is the means by which those relationships are constantly recreated. Therefore, Mauss' gift is the opposite of the genuine gift described by Derrida (1992), because the latter begins by supposing that a gift carries no expectation of reward or reciprocity. In a family, for example, parents have an obligation to support their children during their early teenage years. Parents are obliged to maintain that support; to "cut off" their children is to deny their children. Children, conversely, are obliged to accept that support. To deny their parents' gift is to deny their parents' authority over them. In essence, the lasting social bond between parent and child is performed and recreated through the exchange of gifts.

Mauss ([1925] 2002) refers to the interaction of gifts, exchange, and social position as the "total system" in which action is embedded ([1925] 2002: 7). By total system, Mauss means that every specific act of exchange—any specific instance of reciprocity—takes place within a larger social system that provides meaning to the action. Providing food to the teenager, for example, is usually not a gift designed to create a reciprocal, immediate obligation (cookie for homework). Instead, as noted above, it is part of a deeper bond in which providing food is exercising one's responsibilities in a social system that diffuses responsibilities to parent, child, and state alike (the state, of course, steps in if we starve our children). It is this process of exchange that creates and sustains the role identities of parent and child: if children refuse their parents or if parents do not freely give, then the nature of the parent–child relationship changes.

Modern social theory would describe this central insight of Mauss as seeing the basis of many forms of social recognition in economic relations (Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 1944). This insight no longer seems novel, especially to IR scholars and political theorists. Important elements of Mauss' theory of the gift, such as identities being mutually constitutive and having a material basis in exchange, are underscored in theories of the social that are so diverse they do not occasion mentioning.

Yet something distinctive about Mauss has yet to make its way into IR theory. Mauss' diffuse reciprocity marks gift-giving as something very different from how IR scholars typically understand reciprocity and exchange. First, Mauss points to a difference in kind between two types of exchange, outlined by the editors of this Special Issue (see introduction to special issue, 2). The first system is marked by an equality of political units. This occurs in islands engaged in the exchange of kula. In this system, Melanesian chiefs would organize costly sea voyages to other islands to provide gifts of kula to equals. This practice captures the logic of diffuse reciprocity. Like diffuse reciprocity, it helps "forge

social relationships and enhance trust" (see introduction to special issue, 2). It is limited, however, by identity type: "only the chiefs, and even solely those drawn from the coastal tribes—and then only a few—do in fact take part in it" (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 34). Only units characterized by social equality can participate. Second, exchange of kula marks a continuous flow of exchange between the parties in which they do not anticipate immediately receiving recompense for their gifts. Through kula, participants enmesh themselves within a larger economic and social system that provides economic, social, and political advantages by virtue of participation. In many ways, kula is the equivalent of diffuse reciprocity in Ruggie's account, and it shares similar features to arguments highlighting collective identities.

Mauss also presents a second system—potlatch—that has strikingly different social properties. The potlatch ceremony, held by communities in northwest North America, was a feast in which political units competed with one another to provide gifts. It was an antagonistic rather than harmonious type of exchange (see introduction to special issue, 2). The goals of the ceremony were to establish social and political domination: "the only way to demonstrate his fortune is by expending it to the humiliation of others, by putting them 'in the shadow of his name'" (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 50). If one chief provided gifts so extensive that the receiver could not reciprocate, then the giver achieved a position of domination.

Two features of the potlatch ceremony mark it as different in kind from kula exchanges. First, participants in potlatch ceremonies occupy different social positions. Whereas kula presumes that chiefs are "like units" (in Waltz's phrase) and the process of exchange reaffirms that equality, participants in the potlatch ceremony are marked by different social positions, and exchange enforces those divisions. The second feature that marks a difference is the competitive aspect. Participants in kula respect others through gift-giving; the aim of potlatch, however, is strategic. Potlatch participants want to realize goals of dominance through the ceremony—the aim is hierarchy.

