The gift as colonial ideology? Marcel Mauss and the “solidarist” colonial policy in the interwar era

Grégoire Mallard
Graduate Institute
Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Graduate Institute of Geneva
Gregoire.mallard@graduateinstitute.ch

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Abstract

Marcel Mauss published his essay “The Gift” (1925) in the context of debates about the European sovereign debt crises as well as economic growth experienced by the colonies of European empires. It is difficult to isolate its anthropological dimension from the wider colonial policies of his time. Indeed, based on his worldwide survey of gift-making practices, the three obligations which Mauss identified as the basis of a customary law of international economic relations (e.g. the duty to give, the duty to receive and the duty to give back) could be very well applied to think about the new state of relationships between metropolises and colonies in the interwar period. In fact, Mauss made this relation explicit in his unpublished book, The Nation. In order to identify the complex relationship that Mauss’s essay on the Gift entertained with the colonial ideology of European powers, this article situates the origins of the “gift” discourse in the political discourses of Mauss’s socialist colleagues who criticized the exploitative practices of the French chartered companies in Central Africa, both before and after the Great War. It traces the discursive associations between Mauss’s anthropological concepts (“exchanges of prestation,” “generosity,” and “honor”) and the reformist program of socialist colonialists who pushed for an “altruistic” colonial policy in the interwar period.
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“The Gift,” the best-known essay by a French anthropologist, was published by Emile Durkheim’s nephew Marcel Mauss in 1925. The universal theory of gift-giving practices it provides has been at the center of many postwar disputes between French social theorists, from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950) to Pierre Bourdieu (1994:174-5), but at the same time, as Lygia Sigaud (2002:335,6) has demonstrated, there are many “discontinuities in the interpretation of The Gift.” In particular, she notices a “general indifference to Mauss’s preoccupations with rights and obligations,” despite the fact that Mauss conceived of his essay as the coronation of a decade-long interest in the “history of obligations” in general and “contractual obligations” in particular, as the latter manifest themselves by the “voluntary character of what he called prestations, apparently freely given, yet coercive and interested.”

As Mauss famously wrote, the gift is a “system of total prestations” (Mauss 1990[1925]:7), which partakes in economic logics as much as it belongs to the realms of law, morality and politics, and it develops in the interstices of all of the latter fields (Steiner 2005). Thus, it is not a surprise if Mauss found examples of gift exchanges (like the potlatch) mostly in the realm of inter-national relations, where law, politics, economic and even religious logics are sometimes hard to disentangle. If Mauss (1990[1925]:47) underlined the formal differences between various kinds of “primitive” forms of inter-national gift exchanges, like the Pacific kula or the North American potlatch, he also noticed that all of these systems of gift exchanges were practiced to reaffirm the existence of inter-national solidarity: the first one, along cooperative and horizontal lines of inter-tribal solidarity; the second one, along more antagonistic lines, as the tribes practicing the potlatch avoided a (real) “war of men” by engaging in a “war of properties,” which created both solidarity and suzerainty between partners.

Mauss’s interest in international relations and gift exchanges had in fact two dimensions: empirical (as manifested in his attempt to catalogue all gift exchanges among “primitive” nations) and normative (as seen in his willingness to promote a model of gift exchanges that was not purely based on the calculation of each nation’s individual utility). At the end of his 1925 essay, Mauss proposed a bold (and optimistic) conclusion: that a “system of total services” (in the translation of Halls), or a system of reciprocal exchanges of “prestations” (to use Mauss’s specific French term), always leads to the creation of solidarity, as manifested by an obligation to give back. This was true even in the case of the antagonistic North American potlatch. Indeed, even the “regime of contractual law and system of economic prestations” known as potlatch actually articulated a set of legal duties, “the obligation to give, […] the obligation to receive and reciprocate.” (Mauss 1990[1925]:50) As Mauss wrote, “to contract debts on the one hand, to pay them on the other, this is what constitutes the potlatch” (Mauss 1990[1925]:139); thus, the potlatch did not erase the debt, nor did it erase the social bond, between creditor and debtor nations—rather, it strengthened its significance. Mauss went even as far as claiming that his normative conclusion was not only true for “primitive” societies but also for modern societies: in his political essays on European sovereign debts in the context of the reparations debate, Mauss also asserted the existence of a self-reinforcing relationship between gift exchanges and international solidarity (Mallard 2011).

Building on a socio-historical analysis of Mauss’s conceptual terms, this article seeks to uncover another little-known more contemporary aspect of Mauss’s
theoretical investigation in systems of gift-giving by examining how the latter related to the politics of colonial relations in the interwar period. If the colonial context, which foregrounded his reflection, has not been largely apparent to commentators until now,¹ it may be due to the fact that we had to wait for the formidable work of transcription and translation of Mauss’s manuscript titled The Nation (which Mauss continued to edit at least until after his election at the Collège de France in 1931, but which remained unpublished in its full version until 2013), which was conducted by Jean Terrier and Marcel Fournier (2013), to understand how The Nation extended Mauss’s earlier reflections on solidarity found in The Gift. By looking at Mauss’s analyses of systems of reciprocal exchanges in the colonial context which he published not only in The Nation, but also in his earlier writings on colonialism, this article demonstrates how Mauss refined his analysis of contemporary international politics when the latter diverged from his (optimistic) normative model of gift exchanges; and what hidden variable explained differences between predicted outcomes – that gifts between metropolis and the colonies are always repaid and strengthen imperial solidarity—and observed reality in the context of the colonies.

This article thus seeks to ask the following questions: To what extent Marcel Mauss’s anthropological writings in The Nation contributed to modify Mauss’s original vision on gift exchanges published in The Gift? Did Mauss’s reflections on colonial solidarity prolong Mauss’s earlier (prewar) normative reflections on the issue of colonial economic relations? Did Mauss and his closest colleagues believe that colonial trade practices would increase or decrease international solidarity? To show how Mauss answered this series of questions, the article proceeds as follows.

First, it situates Mauss’s reflections on gift exchanges in the range of colonial discourses which emerged before the Great War from within the socialist and solidarist circles to which Mauss participated. It focuses in particular on the criticisms raised against the abuses of the chartered companies in Congo which were voiced by the French “Committee for the Protection and Defence of Indigenous Populations” (hereafter, the Committee), in whose activities Mauss participated in the 1900s, as well as on the public denunciation by Mauss’s socialist friends, like Jean Jaurès and Albert Thomas, who publicly labeled and shamed the concessionary companies in the French national Parliament. Looking at these pre-war debates gives an important insight into the socio-historical genesis of key concepts used by Mauss in The Gift (like “prestations,” “gifts,” or “generosity,” “contractual gifts”) and found in political discourses on colonial reform.

