

# Transfers

## A Deductive Approach to Gifts, Gambles, and Economy at Large

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This paper reinterprets core issues in economic anthropology by exploring transfers as a theoretical resource. After describing deliberate usage of the term “transfer” in anthropology and economics, transfers are defined as movements of economic matter, while transactions are the forms arising from their configuration. Transactional categories such as Maussian gift exchange or market exchange become second-order reifications. Examining the politics of creating and sustaining transactional categories by first looking at the elementary transfers out of which they are constructed places “one-way transfers” of wealth on the same conceptual plane as reciprocal and market transactions, instead of being a derivative or a remainder of either or both. Gifts and gambling are considered as examples. Gambling and “pure gifts” are one-way transfers engineered to possess only one component transfer, and Maussian gifts explicitly connect transfers together in a particular politics. Anthropological literature that employs an incipient version of the transfer strategy is detailed, demonstrating its nascent explanatory promise. The article concludes by suggesting renewed engagement with contemporary economics on the basis of transfers.

If anthropologists adopt a terminology based on *transfers*, they can better forefront the specificity, temporality, inventiveness, and disputed nature of dealing in transactional categories.<sup>1</sup> “Transactions” here means each and every imaginable instance during which congealed human activity is considered to move.<sup>2</sup> In this terminology an ecosystem of transactions envelops us all, and it is made up of mitochondrial *transfers*. Each movement of economic matter with a single directionality is a *transfer* whether or not it is thought to be part of a more complicated transaction.<sup>3</sup>

A focus on *transfers* works as an ideological leveler when juxtaposing transactive forms that are privileged by anthropology, such as pure gifts, Maussian gifts, and commodity exchanges, with those that are largely peripheral to anthropology (but not so to other disciplines), such as gambling and social security schemes. They all sit together at the midlevel, below “transaction” and above *transfer*. Instead of being polemical starting points for analysis as they are now, I argue transactional subcategories like gifts and commodities should become ethnographic particulars, that is, the results of the political work that goes into defining the nature of *transfers*, both in the field

and in the seminar room. Focusing on *transfers* allows one to analyze the problematics of transactional subcategories such as gifts from the start of the description, rather than reaching problematization as a conclusion, which is where existing literature usually ends. One reaches axioms of exchange by describing how ambiguities come to appear resolved (or fail to do so) in practice. Not without irony, this theoretical article therefore aims to facilitate more ethnographically led and reflective analyses.

Once I have made my case, I return to Maussian gifts, pure gifts, gambling, etc. the megafauna populating our transactional Anthropocene, seeing each as sustained by materiality, politics, power, and enumerative processes all bundled together through iteration and precedent. I will also infer how systemic interpretation might apply to *transfers* as it does to gifts and markets. When I zero in on Maussian gifts and gambling, the former is imagined as an expression of struggles to anchor economic *transfers* to reciprocal obligation, the latter cast as a manifestation of efforts to decouple economic *transfers* from reciprocal obligation.

Shifting emphasis away from existing anthropological categories of circulation and toward *transfers* is conceived as a lateral move. *Transfers* are not a reality to be found; they are a concept to be used, even if in some cases they are also a concept used by one’s subjects. The *transfer* is emphatically not claimed as a universally held principle in the same way as has been argued for terms like “exchange,” “reciprocity,” or the “gift.” However, as an analytical category the *transfer* can be used to delimit components within all the transactions that might be employed to propagate and enact what one takes to be either universal or localized principles. Such forces as obligation, reciprocity, or alienation remain in play; using *transfers* simply expands the

1. I use italics when I refer to the analytical category *transfer*. Ethnographically reified transactions such as the “one-way transfer” appear in roman.

2. I therefore use the term “transaction” in a far more general way than, e.g., Strathern and Stewart (2000) or transactionalist theory in general (see Barth 1966:1–11).

3. Thus keeping fealty with the French and Latin source of the English word: *transférer* or *transférer*, meaning to bear, carry, or bring across (OED 2018).

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domain of study while simplifying the terms of analysis in what has become a bewildering set of debates. The scholarly questions posed by economic activity are then ever so slightly restructured, creating an opportunity to turn over old stones.

### One-Way Transfers

Given the article's scope, it is appropriate to begin with James Carrier's (2005) edited volume *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology*, part 3 of which contains five chapters under the heading "Circulation." These are "Ceremonial Exchange," "The Gift and Gift Economy," "Barter," "The Anthropology of Markets," and "One-Way Economic Transfers." In his short introduction Carrier points out that while circulation has been the most fruitful and impactful area of economic anthropological investigation, anthropological attention has fallen unevenly. Particularly, "one-way economic transfers" receive almost no consideration despite the fact that they "quietly" raise important questions about the assumption that "circulation requires the exchange of value" (Carrier 2005:229). I hope to raise the volume as I proceed, suggesting that the one-way-ness of one-way transfers is already an important part of our analysis of multidirectional transactions. By recognizing as much and embracing the implications, anthropologists might generate a productive new dialogue about transactions broadly. Indeed, the problem of whether circulation requires the exchange of value should fall away if, as I suggest, *transfers* are equally operative in both exchanges of value and one-way transfers.

In 1977, in a largely forgotten book called *The Origins of the Economy*, Frederic Pryor turned to the term "one-way transfer" as a means of categorizing his data on economic activity (Pryor 1977). Pryor needed to distinguish between transmissions of wealth that were balanced by a material counterpart, which he called "exchange" (and which included market or commodity transactions), and ones which were not, called "one-way transfers." Pryor's larger aim was to use statistical regressions to establish correlations between various aspects of diverse economies. His categorization (probably taken from economics) cut through a proliferation of anthropological jargon obscuring the cross-cultural hard data he had collated on the transmission of valuables (see table 1).