Both models of the gift hold lessons for IR scholars. The kula model points to ways in which gift-giving constitutes international society. For example, during the Cold War's détente (1969–1979), the United States and the Soviet Union embarked on an ambitious program of international cooperation. Most IR scholars emphasize how mutual concession-making led to specific reciprocity; Soviet concession over the timing of negotiations, for example, might lead to US concession over scope of the negotiations, creating tit-for-tat spirals leading to cooperation (Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 1986). Mauss points to something deeper than this simple liberal idea. These concessions are indicative of changing social positions during the Cold War. At least from the Soviet perspective, mutual concession-making was linked to a change in the US view of itself, moving from a position of dominance to a position of equality. The Soviets believed détente meant the parties would recognize one another's interests, would refuse to link issues in ways to create negotiating advantages, and would make concessions to create positive-sum gains. The importance of American concessions during negotiations over issues such as arms control was not simply that they helped the parties move past a specific, thorny negotiating hurdle. Rather, such concessions deepened the Soviet understanding of the changing social relationship, moving from enemies to rivals to joint managers of the system (Grynaviski, 2014). Détente, from the Soviet perspective, was an example of moving from potlatch to kula.

In general, however, a richer understanding of Mauss' potlatch ceremony is more promising. We should move from constructivist theories emphasizing kula-kinds of social relations toward potlatch-kinds. To do so requires recognizing that reciprocity may deepen social relationships by creating or reinforcing social positions (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 54; Onuf, 2013: 176 also highlights the unequal status that attends potlatch ceremonies). This may occur in two ways. First, any specific gift may create future material obligations, because the gift crafts a new social position for the giver, with a set of attendant obligations. When a state intervenes under a humanitarian justification, for example, it makes itself caretaker of the population on whose behalf it intervened, creating obligations for the future care of that population (Bass, 2004). The example of the Marshall Plan, described by the editors in the Introduction, shows how these kinds of responsibilities are linked to political changes in social position that create hierarchies (see introduction to special issue, 4–6). Second, any specific gift might reinforce existing obligations because it furthers the roles associated with existing positions. When parents continue to provide for their children's needs, their social position as caretaker is reaffirmed; without the exchange, the relationship would lapse (Carrier, 1991). In this sense, specific gifts that are part of longer-term processes of exchange sustain and maintain hierarchies.

This article articulates what it means for constructivist IR theory to move from kula to potlatch. Most constructivist scholars assume that diffuse reciprocity is grounded in a collective identity and sustained through norm-following behavior. The IR perspective on diffuse reciprocity thus largely neglects the alternative sociological perspective of Mauss, in which practices of diffuse reciprocity do not always require a shared collective identity, at least, not in the way it is typically conceptualized in IR theory, nor are they sustained through a norm-driven logic of appropriateness. Mauss argues that individuals often exchange gifts for strategic reasons—to gain social status over others, for example—yet he maintains that this practice is also thick with intersubjectivity, reproducing and potentially transforming social structures. Mauss provides a different sociological foundation for the practice of diffuse reciprocity, which has significant implications for how we think about practices of hierarchy, agency, and the nature of social obligations in international society. In what follows, we attempt to shed light on the implications that Mauss' theory of the gift may have for international theory.

Structures, agents, and positional change

In the next section, we discuss the implications of Mauss for understanding hierarchy. Before doing so, we need to understand Mauss' views on agents and structures so we can assess how social positions play a role within his broader framework. As a starting point to thinking about why reading Mauss matters, we begin by noting that his view on the relationship between agents and structures is different from that of most IR scholars. To understand Mauss' position, we first need to understand the implications of the way that IR scholars draw the causal arrows between identities and exchange. For Ruggie, Wendt, and Hemmer and Katzenstein, collective identities are necessary conditions for diffuse reciprocity. When agents have a specific identity—civilized, western, modern—they follow the specific behavior patterns prescribed by that identity type. Within the modern IR

literature, this is described as the logic of appropriateness or the logic of habit, where actors enact roles and routines prescribed for them by international cultures (Hopf, 2010; Hurd, 1999; Sending, 2002). In these discussions, identity is primary. Such a view creates a conservative politics in the international system, because structure is dominant over agency; states cannot behave other than the ways that their identities suggest they should (Sending, 2002).

Like many IR scholars, Mauss points to a thorough role for structure. One's position within a society generates interests, and rules and norms prescribe the kinds and amounts of exchange expected of someone in that social position. Indeed, Mauss goes further. His writings, especially *Primitive Classifications*, coauthored with Durkheim, are linked to the view that social structures drive individuals' categories of understanding, affecting cognition and therefore action. Yet despite the structural emphasis in *The Gift*, the essay also contains a sophisticated understanding of the role of agency.