Second, this article focuses on the writings of interwar influential colonial reformers who wanted to redefine French colonialism so as to limit the economic exploitation of colonial subjects by private companies. In particular, this article focuses on the writings of Albert Sarraut, who sought to improve the solidarity among both the colonizing nations—especially the French and British empires—and their colonial subjects, in order to foster human solidarity across societies characterized by different levels of development. Third, the article shows how Mauss’s reflections in The Nation participated in redefining the validity of Mauss’s previous model of gift exchanges, and how he included the question of a society’s level of “integration” (and differences in levels of integration within and across societies) at the center of his attention. This preoccupation for the effects of varying levels of integration on the working of gift exchanges was not surprising when placed against the background of the French empire’s colonial expansion, and the new reformist mandate that Mauss

¹ For exceptions, see Libeud 2009; Conklin 2013.
gave to ethnologists and colonial administrators: to move away from the mercantilist exploitation of the colonies in order to prevent the collapse of international solidarity between the French metropolis and its colonies.

The chartered companies, the exchange of gifts and the governance of colonial subjects in the late nineteenth century colonialism

To many political theorists, the idea that Mauss rehabilitated the normative model of gift exchanges in modern political thought at the same time as he was engaged in a struggle against the power of the chartered companies may seem a paradoxical fact. Indeed, since Harry Lieberson’s (2011:25) *The Return of the Gift*, we now know that the circulation of gifts as the preferred mode of colonial governance was denounced precisely by those late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British philosophers who opposed the expanding private administration of colonial subjects by the chartered companies, like the East India Company. The opprobrium shed on gift exchanges between British rulers and Indian subjects by the British philosophers had signaled a major shift in political thought in the early nineteenth century, as “gift giving as an exchange of favors to create bonds of obligation and loyalty was a pervasive feature of English as well as Indian society [in the late eighteenth century], with patronage between more or less powerful politicians, between authors and aristocrats.” Thus, as Lieberson (2011:25) writes, “a chasm was opening up between the traditional world of gift exchange and the intellectuals of nineteenth-century Europe,” who agreed with British utilitarian thinkers like James Mill that gift exchanges were “a vestige of the old order” that the French Revolution had failed to abolish, “and a disturbance in a modern democratic society.” In the nineteenth century, as European political thinkers drew sharper distinctions between their own practices of government—enlightened, rational, modern, formal—and the practices—personal, unpredictable, premodern, based on the material exchange of gifts—of those whose rule they replaced in the overseas territories where colonial private interests were expanding, those administrators of the chartered companies who still practiced the exchange of gifts fell under accusations of corruption and undue personal enrichment. Thus, the model of the gift disappeared from the realm of political theory in most of the nineteenth century, as Harry Lieberson tells us.

Then, it is not surprising that the “return of the gift” into theories of good governance found its way through early twentieth-century anthropology rather than through political theory or sociology. Marcel Mauss in particular, but other anthropologists as well, tried to rehabilitate gift exchanges as a model of good governance for modern nations to follow. In their ethnographies and anthropological essays, they aimed to demonstrate that there was nothing premodern in this form of government, and that in fact, those “modern” political societies which denied the legitimacy of obligations formed out of the material circulation of gifts were not only less reflexive but also more unjust and threatening to individuals than those which had an appreciation for the wisdom of the obligations created through interpersonal exchange: as Mauss (1990[1925]:98) wrote in the conclusion of his essay, “the brutish pursuit of individual ends is harmful to the ends of the peace of all […]—and rebounds on the individual himself.” Thus, Mauss saw the remaining presence of gift exchanges in the modern (colonial) societies of his time as a useful and positive safeguard against the “brutish” exploitation of men for purely economic purposes.

One could interpret that association between anthropology and a revival of the gift as more evidence of Talal Asad’s (1973) denunciation of anthropology as colonial
apology—or an attempt to civilize colonialism to ensure its long-lasting presence. While the case of Marcel Mauss’s relation to colonialism in general, and the power of chartered companies in particular, may not falsify that claim, the analysis of Mauss’s ideas on colonialism also complicates it. To somehow fast-forward on our story, it is worth noticing that in The Nation Mauss condemned the despicable practices of forced labor implemented by chartered companies without any state sanction; the dishonest financial practices which consisted in placing any cost incurred by these companies to the budget of local colonial governments— and thus to the accounts of the descendants of colonial subjects—; and the moral corruption that reigned within the Parisian milieu where the press, the politicians and the speculators united to defend the private exploitation of colonial subjects on behalf of an alleged moral and technical superiority. All of these factors lead to the destruction of a spirit of national solidarity, both in the colony and in the metropolis: indeed, Mauss (2013:242) saw in the “private appropriation, under the authority of the great [European] states, of many basic commodities necessary for the life of other nations (coal, oil),” a deeply problematic development associated with modern industrial forms of colonialism.

What we could call “monopoly colonialism” of chartered private companies—which was otherwise called the “Colonial Pact” whereby the colonial subjects would produce raw materials for concessionary companies and digest industrial products manufactured by the metropolis—kept colonies in a state of economic dependence due to their over-specialization in agriculture or raw material extractive economies. Rather than opening colonial economies to the opportunities of global markets, the colonial monopolies which flourished in certain colonies under the French state’s authority, destroyed the solidarity of colonial subjects among themselves and between themselves and the metropolitan subjects (Mauss 2013:188). They produced effects that ran contrary to the “mandates” that the League of Nations endowed to the French and British empires after the Great War: e.g. to create, through cultural, social, and economic exchanges, the conditions through which colonial subjects could arrive at a developed stage where they could be given the authority to rules themselves in interdependence but also independence from the metropolis.