Robert Hunt (2000, 2002, 2005) took up Pryor's exchanges/one-way transfers distinction and championed adding the term "transfer" to the economic anthropological lexicon. The two dominant conceptual frameworks for circulation, Hunt argues, are gift and market, both of which are kinds of exchange within which one party and another compare the things they exchange. Market exchange is of the greatest interest to economists, while gift exchange has been most central to anthropology. Hunt provides a handy definition of a third mode of circulation, transfers. A transfer is "the shift of a valued (X) from one social unit (A) to another social unit (B). The valued can be tangible, a service, or knowledge. The shift can refer to changes in possession, as well as to shifts in ownership. . . . The X being

Table 1. Pryor's exemplars of one-way transfers, together with the rationale given

One-way transfer	Rationale
Household pooling	Parents transfer to all their children, but care for aging parents is generally restricted to a subset of a parent's children.
Forager food-sharing	Allocation is not commensurate with status or participation in acquisitive activity.
Inheritance	The inheritance is generally not on the basis of prior economic interaction.
Endowments	Donors are not supposed to retain any control over the assets.
Theft	Thieves take from victims for their gain.
Hospitality	The host cares for the guest whether or not they will meet again.
Gambling	The winner takes wealth from a loser without binding obligation.

transferred has economic content. It contains the efforts of production (work, skill, and experience)" (Hunt 2002:108).

Hunt's definition implies that transfers are the basic unit of which all transactions are made, and exchange is a kind of elaboration where another transfer replaces the original (see also Hunt 2000). Pryor (1977:30) had similarly concluded that generalized exchange (i.e., intercommunity sharing, demand sharing)<sup>4</sup> is actually a series of transfers because these transactions never reach a formal balance. But Hunt's observation passes by almost unexplored and instead those transfers that have no counterpart are juxtaposed to exchanges as categories of transaction belonging on the same scale: gift, market, and transfer (Hunt 2002). I surmise that for Hunt transactional types are essentially ethnographic empirical units, and therefore transfers cease to be transfers once they are recognized empirically as exchanges (e.g., Hunt 2000:19–21). It is only by operating at the scale of empirical phenomena that one-way transfers could be said to pose questions about the exchange of value found in other, equally empirically observable kinds of transaction because only as a reified transaction type can transfers be said to have no return counterpart and thus no clear basis for an exchange of value.

By the time the *Handbook of Economic Anthropology* comes out, Hunt (2005) seems to have retreated from the implication that the transfer is of a different order to exchange and represents what he calls "one-way transfers" as simply an underexplored subfield (which it undoubtedly is). In fact it is the retreat that presents the bigger problems, because a subcategory of one-way transfers looks positively dysmorphic, lumping together what would otherwise be considered radically different transactions. In the *Handbook* these include household pooling, forager food-sharing, inheritance, endowments, theft,

4. What Gell (1992) called the "indigenous service economy" and Sahlins (2004 [1965]) called "generalized reciprocity."

charity, pensions, slavery, and gambling. We should not expect any formal elegance in human activities, but when theft and charity are in one subcategory that is then opposed as a whole to gift exchange, then the situation is clearly obstructive. One-way transfers are an anthropological residual, a collection of bones found in the same cave, and so, faced with an already creaking transaction vocabulary, I want to use Hunt's original insight to instead clear some brush.

Such as they exist empirically, one-way transfers represent both a vast amount of value and a huge proportion of wealth movements. In 2014 the market value of the endowment funds of colleges and universities in the United States was US\$535 billion (NCES 2016:744). The total value of stolen goods in the United Kingdom was £1.8 billion in 2013–2014, down from £6.9 billion in 1995 (Shaw et al. 2015). Inheritance currently stands at 11% of French national income (Piketty 2014:380). These are large numbers, but they are trifling compared to the slavery upon which the United States' economic development was built (Fogel and Engerman 1974).

Now contemplate the proportion of all transactions in immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies that are one-way transfers (Hunt 2000; Woodburn 1998). Consider also aggregating all the household pooling that occurs in single-income households in (post)industrialized economies. Pryor (1977) was able to estimate that in 1970 intrafamily transfers accounted for a startling 39% of national income in the United States. While these one-way transfers may look deviant or at least unusual in either anthropological or, indeed, economic theories that highlight bi- or multilateral exchanges, they clearly are not empirically uncommon or tricky for the lay person to grasp. In fact, boiled down to its bare bones the physical law of entropy makes a system of one-way transfers the essential condition for all reproductive life since it must replace itself. One-way transfers are simply theoretically undervalued because they appear residual the way they currently stand in the literature (but see Schokkaert 2006; Ythier 2006).

While these activities have very different effects and politics, they are united both because nothing moves in the other direction to an initial transfer of wealth and there is no definitive obligation saying there should be. Reasons for lack of obligation to return range broadly, from the death of the donor, to the recipient's impending demise, to the fact that the wealth was won or stolen—or, as in slavery, the recipient took ownership of the donor and all that they produce. It is in terms of lack that these transactions are thought through by scholars. With the theoretical vantage of exchange as their starting point, anthropologists typically treat charity, for instance, as attempts to systematically override recipients' obligation to return. Thus in the language of exchange, charity is a chastened gift or a commodity denied a market (Laidlaw 2000; M. Strathern 2012). In this way an exchange-centered anthropology has somehow managed to render one-way transfers simultaneously parochial to the everyday practice of anthropology and to turn them into curious puzzles to be elaborately deciphered from within the exchange paradigm.