If exchange is fundamental to international politics, then social change may be accomplished by refusing to engage in prescribed practices. Such a view has two premises. First, social structures are not stable. In Mauss' ([1925] 2002) words, we can only "catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards others" ([1925] 2002: 102) because societies are not "static" and in "skeletal conditions." In other words, Mauss provides a straightforward attack against the conservative position that social categories are static. How do we square a dynamically changing social world with his writings that describe social determinism? Mauss' view, we suspect, is that when one analyzes a specific moment in time, one needs to grasp the total relationship between elements of the social. Individuals' interests, the way they think, and their power is constituted by society. So too are the social relationships in which they are embedded and the kinds of strategies they choose from for competition. The static picture thus shows structures dominating agents. Why then are structures "fleeting"?

To answer this question requires understanding Mauss' views on agency. One reason that social systems, for Mauss, are so dynamic is because agents can initiate changes in material practices that can lead to rapid changes in the social system. In the parable with which he ends the book, King Arthur wanted to change the pattern of warring among his knights. To do so, he asked a carpenter to build a round table, to allow him to recognize the equality of his knights. This physical change led to a change in the practices of social recognition, which led to peace (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 106).

Mauss points to two ways in which agents, realizing their social position, may choose to change it. First, agents can attempt to invert hierarchies. Mauss is clear in his analysis that the practices of giving, accepting, and reciprocating a gift are often laden with struggles for power and dominance. The potlatch, for example, "is a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant" (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 47). Individuals can thus use patterns of material exchange to compete for positions of prestige, and in extreme cases they can invert former hierarchical arrangements. Former servants can compete to become masters. This approach accepts the social positions within societies and attempts to gain advantageous ones.

Individuals can also use political power to fundamentally alter society, rather than just their place within society. To do so requires changing the subject positions that constitute a

society by altering the material practices upon which they are based. This is more radical. For Mauss, agents understand their social system and the role of the gift within it. As such, they can work to alter relations within or between communities in the same way Arthur mythically did with his creation of the round table. This requires agents to be cognizant of the social relationships in which they are embedded. To change the system of social positions within a society, agents need to understand to whom they are obligated and what the consequences of those obligations are. In this sense, agents must be self-reflective, like Arthur was when he realized hierarchies of prestige among his knights caused conflict. Agents must also be goal-oriented, in a thin sense. In Mauss' example, Arthur wanted an internally peaceful kingdom. To reach this aim, he modified the social relations he reflexively understood and used material means to alter social positions—he created the round table (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 106). Mauss points out that nations as well as individuals learn and progress in this way, moving from potlatch to kula.[1] This goal-oriented striving, where culture is remade to fit interests, stands in sharp contrast to over-socialized conceptions of individuals and states that often feature in IR scholarship (e.g. Wendt, 1999).

In this sense, Mauss' position on agency and structure may most closely resemble Archer's (1995, 2000)[2] Archer argues that there is a dynamic interplay between agency and structure; before any act of agency, a preexisting structure gives rise to agents' powers and interests. Agents, however, may not like the resources the structure provides and may act to modify it. In doing so, they bring about a new structure that in the future will provide them with different resources and perhaps also different interests (Dessler, 1989). Arthur, in Mauss' example, understood the dangers posed by the social system and altered material practices to secure social change. Mauss and Archer presume that agents are reflective and thus can take advantage of existing social ties to alter positions. Agents can engage in acts of recognition and non-recognition, craft new programs (e.g. social insurance) to mitigate against harm, and fundamentally change material exchange. Mauss ([1925] 2002) connects this approach to the "total system," showing that historians often capture these dynamic trends better than the sociologist, because they intuitively understand the connections between elements of societies that drive social and political change ([1925] 2002: 103).

Hierarchy and diffuse reciprocity

Mauss' model of agency and structure and its relationship to international politics provides a middle way between many debates in IR theory. In this section, we evaluate its practical implications for an emerging literature in IR scholarship on international hierarchy.

Long-standing claims to the anarchic structure of the international system notwithstanding, scholars have increasingly identified and analyzed relations of formal and informal inequality in world politics (Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). These approaches mark a significant advance over the older anarchic model of IR, but they tend to emphasize either agency or structure and largely neglect their co-constitution. In making this argument, we suggest that a Maussian middle position may be best.