Even if expressed in an unpublished manuscript which Mauss kept revising for more than a decade, Mauss’s interwar criticism of the chartered companies echoed his pre-war political struggles. Indeed, in the political pamphlets and letters to the Minister of the Colonies which Mauss (co)wrote before the Great War, he focused his criticism of colonialism on the exploitative practices of the chartered companies. He noticed that such modern forms of colonialism could only inhibit the ability of exchanges to move colonies up the ladder of economic development. That was blatant in the case of the Congo, about which Mauss collected second-hand information since 1900 (Sibeud 2009:56), in the context of his participation to a small but influential organization called the “Committee for the Protection and Defence of Indigenous Populations” (hereafter, the Committee, founded in 1892). In 1906, this Committee (1906) addressed a letter (co-signed by Mauss) to the Minister of the Colonies, in order to protest the decision made by the General Government in the Congo “to reduce the productive capacity of the indigenous populations to the two thirds of the productivity granted by the French State to the concessionary companies.” For Mauss and other members of the Committee, the latter decision revealed the complicity of the French administration in the Congo with the repressive policies of chartered companies whose only goal was to force the local population to work for them, whatever the costs for the region.
The Committee (1906) in which activities Mauss participated placed the fateful negligence of the French local government in the Congo and Gabon in the larger context of state toleration vis-à-vis the worst examples of forced labor and mass killings of colonial subjects that were performed in “hostage camps” of women, which were routinely created by the chartered companies to force husbands into accepting deforestation labor, which men otherwise refused to perform – a practice which was also condemned by the delegate of the Minister in the Congo, Savoyan de Brazza (1850-1905), sent with his Secretary, Félicien Challaye (1875-1967), whom Mauss befriended in the context of their mobilizations, to document allegations of mistreatment by the chartered companies. Although Brazza’s death on his way back from his mission weakened the influence of his report to the government, which remained classified, the Committee relayed his concerns and denounced the French administration in the Congo for allowing such horrible practices as the “hostage camps” to be part of the tool kits of chartered companies “against the populations who refused to work for the Company.” (Committee 1906)

Thus, even if the association between gift exchanges and the positive development of solidarity seemed to be unambiguously positive in The Gift, Mauss and some of the solidarist thinkers with whom he was associated in this Committee were deeply aware that the exchange of “prestations” could be as negative as well as positive for the exchanging partners, depending on other contextual elements. In fact, that word “prestations,” which Mauss later used as an anthropological concept in his 1925 essay, was used by that very same Committee to refer to the labor practices that the chartered companies asked from colonial subjects: in 1901, the Committee (1901) asked the Minister of the Colonies to “formally prohibit that any corporation in charge of public work in the colonies to pay workers with another currency than the legal money”; that “any in-kind payment (especially in alcohol) would be strictly prohibited”; that the word “forced labor” [corvée], which reminded so many bad things, be replaced by the word “prestation” (or “requisition”); and that “women could no longer be requisitioned for digging and earthwork” so as “to limit the number of abuses that have proliferated in Guadeloupe, New Caledonia, and Indochina.” In contrast to “forced” labor, the exchange of “prestations” had to have a “voluntary” character, according to Mauss’s famous definition “voluntary character of what he called prestations, apparently freely given, yet coercive and interested.” (Sigaud 2002:336)

This did not mean that it should adopt the exact same contractual form as a “wage” in the colonial context, but that its logic should not be purely exploitative – and that some “giving back” should be realized in the broader colonial context.

The claims addressed privately by the Committee in letters to the various Minister of the Colonies, were relayed in public by the same coalition of socialist thinkers who stood against the accusers of Alfred Dreyfus a few years before, and who later joined Mauss and Durkheim as contributors to L’Année sociologique, the review where Mauss published The Gift (Besnard 1979). This group included Mauss’s close socialist colleagues, Albert Thomas (1878-1932), whom Mauss had met during the struggle for the rehabilitation of Dreyfus, and who led the parliamentary fight started against chartered companies before the War, before becoming the first Director of the International Labor Organization (ILO), where he tried to use his influence to prohibit “forced labor” in the early 1930s; and Jean Jaurès (1859-1914), the founder of the socialist party in France (in 1905), whom Mauss had met through his uncle Emile Durkheim) with whom Mauss worked to create L’Humanité, the journal of the socialist party, until Jaurès’s assassination by a rightwing nationalist at
the onset of the Great War. All of these men had been staunch defenders of Captain Dreyfus, accused by anti-Semite nationalists of treason, and they expressly related the fight in favor of Dreyfus and the fight against forced labor, in particular, in the context of the League of Human Rights (“Ligue des droits de l’homme”), which they had created during the Dreyfus affair, and which, in 1906, declared itself to be the “tutor of the rights of the indigenous populations.” (Sibeud 2009:58)

After the Dreyfus affair, Jaurès and Thomas took a very public stance against chartered companies during a scandal that involved the N’Goko Sangha Company, which had obtained a concession in the French Congo in 1899. The N’Goko Sangha case exposed the reality of colonial administrative practices which was all the more disappointing that colonialism showed its worst figure in the region where Mauss (1913) claimed, in a 1913 letter to the Minister of the Colonies, that the colonial subjects needed most a benevolent and enlightened colonial administration: the Congo. The socialists first rebelled by denouncing the commercial and labor policies of that company on the ground. As the French local administrator in the Gabon had written in 1908 to his Governor in a letter transmitted to Albert Thomas, the existing system of exchange between chartered companies and local colonial subjects in the Congo did not benefit at all to the latter, largely because of its reliance on in-kind payments. There were various reasons for that, in particular, the fact that the Company paid its local colonial workers with overpriced “gun powder, which was the main currency used by the Pahouins to pay the bridge’s dowry,” and “which was under the exclusive monopoly of the Company” (Leroux 1908): the situation thus allowed the Company to fix whatever price (calculated in hours worked for the Company) it wanted for that good, whose sale was in fact prohibited by other foreign chartered companies in the Congo region, as it had the obvious disadvantage of arming local populations – even if it allowed them to exchange women and build families. Thus, like members of the Committee (1901), Thomas (1911c) proposed that the French state should impose the “obligation for companies to pay indigenous populations in cash and money” rather than in kind.

Mauss’s socialist friends in Parliament also criticized the financial montages that the French metropolis organized in order to have the colonial subjects pay for the oppressive practices which were imposed upon them and from which they suffered. Jaurès criticized in Parliament the short-term logics of economic exploitation in the colonies and the financial hypocrisy of the colonial apologists who indebted future generations of colonial subjects by having them pay for these colossal and unwanted projects. As he said in 1911, France’s financial policy with the colonies “consists in hiding the real costs of the France’s colonial policy by multiplying threefold, sometimes fivefold the taxes levied on local populations, and by accumulating local debt, paid at interest rates which are highly profitable” to the French capitalists, “so as to fund large expenses in big public construction works – the construction of roads and railways which serve no apparent function when much more needed irrigation systems are neglected –, whose costs are placed on the accounting books of local governments.” (Journal Officiel 1911:1778) In so doing, they pre-figured some of Mauss’s (1901[1925]:93) distinction between exploitative short-term practices driven by utility-maximizing private agents, and the logic of honor found in the exchange of real (as opposed to fake) gifts.