## Transfers in Economics

Economists meanwhile have been using transfers as a concept for decades (if not developing it theoretically), with most textbooks tracing transfers back at least as far as a debate between John Maynard Keynes and Bertil Ohlin in 1929. Brakman and Van Marrewijk (1998) inform us that all economic exchanges involve transfers, most of which are purchases and therefore “bilateral transfers,” but they go on to focus, as all economic research on transfers seems to do, on “unilateral transfers,” what Robert Hunt called “one-way transfers,” that is, a movement of wealth not matched by a return. It must be noted that economists need not and often have not applied the same rules as have anthropologists in determining whether a transfer is “unilateral.” For economists it can be enough that an exchange of transfers is uneven; it need not be entirely unidirectional—a tendency probably related to their primary interest in market transactions. It would be fair to say that economists have discovered a great deal about the metrics of transfers, particularly their relationships to other transactions, but questions about the philosophical nature of those transfers have been deferred. For economists transfers are found imbalances in the flow of value.

In international trade and relations aid, debt forgiveness, investment grants, damages payments, and remittances are characterized as “international transfers.” Within states the term “transfer payments” is applied most often to welfare programs, which transfer wealth or wealth-in-kind from those able to pay for it to those in need (called “public transfers”), and by extension to movements of wealth that occur within families (“private transfers”). Economists also use “transfer pricing” to denote the price strategies that firms use when they sell valuables between operations in one jurisdiction and operations in another. Companies manipulate these transfer prices, selling their own wares to another subsidiary based in a higher tax regime at high prices, thereby moving their profits to the lower tax jurisdiction. The deliberate result is an imbalanced flow of wealth from one jurisdiction to another.<sup>5</sup>

Economic analysis of intrafamilial “private transfers” centers on the measurability of nonmarket movements of wealth, with a focus on the effectiveness of these activities in fostering generalized financial well-being. Papers investigate the relationship between “public-transfer” programs (welfare programs) and intrafamily-level “private-transfers” (Cox and Jakubson 1995; Jensen 2004), others investigate the relationship between “private transfers” and income (Cox, Hansen, and Jimenez 2004), and yet others compare intrafamily transfers

5. There are papers confirming that transfer pricing responds to tax rates (Clausing 2003), determining which jurisdictions transfer pricing operates across (Bartelsman and Beetsma 2003), and discussing the technical problem of independent company “profit centers” in different jurisdictions, each aiming to increase its own profit, potentially at the expense of the company as a whole (Hirshleifer 1956).

from parents to children during life with bequests upon parents' deaths (McGarry 1999). "Conditional cash transfers," meanwhile, link state interests in "good citizenship" to economic transfers. These are welfare programs requiring a recipient to make prespecified investments (usually in their children). As policy tools these have mushroomed in importance since the mid-1990s (Ferreira et al. 2009:4). Two of the earliest iterations of conditional cash transfers, Brazil's Bolsa Família and Mexico's Oportunidades (formerly PROGRESA), are now the largest social assistance programs in their respective countries, covering millions of households and families (Eger and Damo 2014). Anthropologically, conditional cash transfers can be seen as governmental attempts to exert control over the effects of, among other things, intrafamily transfers that thwart government's stated aims. In general terms, economists explore quantitatively the complicated and often conflicting human experiences of determining the "one-way-ness" or not of these transfers, potentially complementing qualitative anthropological accounts of welfare (e.g., Edgar and Russell 1998; Gudeman and Rivera 1990; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003).

Economists have encountered definitional issues around such matters as whether pensions are transfers, which depends on whether they are linked conceptually to the payments one makes before retirement or to the income the fund generates and pays out after retirement (Moon 1984). Anthropology is critically equipped to address such questions, but to do so, I would argue, requires a reevaluation of the bilateral or multilateral exchange-based paradigm we share with economics. What both disciplines have right now are categories derived from ideal types that leave "one-way" or "unilateral" transfers as the residue of other forms of exchange and that are therefore characterized in terms of what they "lack."

Having outlined the problematic, I now try releasing the idea of a *transfer* from the inductive "one-way transfer" group of empirical phenomena and apply *transfers* deductively as a micro-concept to all transactions as a kind of tool kit for theoretical bricolage. Instead of being an empirical outlier to more normal multilateral exchanges, the *transfer* then becomes a theoretical motive (in the sense of movement) force that scaffolds all the world's emergent transactions.

### Transfers

Instead of creating ideal typical subcategories of transaction I envisage skipping down to *transfers*, which are modeled as operating at an infra-transactional level.<sup>6</sup> The analytical term *transfer* denotes one isolated unidirectional component within a concrete transaction, that is, something passing from me to you or you to me;<sup>7</sup> the component may or may not be recip-

6. Davis (1992:29), e.g., makes a partial repertoire of British exchanges, listing 42 possible kinds of exchange. The jargon situation has not improved since then (Hann 2006).

7. The component should be locally defined. For example, if, when contributing to a mortuary payment, a portion of sweet potato must al-

located in the future and may or may not be linked to a past transaction. If a "*transfer*" gets balanced with a return, it becomes an "exchange" of two (or more) *transfers* (e.g., barter, purchase, or like-for-like exchange). If the return happens later, this would be a "delayed exchange" of two *transfers* (i.e., tit for tat). A "*transfer*" that is not accompanied by a return and has no prospect of generating one in the future is a "one-way transfer." Such a "one-way transfer" is of course no less and no more a cultural artifact than an "exchange of *transfers*," but a "one-way transfer" and an "exchange of *transfers*" can be analytically distinguished because the former contains only one component "*transfer*," while the latter has two or more.