One approach to the study of hierarchy in world politics sees unequal relations among states as the product of a bargain in which the weaker actor "delegates" some degree of

control over an issue to a powerful actor in exchange for some benefit. Lake (2009), for example, details how the Dominican Republic ceded authority over important elements of its foreign policy to the United States in exchange for protection from internal and external security threats. In this theory of hierarchy, it is the exchange of benefits that sustains the authority relationship between two actors, an exchange grounded in a practice of specific reciprocity. Although one actor in this relationship, the United States, benefitted more from this exchange than did the subordinate actor, the Dominican Republic, both actors exchanged benefits, and the hierarchical relationship left them both better off than they would otherwise be. Indeed, for Lake (2009), hierarchies only emerge when there is a roughly equivalent exchange among the actors involved; he goes so far as to suggest that these relationships are "contractual" in nature (2009: 29–30). This model of specific reciprocity highlights the theory of agency in Mauss. Agents recognize that engaging in specific patterns of deal-making may allow them to pursue their interests; therefore, they engage in exchange with others, trading security for control.

Mauss would criticize Lake for emphasizing agency at the expense of structure, and a thin view of agency at that. Lake pays little attention to social structure. No state in Lake's model is "dominated" in the sense that it loses its ability to make independent decisions due to its social position within a hierarchical relationship. Indeed, Lake's contractual theory of hierarchy, despite his interest in legitimacy and authority, is markedly bereft of social content beyond the shared expectations of exchange embedded in the hierarchical contract. He does not pursue the ideational basis of social relationships that make domination and subordination meaningful. He also does not admit the possibility that the presence of hierarchy or domination may shape agents' preferences and beliefs.

To understand hierarchy requires an understanding of the experience of domination. Understanding the experience of domination is important because it allows an analyst to consider the costs of hierarchy from the perspective of those most affected. For example, how do the dominated frame their plight and when do they consider resistance? Lake's theoretical toolkit provides, at best, a limited understanding of the master–slave relationship, because Lake presumes that the powerful experience hierarchy as a bargain rather than a right, and that the dominated appreciate its material rewards rather than experience its disempowerment, which is often violent. In the same way, Lake does not allow for agents to view international hierarchy through a lens other than one premised on material rewards.

An alternative tradition focuses on structure. There are several different approaches, and here we mention two. One popular approach emphasizes positionality within social networks (Goddard, 2009; Nexon, 2009). These approaches emphasize the asymmetric relationships that lie at the core of hierarchical relationships. Nexon and Wright (2007), for example, describe empires as having a specific network configuration, where imperial powers occupy the center of rimless hub and spoke systems. This central position provides the material power necessary for the growth of imperial power. These models highlight elements of Mauss' concept of structure and its relationship to diffuse reciprocity. First, it admits the possibility of unequal exchange, which points to features of the diffuse reciprocity model where social relations establish differential patterns of exchange for different types of agents. Second, it places a more central role on exchange as the basis for social order. Lake's theory of hierarchy is premised on the notion that some states are simply stronger than other states. Possessing rather than circulating goods is

the core of hierarchy. At the heart of network-based theories is the premise that empire is constituted by flows of goods, power, and information between subordinate and dominant communities. This flow constitutes the empire; exchange is its arteries.

At the same time, structural theories do not provide resources for agents within structural relationships to reflect upon and change them. Structural relationships are durable and resistant to change. This view complements the emphasis on structure in postcolonial thought, where colonizers are thought to mold the views of those they oppress in ways that make resistance less likely (Fanon, [1952] 2008). This affects the core as well as the periphery. When colonizers adopt orientalist attitudes, they have an interest in sustaining and maintaining colonial regimes (Said, 1979).

Theories that do not account for the possibility of agents reflecting upon and attempting to change their circumstances overemphasize structure. First, these structural theories of hierarchy minimize resistance. As James C. Scott (1990: 79) explains, social conflict continues in societies most marked by domination. This social conflict is so significant that Scott suggests,

> It is not the miasma of power and thralldom that requires explanation. We require instead an understanding of a misreading by subordinate groups that seems to exaggerate their own power, the possibilities of emancipation, and to underestimate the power arrayed against them.