With the N’Goko Sangha Company, the financial scandal took an even more extreme form, as the Company obtained a formidable sum of money (to be paid by future generations of colonial subjects) thanks to an arbitration procedure denounced by Thomas, Jaurès and others. Indeed, the Company asked the general government of
French East Africa to pay reparations for a failure to enforce the monopoly over the exploitation of rubber which had been extended to the Company in the French Congo in 1899: indeed, the Company lawyers claimed that it had suffered from the exploitation of latex trees by German companies located on the same territory, in violation of its rights of exclusivity (Leroux 1908), and from the violation of its rights by the French state when the latter agreed in 1908 to swap large territories granted to the Company in the Congo and Cameroon with the German state. The Company claimed that, after failing to secure the border between the French and German territories in the Congo and South Cameroon, the German factories had been back after 1905, and had proceeded to even greater forest destruction in retaliation to the (not-delivered) threat of legal proceedings by the Company in Germany (Tardieu 1910). Thus, in 1910, the Company asked also for compensation, but this time, it requested formidable sums, and the arbitration tribunal ordered the General Government of French East Africa to pay 2.3 million francs to the Company (Tardieu 1910). The N’Goko Sangha Company, like the modern-day “vultures funds” which sued the Argentina in New York courts after the restructuration of the Argentinian debt (Nelson 2016) followed a business model in which wealth and profit were extracted from legal action against the State and from the organization of public campaigns which misrepresented the reality of their distant practices.

For Mauss’s socialist friends in Parliament, that arbitration case was indeed a grotesque travesty of the reality of the colonial practices on the ground: the fact that such a Company could receive reparations from the French Government in East Africa meant that the colonial subjects were exploited twice, once by being coerced into almost unpaid forced labor, and second, by having their children reimburse the debt which allowed the local government to pay reparations to the Company. As Marcel Labordère (1911), an economist, trade cycle specialist and a friend of Thomas, wrote to Thomas, the arbitration of the N’Goko Sangha case was a complete violation of the implicit understanding behind the granting of a concession. Indeed, when the French state gave a first compensation to the Company in 1905 (by giving concessionary rights on millions of hectares in Gabon in exchange for the de facto loss of forests in Congo), “either the Company accepted the gift as it was,” and it decided to fight the German economic competition there – which the Company knew existed in the new Gabonese territory – by investing economically in the territory; or the Company just saw in the granting of new territory where there was a known German presence an opportunity to “seek even more profit by means of further legal action against the State.” By choosing the latter strategy, the Company not only proved to be ungrateful (as it did not consider the economic potential of the million of hectares on which it gained concessionary rights), but it also – and more importantly – proved to be extremely deceitful, as it systematically planned to use “an arsenal of legal means which, conveniently deployed by a reserve of friendly forces [parliamentarians, journalists, jurists], could help it make profit in the vast field of reparations claims at the expense of the national interest.” (Labordère 1911)

Thus, even if neither Jaurès, nor Thomas, nor Mauss contested the principle that France had a civilizing mission in the non-European world (Manceron 2003:225), and that the exchange of “gifts”—gifts of land, gifts of labor, gifts of investments, etc.—was a priori a useful way to foster the economic development of, and political solidarity between, the metropolis and the colonies, the reality of colonial practices on the ground involved the multiplication of travesties of gift exchanges. What they feared in particular was the capitalist oppression of the many colonial subjects by a minority of speculators who duped the French people thanks to its control over the
French press, which lied about the nature of the gifts granted to companies (Girardet 1972:108).

In their pamphlets, addresses and letters, these words—“gift” or “prestation”—functioned as positive markers of the French mission in Africa: what these public intellectuals placed at the pillory was the failure by chartered companies to uphold the ideas of honor, which had justified why they had been granted public monopolies (privileges) in the first place. This failure to live up to the ideals of solidarity meant that, as Thomas (1911d) asked, in 1911, in the National Assembly, chartered companies like the N’Goko Sangha Company should lose their concessionary rights when it was blatant that they failed to honor their promise to invest in developing the region—the counter-gift that chartered companies had to give back in exchange of their concession, which was the reason “why the French state granted concessions to these companies in 1899” as, indeed, “concessions were meant to encourage chartered companies to effectively administer large territories” (Leroux 1908) in the absence of state support and military support. Besides, Albert Thomas who sat at the Budgetary Commission of the French Parliament, asked for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry to annul the whole arbitration procedure. The socialists’ fight against forced labor and monopoly capitalism were not framed as denunciations of gift exchanges (in contrast to the early nineteenth century British utilitarian discourses), but rather, as criticisms of the deviations and travesties of exchanges of prestations practiced by chartered companies. That chartered companies behaved like the worst capitalists showed that they did not understand how gift exchanges practiced between solidary societies should behave, which may be one reason why Mauss undertook to describe such “ideal” rules of gift exchanges in his 1925 essay.

Interwar altruistic colonialism(s): The solidarist defense(s) of a new colonial contract

The late nineteenth century criticism of colonialism that stemmed from the socialist and solidarist circles in which Mauss participated was grounded on a willingness to provide colonies with true rather than fake gifts: a policy which the philosopher Alexandre Köhèève (2001[1956]:123) later called a “giving colonialism,” in a lecture delivered at the invitation of Carl Schmitt. Already in 1902 and 1907, after his trips to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, Marcel Mauss wrote memorandums addressed to the Minister of the Colonies in which he appealed (in vain) to the patriotism of the Minister to create a “Bureau of French Ethnology similar to the American Bureau created at the Smithsonian.” (Mauss 1907:22) As he wrote in 1902, “in order to be humane, colonial administration needed to respect and use local beliefs and practices so as to avoid a brutal confrontation” in the colonial encounter, “which he believed should only very gradually change the economic and technological regimes in place.” (Mauss 1902:1) The reasons for the development of “descriptive sociology” (or “ethnology”) in the colonies were not only scientific but also practical ones: with the creation of such an Institute, as Mauss (1913:2) wrote, the Ministry could be confident that the recipients of its largesse would do the utmost to “justify as soon as possible the sacrifices consented by the Ministry and the Colonial Governments” and that the future Institute would provide facts of “immediate relevance to the administration and colonization.” When, in 1925, Mauss finally obtained from the Minister of the Colonies, the creation of the Institute of ethnology in Paris, which he chaired with Paul Rivet, he thus tried to sensitize “colonial Administrators, missionaries and explorers” (three of the publics he targeted) to the
ethnological lessons derived from his analysis of gift exchanges (Conklin 2013:240). The students he trained there and at the Museum of Ethnography, whom he involved in the preparation of the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition in Paris, could then learn ethnographic and museographic techniques that would help “the world see with clarity that it is through colonial action that it can now realize the notion of human solidarity.” (cited in Girardet 1972:132)