The valuables in motion during a "one-way transfer" do not have a counter-valuable against which their value can be directly compared, whereas an "exchange of *transfers*" offers an opportunity for direct comparison.<sup>8</sup> There is therefore a qualitative difference between one-way *transfers* and two-way *transfers* or exchanges. A delayed exchange conceptually bridges the two until it is completed or the return is no longer possible. To mark the difference I use italics when I refer to the analytical category *transfer*. Ethnographically reified transactions such as the "one-way transfer" appear in roman.

The form of *transfers* that are included within each "transaction" will often be murky, for three reasons elaborated below. (1) The *transfer* may not be deemed delineable or enumerable (e.g., suckling an infant). (2) Linking one *transfer* to another and calling it a certain kind of transaction is as much about political recognition as it is about the items themselves. (In gambling, e.g., the winner is not obliged to compensate a loser, but that does not stop people from demanding that they do just that.) (3) Intangibles such as respect, status, and/or obligation that may accrue in return for a *transfer* are only as concrete as their effects and may be retrospectively enhanced or denuded by subsequent events, changing the balance of the *transfers* within a transaction if they are traced back to it. Starting at this lower, infra-conceptual level is a way to circumvent the a priori assumption within the term "exchange" that a return is expected, a point I discuss later. This is not to say that exchange and reciprocity are irrelevant, only that they require establishment and maintenance. By coupling the heuristic term "transaction" with the microlevel *transfer*, one might incorporate that murkiness and avoid employing the false clarity of prescriptive subcategories.

1. Instead of a moment of exchange, which sits somewhere in the convergence of perspectives that may never have actually converged (e.g., Strathern and Stewart 2000:17–18), let the particle of circulation be the *transfer* of congealed human activity from the control of one entity to another. Any given transaction can then accommodate multiple perspectives from each angle. The point of convergence at which a *transfer* takes

ways accompany a pig, then pig + sweet potato may be considered a single *transfer*.

8. The value of the valuable involved in a one-way transfer can of course still be compared to other valuables in the abstract.

place is then an arena for both competing valuations of the thing or service being *transferred* but also, and as part of the determination of value, the competing values of various economic philosophies and/or pragmatics.

Encompassing exchanges within the scientific jargon of *transfers* does not place every kind of *transfer* on a single measurable scale. It is surely impossible to live without making categories for comparison and creating value comparisons, but the generality of the means of measurement are themselves highly variable and of differing degrees of abstraction within natural languages (Gudeman 2001:14). The term *transfer* is designed, rather, to free up discussion of the commensurative possibilities, constraints, and perspectives that occur around a *transfer* or grouping of *transfers*. Knowing the nature of the *transferred* item as a unit is also not necessary prior to the *transfer* or a necessary consequence of it. *Transfers* are possible not because the things that move are immutable objects but because the properties of things in the social world are given immutability that appears objective (Verran 2001). Indeed, the establishment, perpetuation, or erasure of the *transferred* object's status as a unit may well be an important feature in identifying its politics and the social reality generating it (Pickles 2013; M. Strathern 1992). The accretion of immutability through continued circulation provides parameters within which each party establishes their own valuations as a function of their separation as parties to a transaction.

2. The mutual recognition of the coupling of *transfers* does not presuppose that each party is an autonomous agent acting in the rational pursuit of material self-interest (or any other form of self-maximization); the goal is to instead foreground the political constitution of distinction and mutuality through the work of delineating in each case what counts as a *transferable* object, what are the appropriate ways that it might move, and how might that movement be innovated upon to the benefit of those it is being used to delineate.

The *transfer* is not to be equated with disinterested giving (contra Sneath 2006, 2012) except under conditions where that motivation can be clearly delineated (e.g., in Davis 1992). A given actor may choose to assess their transactions in instrumental terms, or for that matter, through any other political philosophy. The project of understanding transactions in terms of *transfers* thereby necessitates localized ethnographic knowledge of how transactions are perceived. A *transfer* can create chains that are characterized by one party as involving some *transfers* and not others, while the other party may include and exclude completely different past and future *transfers* and partners.

3. There are various ways in which a *transfer* is proscribed or limited by the nature of the wealth under consideration, especially in the case of permanent sources of production such as land, which, for example, may be allotted by a matriline, may have usufruct rights given, or may be leased by legal contract. In the case of valuables such as cash money or a harvest, which are locally unanchored and therefore have the capacity to flow out of immediate communities, *transfers* may be more often ac-

companied by a counter-*transfer*, as in market exchange. Some items that might conceivably be *transferred* but that are too important to do so in practice are often considered priceless or ungiftable (what Annette Weiner called "inalienable wealth" [Weiner 1992]), negating their *transfer*-ability to outsiders and defining the boundary of insider and outsider. These heirlooms are *transferred* intergenerationally, proffering continuity on the political entity asserting to have kept them. Retention precipitates a form of valuation that evades enumeration and commensuration but may also be the subject of strategic action, as when a frequent traveler holds onto a few euros just in case. Bringing *transferable* objects into association with inalienable wealth is another strategic action that augments their value, for instance a letterhead that carries a crest. Side-stepping atemporal economic abstractions like gifts or inheritance allows a view of historical processes by which valuables are recontextualized and revalued through the action of outgoing *transfers* or equally active efforts at retentive *transfers*.

I outline these limits because a shift in lexicon is no elixir, and I am certainly no Pollyanna. The shadow cast by shifting focus onto transactions as composed of *transfers* both enables and necessitates switching perspectives again so as to illuminate the contours of both a theory and its shadow (see Jiménez and Willerslev 2007). *Transfer* is useful as a reflective prompt because it carries far less conceptual content than anthropological terms such as "gift exchange," "commodity exchange," "barter," or "hospitality," let alone "exchange" itself. It is both more general, and more basic, enabling one to include a far broader array of transactions when filling in the content without the problem of certain forms slipping through the cracks. To demonstrate this potential I now discuss two transactions with distinct but complementary *transfer* dynamics: first gifting and then gambling. The coupling of the *transfers* involved in each case is politically charged in a manner that invites their productive juxtaposition.