By describing hierarchical structures in ways that do not allow for agency by the dominated, IR scholars ignore these forms of resistance. Second, resistance occurs in core states, in addition to the periphery. People within dominant societies reflect upon and realize the seeming injustice of patterns of inequality. The British movement to ban the slave trade in the nineteenth century and the anti-imperialists in the US Senate in the 1890s are two examples of dissent, where positions and structures do not straightforwardly determine ideational outcomes.

Mauss makes two arguments consistent with the fact of resistance. First, agents in dominated and dominating societies can recognize that their places within social relations are not natural facts. They might recognize that their social position is unjust or works against their interests. This reflexivity makes resistance possible. Second, patterns of domination are premised on material exchange. Boycotts and disobedience, for example, attempt to interrupt the flow of goods to imperial cores. One interpretation of these kinds of techniques is that they attempt to impose costs on dominant states. For Mauss, there may be more at work. Even if boycotts or disobedience impose no costs on imperial powers, they arrest the flow of goods upon which patterns of domination are constituted. Such resistance is a refusal to obey the rules of the subject position. In doing so, like Arthur building a round table, the dominated manipulate material exchange in a way intended to produce social effects. In other words, resistance requires reflection and manipulation of material patterns to secure social or symbolic effects.

Social obligation and morality

Mauss' treatment of agents and structures in social life, which seeks to avoid overemphasizing the degree to which structure determines social action while not reducing social

interactions to the interests of autonomous agents, has implications for our understandings of obligation in world politics. In this section, we focus on two implications we find particularly significant. First, Mauss' social ontology suggests a sociological account of obligation that is distinct from rationalist and constructivist accounts. Rather than focusing on interests or identity, the practice of gift exchange provides a distinct explanation of the social and psychological processes that produce the "compliance pull" of social rules and norms, one grounded in shared understandings of common fate and mutual vulnerability. Second, this alternative sociological account of obligation suggests a set of moral arguments about the kinds of obligations that states and other transnational actors owe each other in world politics. These obligations are rooted in acknowledgment of the need to care for the conditions that make agency and social order possible, a type of stewardship obligation that is neither wholly prudential nor entirely categorical. Mauss' theory of the gift helps shed light on these types of moral claims in world politics; in so doing, it enables us to rethink the importance of certain foundational norms of international law and politics and opens up new possibilities for constructing a more just form of international politics.

Understanding the dynamics of social obligation is central to any account of how and why actors follow, accept, or simply do not actively work to overturn existing social rules and structures. Despite the centrality of concepts such as compliance and obligation to the study of IR, the nature of social obligation remains something of a mystery in IR theory (Reus-Smit, 2003). Scholars often only address the question of social obligation indirectly, presupposing a sociological account of its origin that mirrors their prior ontological commitments. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that we find two dominant views on the nature of social obligation in IR theory that tend to reflect the presuppositions of either rationalist or constructivist approaches.

For rationalists, obligation is ultimately rooted in interests. Actors obey social norms and rules for fear of the costs, be they material or social, that will accrue to them if those norms are violated (Keohane, 2005: 99–105). Compliance with rules is driven by a consequentialist reasoning, but the focus on calculating costs and benefits does not yet give us an account of obligation. Obligations presuppose a conflict between what an actor desires or wants to do and what that actor should or must do (Stern, 2011: 3–4), and reducing all choices to a crude model of consequentialism largely effaces this conflict. Rationalist accounts of obligation root this conflict in the tension between short- and long-term interests. Institutions, norms, and rules matter, for rationalists, because they help structure interests in such a way that actors come to value the prospect of realizing long-term interests over the temptation of short-term gain, what is often called extending the "shadow of the future" (e.g. Milner, 1997; Oye, 1985). Actors feel the "compliance pull" of obligation when they value these long-term interests over short-term gains, a concern made manifest in behaviors such as caring about one's reputation in world politics (Guzman, 2007; Keohane, 2005). This account of social obligation is thus a prudential one: actors feel obligated to follow a rule because it is prudent to do so, rather than out of commitment to a higher moral law.