In many ways, the program of “giving colonialism” or “altruistic colonialism” was not yet fully articulated until the interwar period, until Albert Sarraut, the Minister of the Colonies who reigned over colonial policy in most of the 1920s, wrote two important books on the issue. Albert Sarraut (1872-1962) was indeed the highest authority on the colonial issue in the interwar period: he prepared the most important bill introduced into Parliament in 1921, which was rejected but then adopted in piecemeal fashion by successive governments over a thirty-year period, as he held the positions of Minister of the Colonies from 1920 to 1924 (and from 1932 to 1933), just before the creation of Mauss’s Institute, as well as Minister of Interior from 1926 to 1928 (and from 1936 to 1938), during which period he was in charge of domestic affairs in Algeria (as Algeria fell under the Ministry of the Interior). As such, Sarraut had the ability to pass important elements of his reform despite his lack of legislative success (Thomas 2005).

Like Mauss, Sarraut defended French colonialism when the latter took the form of a giving colonialism: his calls for a policy of “generosity” were explicitly asserting the moral superiority of the French colonialism over that of the British. The French “honor derived from the fact that,” against the ideology of racist superiority exemplified by the British colonial enterprise, which doomed the “inferior races” (Sarraut 1931:113) to an ever-lasting specialization in raw material extraction and agricultural labor, France was the first colonial power to understand the “human value of retarded races and its sacred obligation to respect and develop such human value,” (Sarraut 1931:115) so that the inferior races could slowly join France in the joint management of all human affairs (not just agricultural specialization but also industrial manufacture) without loosing their singularity. As Sarraut (1931:104) wrote in two chapters titled “The Colonial Obligation of France” and “The French Colonial Doctrine,” which were based on lectures he gave in the mid-1920s before students of the Colonial School (where Mauss was giving the classes on ethnography), the obligation to give and be given back in return was almost a national character for the French, independent of the political regime which ruled over the expansion of the colonial territories: in contrast to Anglo-Americans, Sarraut (1931:79) asserted that “Frenchmen are altruistic; their genious reflects a taste for the universal; their humanity, their sense of right, fairness and beauty foment the altruistic conceptions which they develop well beyond the national confines to expand to humanity as a whole their dreams of justice, solidarity and fraternal goodness.” As he continued, “Frenchmen feel the obligation to give and to give oneself so that they can bring the lights of civilization to races less fortunate than theirs.”

When he wrote The Nation, Mauss (2013:187) was a little bit less naïve in his analysis, but he shared the same patriotic apology of French colonialism when the latter respected the singular character of colonial societies, their right to keep their cultural difference, as well as the necessity to foster relations of trust through reciprocal exchanges. For Mauss, there was reason to believe that a process of positive integration had taken place under the experience of French colonialism, as a result of the multiplication of exchanges of goods and reciprocal services between the metropolis and the colony. Mauss (2013:189) wrote, “whatever the crimes of
imperialist colonization, it pushed away Barbary, war, slavery, and misery in important parts of the globe.” As he added, “it [is] still better for a Moroccan to be governed by Frenchmen than by warlords, for the Arab to be under the British rather than Ottoman tutelage.” Mauss did not challenge the official colonial ideology and history of the French Republic, which refused to see that the policy of total extermination experimented with by the Napoleonic forces in Saint Domingue and later by those of Charles X and Napoleon the Third in Algeria had been much more brutal than the administration of Berber populations by Abd El Kader (Manceron 2003:180).

But progress in the French administration of the colonies could be made if the metropolis adopted a truly “giving colonialism.” Sarraut and Mauss’s interventions in the public debate or through their teaching formed part of a reformist colonial discourse in which the figure of the gift was deployed at great length, as “the gift” – rather than “the taking,” as Carl Schmitt argued (see Heins, Unrau and Avram, 2016, this issue)—was to become the foundation of the international solidarity between the metropolis and its colonies.

The gift, conceived in solidarist terms as an implicit contract, created obligations and duties for both the metropolis and the colonies, and these obligations defined the colonial contract that Sarraut wanted to impose in lieu of the Colonial Pact. For Sarraut (1931:104), the relationship between the metropolis and the colonies should no longer be characterized by an “act of force,” but it had to become a “fact of law,” almost a “total social fact” in Maussian language. He developed a colonial doctrine of contractual rights (Manceron 2003:215), which was clearly “solidarist” in the sense that it recognized that certain acquired rights like property rights or the right of first occupation—those rights that are based on purely “dogmatic fictions,” and against which Sarraut (1931:89) opposed “living, positive and productive right”—could be disregarded on behalf of a “higher utility”: for instance, in case of public expropriation or foreign intervention on behalf of higher principles that concerned humanity (or the collectivity) as a whole. In other terms, “there is a superior right (above all others) which is the total right of the human species to live a better life on this planet, a life fuller of material and spiritual riches, which can be best achieved thanks to the solidarity collaboration between races.” (Sarraut 1931:89) He slayed the idea that the benefits that France should derive from the colonial relations derived exclusively from a right of first occupation – the act of “taking” recognized at the Berlin Congress of 1885 in which the European Great Powers divided colonial possessions in the Congo (Schmitt 1950: 228)—or that the duration during which that right should be exercised only depended upon the commercial benefits that the metropolis could derive from the exploitation of the colony’s riches. According to him, one nation would lose its right to colonize others if those other peoples already exploited to the fullest extent the resources that nature had endowed its territory with; or if it failed to do so in an altruistic fashion, as Albert Thomas had claimed was the case of chartered companies.