### Pure Gifts, Maussian Gifts, Unaccompanied *Transfers*

Anthropological orthodoxy distinguishes "pure gifts" from "Maussian gifts." A pure gift is altruistic, an act of generosity without concern for a return, that is, a one-way transfer. A Maussian gift appears the same: it too is an item conferred by a donor upon a recipient under the auspice that a return is voluntary. However, in a Maussian gift this auspice is deemed to be to various degrees delusory. Parties know that a return is obligatory and that the other party knows that they know it is obligatory (Mauss 1990). Everyone participates in a contrived game of free will, and early debate centered on whether self-interest was all that was behind it (Malinowski's [1926:27] position) or whether generosity played an operative role for the individual; the interest in reciprocity came from the moral person as defined by the social unit (Mauss's position; see Parry 1986:455–456). The timing of a return on a Maussian

gift is potentially open-ended, but in every case there is an expectation among at least one party to the transaction that a return *transfer* will eventually take effect. This may end the exchange or instigate yet other *transfers* in an ongoing web known as an exchange system. Godelier (1999:10) points out that it was Mauss's genius to reconnect the point of departure of original gifts to the point of arrival of their returns. I contend that this reconnection during analysis and its negation (seen in the pure gift) is always essentially an ideological project. Lack of reciprocation is basically excluded from consideration by Mauss by virtue of Mauss's interest in gifts insofar as they were precursors to contractual law, in the Durkheimian evolutionary tradition (Parry 1986:457).

Pure gifts are also complicated *transfers* in their own ways: categorically destroying all feelings of obligation may be considered undesirable or even impossible (Laidlaw 2000); pure gifts may have a depurifying effect on the gift itself (Parry 1986); or last, because it appears impossible to get rid of the niggling faculty that humans have for conjuring immaterial counterweights (Bourdieu 1977). These complications are important, but all can potentially agree that a pure gift, if it does exist, must necessarily be a one-way transfer.

Posing Maussian gift exchange as the structural opposite of capitalism is a straw man regularly unmasked in lecture theaters and seminar rooms. To achieve this unveiling, most oversimplify Christopher Gregory's (1982) *Gifts and Commodities* to say that in gift economies (as opposed to capitalist economies) the important result is always and only the relationship that the contributions represent or bring into being, rather than the gift itself that participants really desire. Meanwhile, in capitalist economies things characteristically take the form of commodities divorced from their producers, and because that is how their subjects are accustomed to thinking of objects, people tend to desire the thing that is given and not the abstract labor relationships that created it. From that polemical starting point it is a short step to revealing that societies that organize their economy through delayed reciprocity (famous examples being the Kula Ring in Papua New Guinea and potlatch in the Pacific Northwest) intensely desire the things themselves for themselves after all. Ipso facto one can then reveal that the relationship represented by a gift in a commodity economy is often, in fact, far more important than the object. It is by now well established that the gift can be seen in the market transaction and object fetishism in the gift (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1990; Gell 1992). The romantic association between altruistic giving and simple economies who practice gift exchange is then revealed as a commodity-induced projection, because the very possibility of separation of interest from gift is shown to be an artifact that is, if not peculiar to a capitalist economy, then at least correlated with it (Carrier 1990). The current consensus on the importance of Maussian gifts versus pure gifts follows Parry's common sense wisdom, that empirically "it is not a question of either an ideology of reciprocity or of its repudiation, but rather of a significant difference in the extent to which these possibilities are elaborated" (Parry 1986:466).

The gift literature bedims further when one considers whether the gift itself (pure or Maussian) contains a spirituality that is either socially generative or polluting, and in turn whether that spirit emanates from the donor or some more mystical source. These occur most notably in debates surrounding the properties of the Maori *hau* or the Hindu *dan/dana* (e.g., Firth 2011 [1929]; Graeber 2001; Laidlaw 2000; Lévi-Strauss 1973; Parry 1986; Sahlins 1972). Whether or not the gift is literally or figuratively part of the person of the giver does not concern me here. I here bracket the "spirit of the gift" so as to draw attention to a more prosaic point about how *transfers* either become one-way transfers known as pure gifts or get coupled up to become Maussian gifts.

In this article a Maussian gift occurs when an attempt to couple the outgoing *transfer* of economic matter to a *transfer* that is perceived as a return is socially recognized. A pure gift occurs where a return *transfer* is deemed unnecessary or inappropriate by all parties or by the presiding authority. The focus instantly shifts to the political constitution of forms of transaction out of their component *transfers*. It also immediately strikes one that, framed in this way, a pure gift requires a strong consensus or authority if it is to be accepted as pure and not Maussian. This is because any credible suspicion that the pure *transfer* might in fact be Maussian rather poisons the well for everyone. The unaccompanied *transfer* is always at risk because the mind works through connection; it therefore makes sense that unaccompanied transfers would be more common in authoritarian societies, where conceptual connections between *transfers* can be effectively sanctioned.

I take a particular interest in Maussian gifts because they are conceptually more common than their altruistic counterparts, and because where I conduct research in Papua New Guinea reciprocal gifting and ceremonial exchanges are extremely conspicuous. The first explorers, colonial officers, missionaries, and anthropologists in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea found some of its peoples had developed what looks like Maussian gift exchange into their most exulted cultural forms, a to-and-fro that played out over and beyond the life cycle of its individual members and involved the most valued items: usually pigs, shells, dog's teeth, feathers, and axes. Thousands of pigs and shells moved through vast networks for the bragging rights of political leaders whose fame and authority were manifested in large part through their transactive prowess. The colonizers fed this grand competition (and ultimately undermined it) by paying those who assisted them with shells, steel, and later, money (Strathern and Stewart 2000).