Constructivist accounts of obligation focus on the normative power of identity, linking the "compliance pull" of rules to the identity commitments an actor has internalized (e.g. Chayes and Chayes, 1993). Actors feel obliged to follow rules because

rule-following behavior is appropriate given the roles they occupy in a given social structure; they thus act according to a "logic of appropriateness" rather than consequence (March and Olsen, 1998), and behavior is driven more by a commitment to a (socially constructed) understanding of morality than by a prudential calculation. The conflict at the core of obligation in constructivist accounts is, therefore, not the conflict between long- and short-term interests, but the conflict between interests and morality, between individual gain and socially appropriate behaviors. The more deeply internalized those standards of appropriateness are, the less acutely this tension will be felt, and at the extreme, it may disappear altogether as actors redefine their interests in terms of their social roles and begin to act unreflectively in their social interactions with others.

While there are important differences between constructivist and rationalist IR theories of obligation, both approaches have difficulty sustaining the claim that agency and structure are mutually constitutive, and they leave important facets of social obligation under-examined as a result. In focusing on the tension between long- and short-term interests, rationalist accounts tend to reduce social obligation to a question of agency where social structure has little constitutive effect. Constructivism, for its part, tends to reduce social obligation to social structure, and the tension between interests and morality is ultimately determined by the degree to which individuals have internalized social norms. As noted earlier, this makes it difficult to envision how agents can bring about changes in those social norms and how actors can navigate their social obligations in a meaningful way.

Mauss' description of the gift contains within it an implicit account of social obligation that better enables us to sustain the claim that agents and structures are mutually constitutive. Three central obligations structure Mauss' discussion of social order in *The Gift*: the obligation to give gifts, to accept them, and to reciprocate the gift in the future. Mauss provides ethnographic descriptions of gift-giving in various societies, yet his focus is not on the specific rules governing what gifts are appropriate in a given social setting (though those obviously matter a great deal), but on the structure of gift exchange that he characterizes as a basic, or foundational, structure (Mauss, [1925] 2002: 5). He is concerned, in other words, not with the social content of rules but the constitutive structure of gift-giving itself. This focus on the constitutive structure of social rules, rather than the rules themselves, points to a different register of social obligation than that which is typically the focus of rationalist and constructivist theory. This register of social obligation concerns the relationship actors have to the conditions of possibility for meaningful social action. Here, it is instructive to return to the question of where Mauss locates the constitutive tension of social obligation.

For Mauss, the tension at the core of social obligation is not between long- and short-term interests, nor between interests and identity, but between agency and social order. Actors depend on social institutions for meaningful agency, yet those same institutions constrain their freedom, potentially casting them in subordinate social roles that limit their opportunities for action. Mauss is clear in his analysis that the practices of giving, accepting, and reciprocating a gift are often laden with struggles for power and dominance. Actors face the temptation to escape their possible domination by refusing a gift, yet doing so threatens to undermine the practice of gift exchange upon which social order rests. In so far as actors depend on their social position to engage in meaningful social

action, refusing to give, accept, or reciprocate a gift risks undermining the conditions of possibility for agency, even while these same practices constrain one's ability to act. Social practices thus both enable and constrain actors' agency, and Mauss' model of the gift places this constitutive tension at the core of social obligation.

This account of social obligation suggests that social order is sustained by an acknowledgment of the contradictory nature of social relations: that social relations simultaneously empower and disempower us as agents. Actors may comply with social rules, in short, not because they value long- over short-term interests, nor because they unreflexively enact socially appropriate behaviors, but because they recognize the importance of these rules to sustaining the conditions of possibility for their own agency. Some forms of obligation thus may be rooted in actors' acknowledgment of their inherent vulnerability as meaningful social agents, and this acknowledgment may help account for why actors comply with social norms and practices that might constrain or even dominate them.[3] Acknowledging one's dependence on social practices for meaningful social action does not lead to a categorical obligation to accept and faithfully enact one's social position, nor is it reducible to a consequentialist calculation of interests. Instead, it counsels prudence in avoiding practices, such as refusing a gift or failing to reciprocate a gift, that undermine the conditions of possibility for agency. This temptation to sovereignty, to have control over the conditions of possibility for one's agency, is the temptation Mauss' social obligation guards against. Mauss' model of obligation is thus grounded in an appreciation of the fiduciary duties that stem from our condition as socially embedded agents and informs a set of responsibilities related to the proper stewardship of shared social institutions.[4]