The ideology of “altruistic” colonialism not only translated a new legal doctrine of international solidarity, but it also distinguished its promoters in the economic policy field from other schools of thought. As Mauss did in The Gift, or as Thomas did in his attacks of the private companies, Sarraut (1931:89) blamed the speculators and merchants (especially private chartered companies) for their egoistic understanding of commerce: he wrote, “the distant possession should no longer be a simple enclave [comptoir], a reserve of riches, a market opportunity for the conquering nation, which comes to grab spices and sell its merchandises by
pressuring the local populace which it exploits without limitation.” For Sarraut, as well as for some economists, the primacy of “giving” should manifest itself in the colony with the massive export of capitals from the metropolis to the colony. This policy of massive investment, which had been the basis of the giving of concessions before the war, was not yet realized in 1919: for instance, in 1902, French colonies received less than one-tenth of the total of France’s total capital exports (between 2 and 3 billion francs), and the situation was not much better after the war (Marseille 1984:330). This is why Sarraut’s 1921 bill proposed that the colonies could raise billions of francs through borrowing on private markets (by continuing to appeal to the generosity of French bond holders manifested during the war), so that French capital could find the most productive opportunities thanks to much smaller labor costs in the colonies than in the metropolis.

Thus, the solidarist discourse on colonialism defined a fairly coherent package of legal and economic doctrines that occupied a specific space in the French political landscape. But it was far from being consensual, even in the leftwing camp. The Communist party, which was created after the split of Mauss and Blum’s SFIO in 1920, was clearly opposed to colonialism (whether altruistic or not) on principled ground. As far as Blum was concerned, he also claimed to push for a “generous” colonial policy, although it greatly departed from the Sarraut’s pro-investment policy, as Blum refused to challenge the trade specialization between the “industrial” metropolis (producer of industrial products) and the “colonial garden” (producers of raw materials and some agricultural goods). What Blum proposed instead was an extension of social rights enjoyed by metropolitan subjects to the colonial subjects: indeed, Blum insisted that the metropolis should demonstrate “generosity” (Marseille 1984:195) toward its colonial subjects by raising their salaries and facilitating their integration in metropolitan markets of consumption goods. Thanks to a rise in wages, France would thus find in the colonial markets—50 million non-metropolitan French, which included 10 million in Algerian territory—the market opportunities that its exporting industries (like the cotton and garment industries) needed in order for them to continue generating profits. This form of colonial “Fordist model,” (Kojève 2001[1956]:121) whereby agricultural laborers in the colonies were transformed into consumers of French-made products which they could not previously afford, meant, in the words of Marius Moutet (1876-1968), the adoption of am “altruistic policy” (cited in Marseille 1984:337) of legal “assimilation,” whereby the laws voted on in the metropolis (for instance, laws imposing social rights and minimum wages) would be also applied to the colonies (Algeria in particular). Not surprisingly, when Blum became the head of government in 1936, such a policy, which his Minister of the Colonies, Moutet adopted this policy which demonstrated “human solidarity” and which rejected a “policy of egoism,”—but it failed to be implemented.

Interestingly, when solidarists sided against a renewed Colonial Pact, they used the same arguments that the socialists like Thomas had used before the war against the chartered companies: they claimed that the specific “gift” proposed by the assimilationists, which consisted in transforming Algerian peasants and other colonial subjects into wage earners on par with their metropolitan counter-parts, represented a fake gift. In particular, economists like Edmont Giscard d’Estaing (1894-1982) argued that by equating the commercial balance with the balance of payments, the assimilationists did a mistake: indeed, they remarked, an apparently favorable commercial balance with the colonies – if the metropolis exported more industrial goods to the colonies than it imported raw materials from its colonies – had in general no positive impact on France’s balance of payments, quite the contrary. Indeed, since
the industrial goods that France exported to its colonies (and which it counted as exports on the commercial balance) were denominated in French francs (or local currencies only convertible in French francs), France gained no foreign currencies from its trade with the colonies. Even more, the preferential treatment between France and its colonies weighed on the colonies’ ability to produce and then export their raw materials or industrial products (should they produce any) outside of France, and thus on their ability to accumulate foreign currencies. Thus, by privileging trade complementarities within the French franc zone only, the French nation gave a fake gift to the colonial subjects, whereas a true gift would have meant trusting them with the ability to turn capital investment into profitable joint ventures.

Sacrificing French dying industries, which were kept alive thanks to hidden subventions placed on the budget of colonial governments, represented a hard but necessary “altruistic” decision. Indeed, as Giscard d’Estaing claimed, “the Metropolis had to accept immediate sacrifices without guarantees [sans contreparties] to the benefit of the Colonies, where, one could hope, but with all the assumed risks, that one day in the distant future, prosperity and industry will blossom.” (cited in Marseille 1984:223) In so doing, his arguments intersected with Mauss’s ideas, which also expressed the wish that the metropolitan State should practice a policy of real “generosity” toward both its colonies and European neighbors. As Mauss (2013:241) wrote in The Nation, “it is clear that modern nations will not be able to reach a sufficient stage of internationalism necessary to guarantee a mutual peace until they succeed in giving one another material proof of relative disinterestedness [désintéressement relatif], in exchanging mutual services of all kinds, economic in particular. Perpetual peace, to the extent possible, can only be established among equally good and serviceable (if not idealist) nations, which agree to sacrifice a reasonable portion of their interests for one another.”

A skeptic view of imperial solidarity? Mauss’s The Nation

Whereas The Gift formulates an unequivocally optimistic view on the ability of gift exchanges to create solidarity between nations, the unpublished work on which Marcel Mauss spent most of his time writing in the 1920s—e.g. the manuscript of The Nation—was much more careful when assessing the relationship between the two. In The Nation, Mauss questioned whether colonialism (whether altruistic or not) had created political solidarity and community out of contractual exchanges across and between societies. The answer was unclear to him, or rather, not as clear as he had wanted it to be in The Gift. Indeed, during the 1920s, as Jean Terrier and Marcel Fournier (2013:18) assert, if “Mauss insisted on the fundamental openness of societies, the porosity of social boundaries, and the circulation of goods and ideas… as exchanges express the ‘constitutive mix [“mélange”] of all things, values, contracts and men[,]” Mauss considered that these exchanges of reciprocal prestations between societies could have both negative and positive effects (Mauss 2013:125), depending on the types of “borrowings” (emprunts in French) that circulated from society to society (whether the latter concerned civilizations, techniques, aesthetics, religions, and legal forms), and the structural elements present in the context of exchange.