Consequently, Melanesian anthropology has its own flavor of ambivalence toward the Maussian gift. It is a paradigm-setting concept ever associated with Melanesia through Mauss's use of Malinowski's Trobriand material and because Melanesia figured prominently as ethnographic exemplar in the anthropological discourse that followed the translation of Mauss's *Essai sur le don* into English (e.g., Foster 1995; Gregory 1982; Munn 1986; A. Strathern 1971; M. Strathern 1988; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992). And yet, as James Carrier (1992) has argued, the

gift was far less prevalent in Melanesia than it appeared, the commodity transaction far more common, and the ambiguities of real economic life were too often hidden by an essentializing character in Melanesian anthropology (see also Gell 1992). The application of Maussian gift-logic undoubtedly cloaks a great deal of Melanesian economic activity (but see Hart 1986; Healey 1990; Rappaport 1984), but negative or complicating argumentation such as Carrier's is hard to rally behind and tends to reproduce itself. No wonder it has become common in the exchange literature to attach the prefix "so-called" before using the term, so "exchange societies" becomes "so-called exchange societies" (e.g., Keane 2001), and in Melanesia in particular "gift exchange" became "so-called gift exchange" (e.g., Feil 1987; Gregory 1980; M. Strathern 1991).

Diacritics such as these are a good sign that the current terms are creaking under the weight of their annotations. In the absence of alternatives and through the canonizing effect of continual diacritical exegeses, the Maussian gift developed into Melanesia's dominant conceptual device. It became Melanesian anthropological orthodoxy to interrogate the idea that the gift, either competitive gifting or communistic sharing, but always binding, reciprocal, and total, was at one point the organizing principle for Melanesian sociality, and that the situation has since been muddied by European encroachment (Akin and Robbins 1999). In so doing, and in spite of many authors' efforts, the gift-commodity paradigm has been reinforced even while it was tempered.

Anthropologists of Melanesia share with their interlocutors an overriding concern with setting the boundaries of transactions, implicating people in transactions with appeals to definitive obligations but in the knowledge that their appeals were transparently contingent (Pickles 2013, 2017). Like Melanesianists David Akin and Joel Robbins (1999), I found that my interlocutors "regularly work to differentiate kinds of exchanges, kinds of relationships, and kinds of objects" (9) and are anxious about the collapse of these distinctions (see also M. Strathern 1992). It therefore seemed apt to shift the lens toward the prospecting work of achieving the desired transactive forms (Pickles 2017; cf. Munn 1986). In a context that foregrounds reciprocal giving as an ideal, this meant concentrating on the human work of connecting or disconnecting all those endless *transfers*.

Furthermore, I am always affected on fieldwork by the sense of continual disappointment with the many failures usually involved in conscious attempts to make lasting connections through things. In present-day Papua New Guinea in particular, a peripheral nation in the grip of bad-faith politicians and extractive industries and struggling with runaway inequalities, it is at least as important to theorize failure to successfully make exchanges stick as it once was to understand them working effectively. Analyzing exchanges as successfully connected *transfers* has the knock-on effect of placing unsuccessfully connected transfers on an equal analytical footing with those that succeed. This is probably the area in which the term *transfer* has the most potential. In Papua New Guinea, at least, failure to agree on the form of a transaction and its proper deployment makes up a very

large proportion of the sum of all perspectives on transactions, and while this may have been exacerbated since colonial intervention, it must always have been more important than it has appeared in exchange literature by default of the "exchange" unit of analysis (but see Munn 1986).

While Papua New Guineans brought me to this conclusion, I am increasingly convinced that regardless of site, reciprocal gift exchange as "observed" has always depended on a leap of faith on the part of the observer. Anthropologists are too ready to follow some of their interlocutors' statements, prioritizing the ones that formulate "exchange" as balanced in a formal, abstracted sense (Bourdieu 1977:4–9; A. Strathern 1971:101, 104; Strathern and Stewart 2000:22–23). In some specific circumstances people do exchange one thing for an equivalent object at the same time. But delayed exchanges form the bulk of the exchange literature, and these depend on extrapolation from either the idea of exchange of identical items or commodity exchange (but see Foster 1990). The time and space between the *transfers* in a delayed exchange invites explication, and this has foregrounded reciprocity, mutuality, and obligation as connecting forces. But there exists also a great deal of contingency, threat, and existential uncertainty. Anthropologists missed a trick when we made a rule of assuming that gifts are usually returned, then marking out occasions when a return is unwelcome, rather than factoring in that they often are not (but see Bourdieu 1977). It is not a sufficient question to ask, as Godelier (1999) has asked, "Which principle *prevails* in the society and why?" (14, emphasis in original). The question must instead be how a practice is instituted into a prevailing principle within and across social boundaries, and why. Not beginning from the gift concept, one is far less likely to overextend it. Starting at a smaller scale with less conceptual content and building up toward transaction types might get us closer to people's attempts to muddle through their economic lives.