This alternative perspective on social obligation allows us to rethink the normative foundation for important practices in international law, such as *jus cogens* norms. These norms, which are widely thought to include the prohibitions on genocide, slavery, and aggressive war, impose obligations on states from which no derogation is permitted (Bassiouni, 1996; Gould, 2011). They thus pose a challenge to the traditional, positivist model of legal obligation in which states are bond only to those rules to which they explicitly consent. Although few legal scholars dispute the existence of these norms, there is widespread disagreement on how to conceptualize the obligations they generate. Two important attempts to explain *jus cogens* obligations mirror the prudential and categorical accounts of social obligation offered by rationalists and constructivists, respectively. The prudential account locates the obligatory power of *jus cogens* norms in the idea of a public international order, arguing that adherence to these norms is prudent given the negative consequences to international order that often result from their violation (Christenson, 1987). The categorical account offers either a natural law explanation, locating the force of *jus cogens* norms in reason and a higher moral authority that imposes obligations on states, or an appeal to the higher obligations that states owe to the international community (for a good discussion of these two views, see Criddle and Fox-Decent, 2009).

Our development of Mauss' idea of stewardship obligations offers a distinct perspective on this debate. In this view, *jus cogens* norms acquire their obligatory force from the acknowledgment that respecting prohibitions on genocide, slavery, and aggressive war is necessary to sustain the conditions for states to act as agents within the international legal

order. Violating these prohibitions risks doing harm to or the outright destruction of the international legal order, and because this legal order helps constitute states as actors in the first place, states have an obligation to care for its maintenance. Unlike public order theories of *jus cogens*, the stewardship model of obligation does not presuppose a commitment to any particular normative agenda or identification with a community that exists above the state. It only requires that states acknowledge their dependence on shared practices for exercising their powers as social agents. This argument suggests that the claim to state sovereignty has important limits, and those limits are grounded in a shared acknowledgment that the conditions of possibility for state agency lie, in important respects, beyond the control of the state itself. Acknowledging this fact carries with it an obligation to avoid actions, such as aggressive war, that may threaten those constitutive conditions by undermining the social order that establishes states as meaningful agents.

Mauss' perspective on social obligation in *The Gift* thus enables us to rethink the nature of obligation in political life, re-grounding the force of certain rules in actors' acknowledgment that they do not control the conditions of possibility for their own agency. We believe this view of social obligation has important implications for international morality, suggesting obligations we owe others that have heretofore been underappreciated. In particular, the idea of stewardship obligations suggests we have a duty to care for the social conditions that enable us to act as agents. This notion overlaps in important ways with the "ethics of care" developed by feminist theory (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993); here, however, it is not care of vulnerable others but care for the social practices and institutions we depend on for meaningful agency. As social agents, our ability to take meaningful action is inherently vulnerable because its conditions of possibility lie, in important respects, beyond our control. Acknowledgment of this fact not only warns against the allure of sovereignty (Markell, 2003) but also it generates a moral obligation to care for the social practices that enable us and others to engage in meaningful action, an obligation rooted in our shared mutual vulnerability. As Mauss' discussion of gift exchange makes clear, this moral obligation is not a form of charity where our care for others is driven by altruistic motives. Instead, the obligation stems from a collective recognition of our shared condition of mutual vulnerability, in which our ability to act as social agents depends on the continued maintenance of the social rules, institutions, and practices that make such action possible. Social insurance, for example, represents a duty to provide for the basic conditions needed for individuals to act as meaningful agents in society. It stems from a recognition that our own power as social agents is dependent on a larger social context that implicates the lives and well-being of others.

Applying this ethics of stewardship to world politics means states and other actors have an obligation to attend to and sustain the social practices, such as multilateral diplomacy, international law, and international organizations (IOs), that enable governments and other actors to engage in meaningful social relationships. States must take care to not undermine the social norms that enable them to take action with others, respecting, for example, procedural norms as they pursue their interests. It suggests a duty to act with restraint and to care for the collective institutions that sustain social intercourse. This duty is rooted not in an appeal to a higher law or a valuation of long- over short-term

interests, but in an acknowledgment of the inescapable condition of mutual vulnerability in which all social actors exist. Acknowledging our condition of mutual vulnerability is at odds with some traditions of state sovereignty in which states seek mastery over the terms of their own existence and agency (Schmitt, [1922] 2010). Mauss' social ontology helps reveal the misguided and dangerous myths upon which these claims to sovereignty rest, myths that threaten not to enhance state power but to diminish and ultimately extinguish it. The ethics of stewardship that follows from his social ontology, in contrast, promises a world in which states acknowledge their mutual vulnerability and work collectively to sustain the conditions needed for meaningful social agency. In so doing, international politics may return, as Mauss ([1925] 2002) puts it, "to the enduring basis of law, to the very principle of normal social life" ([1925] 2002: 89).