Rather than turning into an apologist of the French discourse on “altruistic colonialism,” or the League of Nation’s Mandates system, Mauss (2013:184) believed it to be his scientific duty to identify the proper social mechanisms which could lead to one outcome (positive solidarity) or the other (mutual destruction), so as to “warn his contemporaries that there is a missing echelon in the ladder that the League of
Nations placed upon the wall of history: that of the “nation, which most societies had not yet arrived at.” Mauss believed it was a misguided effort to present the contractual bonds between “nations” as “mandates, protectorates, and all kinds of modern words that pay homage to principles” of sovereign equality between political communities that had reached very different levels of integration—words which, as Mauss noticed, “were, in fact, foreign to the real aspiration of politicians and diplomats” which, in practice, were often “military alliance, suzerainty and colonies, and all kinds of hegemonies.” Even if “the surface of the globe [had] been vascularized” (Mauss 2013:158) by an explosion of exchanges, the League of Nations created by the Versailles Treaty was a misnomer, as many different social organizations were characterized with the name of “nation,” while only a few (the United States and France) could be called “nations” in the proper sense.

With The Nation, Mauss thus proposed a general comparative and historical framework that allowed him (and later his students) to rank societies according to a gradation of neighboring “degrees of integration.” (Mauss 2013:79) At the smallest level of integration (almost null) Mauss found what he called, after Durkheim, “poly-segmentary societies” (Mauss 2013:77): some of which lacked a permanent organization, and, like Melanesian or aboriginal Australian societies, only gathered as a whole during totemic ceremonies to celebrate rituals; some of which actually did present a slightly higher level of integration, as they benefitted from permanent but not centralized political structures that checked the centrifugal forces of clans and extended families, like in the “tribal societies” of the North American or African continents (Sioux, Iroquois, or Bantu). At the highest level of integration, Mauss placed the “nation,” which characterized societies where intermediary bodies no longer buffered relations between individuals, and where a strong sense of territorial boundaries limited the desire for imperial expansion. Such a conception of the nation conceived as a daily plebiscite, in the words of Ernest Renan (1823-1892), was quite in line with the French Republican definition, and not surprisingly, Mauss found that only two Western countries could claim the title of nations: France and the United States. In these two nations, “the two poles in the continuum of social beings, Individuals and The society, symbolized by the state, face one another,” (Terrier and Fournier 2013:25, 26) and individuals only recognize the authority of the law of their own nation-state. To these two poles of social organization, Mauss added an intermediary stage: “empires,” where the force of integration had deepened (compared to tribal societies) under the increased presence of a central political authority, but not to the point of creating a centralized nation of individuals united by a common national consciousness as well as by their willingness to use the state as a means of political and social reform. Under the category of empires, Mauss listed “societies of Muslim law, Chinese law, Hindu law,” (Mauss 2013:82) as well as Tsarist Russia, ancient Greece, Egypt, Mexico, Germany, and colonial societies.

In so doing, Mauss thus proposed a vision of colonialism that was completely in line with the interwar version of the colonial ideology, which distinguished colonial societies between different levels of integration, which left them more or less close to autonomy. This was in line with what Mauss (1913) wrote to the Minister of the Colonies in 1913: that self-rule should be postponed to a more or less distant future, depending on the nature of colonial societies, as for instance, “populations in Algeria and the Tonkin could, to some extent, develop and prosper by themselves,” whereas “those in New Caledonia, the Congo, and elsewhere are completely dependent our benevolent tutelage.”
But in establishing such a typology of societies ranked by their degree of integration, Mauss also continued his uncle’s scientific exploration while displacing his uncle’s focus: whereas Durkheim (1893) explored the differences between “mechanic” and “organic” forms of solidarity by looking at the sites of production, Mauss focused on the sites of inter-societal exchange of goods and services (the exchanges of “prestations”) and their effects on the creation of a national society. For Mauss, “inter-societal” exchanges (rather than the organization of labor within closed societies) were the main drivers of history, responsible for how societies with varying degrees of integration co-evolved sometimes in tandem, sometimes in a contrapuntal manner. For instance, the potlatch represented the trading practice and the specific understanding of customary contractual obligations by which poly-segmentary tribal societies had moved up to the level of quasi-empires (Mauss 2013:178), as in the case of the large Native American empires.

This typology of levels of “integration,” then, could help Mauss distinguish between “real” and “fake” gifts: between the systems of reciprocal prestations which had positive effects on exchanging partners, and those which had negative effects. Indeed, the criterion that Mauss used to identify the real effects of “gifts” (systems of reciprocal prestations) was qualitative and historically grounded: one could judge whether the exchange of “prestations” between a metropolis and its colonies had positive or negative effects by observing whether the exchange of prestations moved the colony closer to the model of the “nation,” in which individuals united around the celebration of a centralized authority within their society, or whether it further lead to the fragmentation and anomization of societies. This criterion was not whether present deficits were hidden in the balance sheets of colonial budgets, as his colleagues in economics (like Giscard d’Estaing) did when they criticized the French “altruistic” policy of assimilationists for creating a fake solidarity between metropolitan and colonial subjects. These economic considerations were important for Mauss, but they did not translate the fluidity of gift exchanges, which, at one point, may look “poisonous,” but at another moment could participate in a positive process of social change, if progressive forces united in society to overcome forces of natural destruction and economic exploitation. Indeed, the real test of the existence an altruistic gift remained for Mauss whether the social and state metropolitan interests would eventually help further the “nationalization” of the chartered companies, and help unite colonial subjects within a colonial democratic society open the broader global economy.

Mauss thus initiated in *The Nation* a normative reflection, which was absent from *The Gift*, and which related to his pre-war reflections on the monopolies and concessions granted to chartered companies (especially in the exploitation, trade and administration of raw materials like rubber), whose exploitative practices could lead to rebellion and further fragmentation and violence if they continued to brutally extract all the social and natural resources of the French empire. For him, the drive toward “monopoly capitalism,” or “monopoly colonialism,” practiced by the chartered companies could be turned into a factor of social progress if it could quickly evolve into the creation of socially and democratically controlled monopolies in charge of the administration of the vast sectors of the economy presently controlled by the chartered companies (Mauss 2013:243). Then, the nationalization of colonial

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2 Durkheim (1893) distinguished between a “mechanistic solidarity,” which he observed in “primitive” societies characterized by the absence of a division of labor, and an “organic” solidarity, which he observed in societies with a higher level of division and complementarity between the various productive forces (or groups).
monopolies could pave the way toward harmonious development if it followed certain rules, which existed at three different levels: first, the notion of “nationalization” needed to be dissociated the “nation” from the “state,” which thus distinguished Mauss’s (2013:252) proposed policy from the “state socialism” embodied by the Bolshevik revolution – nationalization was not purely state control of capital, but the social control of capital—; second, “the term implied that only societies having reached the national stage in the life of societies could logically and practically decide to nationalize something”; and third, the term “nationalization is associated with the ideas of organization, justice and legality which are absent from the term of socialism.”