The argument thus far somewhat resembles Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), within which Lévi-Strauss's treatment of the Maussian gift is eviscerated. Lévi-Strauss is charged with objectifying reciprocity by foregrounding rules of exchange. Bourdieu castigates Lévi-Strauss, claiming he effectively reified with rules a profoundly temporal and thus uncertain practice into a certainty, and in so doing overlaid upon the world the conditions of his own being as a socially separated, intellectually elevated rule deriver. For Bourdieu the "full truth of the gift" is the coexistence of two opposing truths, the objective model of gift exchange as a total system, and the subjective contingency by which the system is experienced and reproduced. It is the temporality of gift exchange that enables these two truths to coexist, and it is the responsibility of anthropology to articulate the full package—model, contingent experience, and temporality—as a dynamic. Where Bourdieu highlights temporality and its embodiment in practice as productive of social institutions, I use *transfers* to codify the multitude of available units that are the traffic of that temporality and the object of directed objectification by both analyst and practitioner. It is hoped that *transfers* can be used as part of

anthropologists' conceptual tool set to make descriptions that stand up to Bourdieu's high standards. The aim is to enable anthropologists to start whereabouts Bourdieu's critique of exchange left off, not to repeat it.

Maurer similarly argued that contemporary economic anthropology is at its best when it shifts "the optic from exchange to flow or circulation . . . [returning] the objects of exchange to 'the space and time of their genesis' (Eiss 2002:293; Gilbert 2005; Keane 2001), revealing relationships missed by the reification of subjects and objects that is sometimes presumed by the analytical category of exchange" (Maurer 2006:21; see also Munn 1986). And yet Hann (2006:215, 221) argues that the term *transfer* represents an abandonment of the broadly effective Maussian paradigm dominating economic anthropology, a paradigm that has done much to underscore obligation as the irreducible element within exchange. There is in fact no mutual exclusivity between *transfers* and the Maussian paradigm, and I will show that *transfer* is already an unacknowledged technique in economic anthropology within and without the Maussian paradigm. As an analytical Lego brick within exchanges, *transfers* in no sense displace existential social forces such as reciprocity or self-maximization; instead they aid anthropological description of their constitution. I now demonstrate the utility of *transfers* in folding one of the transactions sidelined by the Maussian tradition into our discourse, gambling.

## Gambling

As a subcategory of transaction, gambling inevitably has fuzzy borders open to ideological expansion or contraction (Pickles 2016, 2017). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) defines "gamble" as (1) "Play games of chance for money; bet." and (2) "Take risky action in the hope of a desired result." The definition is complicated when one considers either whether financial speculation has to be gambling by definitional necessity or whether betting on games of skill or athleticism as opposed to chance is gambling. Still, few would go so far as to claim that gambling did not exist as a transactional type. For most gambling is both distinctive and deeply ingrained, and many assume it to be a universal feature of all societies, though in fact it is not (Pickles 2014b). Anglo-Saxons are among those who habitually project gambling onto other activities, often claiming that this or that activity is gambling if you think about it. Much of this has to do with popular understandings of risk, probability, and evolutionary theory (Reith 1999; Schüll 2012). The gambling that "lies underneath" other activities is therefore not *prima facie* explanatory but, rather, an ethnographic indicator of a particular cosmological frame that considers gambling so relevant that it gets projected outward. Where gambling's history is short, and where one cannot assume that the same associations with risk, probability, and evolutionary theory have been instilled, then the contours of gambling can be quite different (Pickles 2014a). Facing this diversity up close, I have often asked myself, What is unique to gambling that we all seem to recog-

nize it when we see it? Where does it sit in relation to other kinds of transaction, and how variable might that position be? Why, exactly, is it close to financial speculation, and why is it far from a Christmas present?

Seen from Pryor's (1977:255) perspective, gambling is a kind of one-way transfer: the winner is not obliged to make a return to the loser(s). From another perspective (one promoted by the gambling industry), a player spends money in order to gain the pleasure of game play, making for a market exchange of *transfers*. This perspective has been found to facilitate the legitimization of gambling as one among many entertainment products. The larger game surrounds sometimes lend themselves to still another perspective, one in which losers are indirectly compensated by winners with peripheral items or chances to play again, resulting in an imbalanced exchange of *transfers*. The link between *transfers* surrounding gambling (or lack thereof) are an arena for politics that has considerable effect on not only the moral status of the activity but also the value created, exchanged, or destroyed by it.

From the perspective of most players, there is no doubt that during play the defining mechanic is betting, which translates as the opportunity for players to elicit a one-way transfer toward themselves. By staking money (i.e., by committing it to being part of a consolidated *transfer*) gamblers attempt to gain valuables that have been divorced from reciprocal obligation, and so cause a one-way transfer in their own direction. (A winner regains his stake, and therefore can be said not to have made an outgoing transfer.) Leaving aside the "gambling as exchange" perspective so beloved by industry and some anthropologists, and concentrating on most players' perspective of gambling as one-way transfer brings to light some interesting effects that gambling has on the value of stakes. In betting, the values of the stakes are compared as they are consolidated, as opposed to what happens in a contemporaneous exchange of *transfers*, when the value of the wealth is compared as the things are exchanged. It is valuation by association rather than valuation by friction. Valuation is underdetermined compared to an exchange of *transfers* because winning allows the victor to take home both the value of their stake as well as some (or all) of the other valuables staked by others. Gambling therefore privileges subjective assessments of the value of one's stake as opposed to the market value of that stake. Subjective valuation is heightened by the repeated rounds of play, in which participants may choose to anchor their success against high points, low points, or the starting point of their bank, and money is moved without it being made to correspond to another object or service. Gambling shares this property with other one-way forms of *transfer* (grants, charity, household pooling, and theft) and, to a lesser extent, to acts of delayed reciprocity.

By contrast to Maussian gifting, gambling enforces certain rules that purport to make it stand out from everyday rounds of give and take as a one-sided transaction rather than a gift bound up with obligations of return. In gambling the stake is tied to the unforeseeable result of an event that, when resolved, strictly determines an outcome. Gambling therefore has among

its defining characteristics the negation of a mutual assumption among players that one should be obliged to reciprocate the flow of valuables that occurs during the course of a game. If one were obliged to give a loser an amount equivalent to what one won, this would not be gambling. Compensation must be voluntary. Gambling must therefore be seen as a one-way transfer. If reciprocity is felt necessary, it usually comes in the form of a free game, a token return, or the axiom that a winner must keep playing until a loser gives up. Gambling is in this respect a vehicle for increasing not just your wealth but also choice about whether to donate and to whom to donate, as well as increasing the number of one-way transfers in that context.