Conclusion

When read through the lens of the historical development of twentieth-century sociological thought, *The Gift* might appear as a minor work whose contribution is eclipsed by more well-known works from thinkers like Durkheim or Parsons. The tradition of social theory largely identified with these thinkers has had so profound an influence on contemporary social science that many of *The Gift*'s insights, such as the need to study cultural practices directly, the importance of social structure, and the centrality of meaning, are now so commonplace as to be unremarkable. Although written more than 90 years ago, we believe Mauss' perspective on social relations, in particular, the implicit social ontology that underlies *The Gift*, still provides fertile ground from which new insights about social life and IR, in particular, may be cultivated. Mauss presents a model of social relations in which people are embedded in a thick set of institutions, norms, and practices that sustain social order, yet he also recognizes that people are cognizant of their condition as socially constituted agents and are able to act strategically in the face of this recognition to change their social position and status. In staking out a middle ground between structure and agency, Mauss provides an ontological perspective that takes seriously the claim that agents and structures are co-constitutive.

This perspective, we argued, has important implications for a variety of issues in international theory. First, Mauss provides an understanding of reciprocity in IR that appreciates the role that unequal social status plays in structuring relations of exchange between actors. Such a perspective suggests that when actors engage in reciprocal exchanges, they are not simply building cooperation through tit-for-tat compliance or enacting shared normative commitments, but they are struggling to transform social positions, gain social status, and place others in subordinate positions. More than interests or identity is thus at stake in relations of diffuse reciprocity; such reciprocity also involves relations of super and subordination that implicate the deep, generative structure of international political life.

The Gift also provides a way to rethink the nature of social obligation in international political life and points toward an alternative ethical framework that raises new questions about the obligations states owe to each other and the international community. As we

argued above, Mauss' social ontology, in which social practices both enable and constrain actors, points to a model of social obligation in which actors have a duty to care for and sustain the social practices that constitute them as agents. This model provides a different perspective on certain foundational elements of the international legal order, such as *jus cogens* norms, and the duties they impose on states. Finally, we believe Mauss points toward an alternative framework for thinking about moral and ethical questions in world politics. This framework is grounded in an acknowledgment of our inescapable mutual vulnerability as socially constituted agents, and it guards against the claim to sovereign mastery that is, in many ways, constitutive of modern politics (Ashley, 1988).

Taken together, the contributions of *The Gift* to IR theory are significant, and they speak to issues of social theory that are very much at the forefront of IR scholarship. Despite the long-standing and widely accepted claim that agents and structures are co-constituted, there remains a tendency to reduce the generative character of social order to either agents or structures, which renders the appeal to co-constitution little more than an empty rhetorical flourish. The model of social relations that Mauss sketches in *The Gift* provides a means to move beyond these reductionist tendencies. By taking the embedded nature of social agents as the starting point for analysis, Mauss enables us to explore more effectively how practices of reciprocal exchange generate social order and how agents manipulate those practices to bring about change. In doing so, Mauss helps us understand a world where societies are dynamic and resistance to domination is commonplace.

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Notes

1. Mauss provides a progressive vision in these passages, where agents realize the effects of creating hierarchies. In other passages, Mauss recognizes that agents may realize possible gains that are not linked to progressive goals, such as achieving power or glory at the top of hierarchical orders.
2. Archer is closer to Mauss than is Giddens (1984) with respect to the agent–structure debate because of the role Archer gives to time and the heightened capabilities of individual agents to modify social structure.
3. We do not mean to suggest this is the sole source of obligation in political life; only that Mauss offers us a model distinct from other approaches highlighted by existing social and political theory.
4. The concept of stewardship obligations can also be found at the intersection of theology and environmentalism; see, for example, Attfield (1991) and Fowler (1995).

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