Mauss left the question of whether such movement of “nationalization,” by which he meant the collective appropriation of different means of production and trade organized by the chartered companies, should precede or follow a movement of political independence. In so doing, his manuscript strictly belonged to the interwar era, during which it was next to inconceivable that such an apparently robust colonial edifice as the French empire of 100 million men could be destroyed in the near future. For Mauss, the questions which related to political status (the constitutions and treaties through which sovereignty manifested itself) had less importance than the question of the contractual ties and social obligations that stemmed from the organization of international economic exchanges. In The Nation, Mauss (2013:55) even regretted that many political scientists and legal theorists, like Max Weber, whom he did not hold in high esteem, confused the two notions of state and nation, thus subsuming the latter under the former. In fact, such diffidence for any top-down process of assimilation of colonial subjects into new forms of political citizenship placed him closer to Sarraut than to Blum, as for Mauss and Sarraut (1931:211), it would have been absurd to decide by decree that “all laws should be applicable to the French metropolis and the colonies” (as the assimilationists wanted). Like Sarraut, Mauss considered both the ideas purely political ideas agitated by the pro-independence, or the pro-assimilation, quite futile, because they remained centered on purely formal state structures, and did not take reciprocal exchanges as “total facts,” which, indeed, could have a political dimension, but were first and foremost social, legal, economic, cultural, technical and indeed political facts.

Thus, in The Nation, Mauss’s thinking came back to the question of what to do with (and how to get rid of) the chartered companies—not with how to get rid of the colonial state administration or the French state and its army. Chartered companies remained his primary target: their exploitative practices could only inhibit the ability of exchanges to move colonies up the ladder of integration. In particular, these companies did not help colonial societies coalesce around a central legitimate authority, to which the local populations (of both European and non-European descent) could identify with. Rather than opening colonial economies to the opportunities of global markets, the colonial monopolies which flourished in certain colonies under the French state’s authority (Mauss 2013:242), destroyed the solidarity of colonial subjects among themselves and between themselves and the metropolitan subjects. When Mauss was writing The Nation, such exploitative practices had not disappeared—far from it. In fact, the same network of solidarists and socialists who had denounced the practices of the N’Goko Sangha Company continued to denounce similar abuses that were still perpetrated in the Congo by the Compagnie forestière Sanga-Oubangui, which the novelist André Gide denounced in a famous essay used by Albert Thomas (1926) and the ILO to attempt to prohibit at the 1930 conference forced labor. Thus, Gide and Mauss were not completely unaware that the most
coercive and exploitative practices could be hidden under the name of reciprocal exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts conceived as free “prestations,” but they still believed that such abuse could be marginalized (and denounced when and if it resurfaced) in a renewed colonial project from which both metropolis and colonies could benefit. In some ways, they were right, and even though the socialists and solidarists may have disagreed on the question of whether the French metropolis should push an integrationist or assimilationist policy, they both united to condemn forced labor, which was eventually prohibited in France by the law of June 17, 1937, prepared by Blum’s Minister of the Colonies, Marius Moutet (Couturier 2006:112).

Conclusion: A non-linear understanding of historicity?

Both “The Gift” and Mauss’s unpublished manuscript The Nation precisely aimed at placing the theoretical focus of anthropology on transnational circulation and transfers—or, in Maussian terms, “inter-social” contacts, a term he preferred as he emphasized not all (almost none of) the societies had attained the status of “nation.” But in his unpublished manuscript The Nation, Mauss developed further his reflections on the destructive and positive aspects of the systems of reciprocal exchanges characteristic of the colonial era. The Nation started where Mauss’s reflection in The Gift ended. In The Gift, Mauss proclaimed that the exchange of goods and reciprocal services was the safest way to ensure the solidarity between exchanging societies. In The Nation, Mauss listed the practices that prevented such a reciprocal exchange of prestations from having positive effects on both exchanging parties, especially, by focusing on the role of the chartered companies. By comparison, The Nation thus paid much more attention to the obstacles which could explain why the exchange of reciprocal prestations could go wrong, and not bring about the kind of inter-national solidarity he had wished to see within Europe and between Europe and the rest of the world. In so doing, he developed the theme that gifts can sometimes turn into “poison”—a fact that he found in “Germanic folklore,” which plays on “the double meaning of the word Gift as gift and poison.” (Mauss 1990[1925]:76, 81)

Mauss thus initiated in The Nation a normative reflection, which related to his prewar reflections on the monopolies and concessions granted to chartered companies (especially in the exploitation, trade and administration of raw materials like rubber), in which he saw a transient organizational form that should morph into national monopolies if colonial wars were to be averted. In many ways, the last section of The Nation promoted the policy that would ultimately follow the independence of French colonies, especially in the case of Algerian independence, whose government decided to “nationalize” oil extraction in Algeria ten years after obtaining its political independence (Bedjaoui 1978). This may be where Mauss’s theory of international relations was prescient: whereas many postwar theorists like Raymond Aron focused on the characteristics of statehood to think the problems of colonization (and decolonization), Mauss tried to articulate (although imperfectly) his reflections on long-term political independence with a concern for the social conditions that would make it possible for a nation to be economically independent (but integrated in global economic chains) and to form a national consciousness. In so doing, his work would be more relevant to the second wave of decolonization started in the 1970s with the calls for a “new international economic order.” (Bedjaoui 1978)

Indeed Mauss’s essays did not explicitly discuss whether political independence should precede economic nationalization: he seemed to suggest that the
latter could come before political independence; nor did Mauss discuss the question of whether a just compensation would need to be paid to the private holders of capital at the time of the nationalization. This lack of attention to the question of political independence (and the means to obtain it) in the colonial context, and his idealization of the “nation” as the end-point of historical development, reflected the context of its writing, and the difference with our own times: in an era during which supranational forms of political authority have been hailed as the supreme stage of historical development (allowing the current backlash to go unnoticed by political commentators), Mauss’s thinking could help political theorists appreciate the illusionary character of our constructions of utopian futures. Furthermore, by emphasizing the positive as well as regressive character of international exchanges, Mauss’s essays could be used to interpret history in a non-linear fashion: as societies are engaged in a constant process of appropriation, rejection and adaptation of forms of exchanges, they morph into one form or another, multiplying the possibilities for individuals to “integrate” in local, national and global societies. Although underdeveloped, Mauss’s attention to the varying forms of integration could lead to a better appreciation for the multiple forms of modernities traversing our contemporary societies.

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