To generate the excitement of play, gambling must be experienced as a one-way transfer. In gambling, the carrot of a one-way transfer induces *transfers* to be consolidated and then redistributed. It is only by reifying the excitement (which must be done at a remove from play itself) that it can appear on another level as an exchange of *transfers* (excitement for money). Part of that excitement is often generated by repeat play, when the one-way transfers are themselves linked together in a run that is the subject of both lay and expert reflection. People ponder the connection of paradigmatically unconnected transactions.

Gambling is a particularly underdetermined one-way transfer, offering the potential for exploration of both possibility and an interrogation of the valuables that are *transferred*. Apparently divorced from obligation, the participants are free to make their own plays and initiate their own flows of reciprocity with their winnings and losses. It therefore sits at the nexus of transactional possibilities, modeling an initiatory gift, the play of reciprocity over time, and the exchange of wealth for entertainment. In staking their subjective assessments of value, gamblers explore and potentially master the flow of *transfers* that are the building blocks of economic life in what equates to a “tournament of value” (Appadurai 1986).

The language of *transfers* opens up the conceptual possibilities of gambling. By reifying the enjoyment of play and/or heightening distribution choices, gambling highlights the contingency involved in connecting up *transfers*. One can also compare the *transfer* dynamics of Maussian gifts and gambling. Where Maussian gifts involve *transfers* that are spread over time so that they risk becoming one-way transfers and are ultimately satisfying when resolved, gambling intensifies *transfers* over a short time while playing up their one-way status and generating the expectation that the next win is just around the corner. Gambling thereby instigates speculation on the nature of links between discrete transactions. Gambling and Maussian gifting are therefore a kind of *transfer* chiasmatic image of each other. If the potential utility of using *transfers* analytically consists of stripping back any transaction’s politics in order to describe that politics as process, it will bolster my argument if I can demonstrate that, in fact, anthropologists have been using the English vernacular word “transfer” to do just the same thing for quite some time.

## Existing “Transfer” Work in Anthropology

In an effort to clarify their politics, anthropologists often strip transactions back to an untheorized, vernacular usage of the word “transfer”—noun: “1. An act of moving something or someone to another place, organization, team, etc.” (OED 2018). A *transfer* stratagem therefore exists nascently in a good deal of the anthropological literature. In economic anthropology the vernacular language of *transfer* is consistently used to describe the moment of movement in a transaction under conditions where the nature of the transaction described is yet to be established by argument. For instance, in *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, David Graeber (2001) uses “transfer” or “transferring” when he wishes to highlight the ambiguity of either the motivation behind the movement of a valuable or its economic status, hence: “a potlatch turned on a contrast between two sorts of transfer: the host received a unique title . . . at the same time defining the guests as faceless and generic in comparison” (210); “we have encountered extremely complicated systems of transfer in which the exact dimensions of ‘groups’ are rarely entirely clear” (226); “the subsequent transfer of names occurs not only within one’s own moiety but within one’s matriclan” (143). Graeber even adopts a definition of gifts that hinges on the emptiness of the term “transfer”: “To give a gift is to transfer something without any immediate return, or guarantee that there will ever be one” (Graeber 2001:225, citing Godbout and Caillé 1998). Gregory (1982:67, 137, 164) and Parry (1986:457–464) both use “transfer” in much the same way, as does Yan (1996:57, 88, 182, 186–187, 200–202).

Carrier (1990) characterizes Mauss as claiming that a gift acquires meaning insofar as it is “the transfer of something identified with the giver” (24). This becomes increasingly problematic under capitalism, Carrier shows, because people rarely make what they give or acquire it through gifting, and therefore the gift becomes a special kind of transaction. In other words, in the construction “the transfer of something identified with the giver,” the word “transfer” does the work of opening us to the possibility that there might be other kinds of transaction that would still result in the same *transfer* of that thing to that other person. This is a most useful property of the emptiness of the vernacular word “transfer,” which implies movement without intimating cause or consequence; it is a word that can cover changing between an airplane and a bus en route to your destination and describe professional athletes switching employers. By contrast, Laidlaw’s (2000) discussion of alms for Shvetambar Jain renunciators as among the closest real-world parallel to “pure gifts” contains no such reference to *transfers*, perhaps because the argument is that pure gifts create no friends and therefore no space for such ambiguities.

It is precisely the politics of ambiguity that Marilyn Strathern (2012) depicts at play in the donation of human bodily material and its use for scientific or medicinal purposes in the United Kingdom. Given the sheer technical specialism required to appropriately remove and artificially sustain, implant, or otherwise utilize each kind of bodily material, the term *transfer* seems

uniquely appropriate to the subject matter, and it is certainly not a coincidence that “organ transfer” is a technical term. More than this, Strathern argues that the absence of a system of monetary purchase to grease the wheels of bodily material transfers heightens the ambiguity surrounding them, thereby intensifying the sense in which these movements are best seen as “transfers.” “It is as though a shadowy contract had been created by the transfer, maintained as a debt the one owes or has discharged to the other” (M. Strathern 2012:401). Tensions are high because in most of the cases Strathern describes, the donor of bodily material is dying or has died just minutes ago. The situation is so riddled with ambiguity and yet so suffused with high feeling that any use of a term that is not devoid of conceptual content could not manage to describe it. The ambiguity of the term “transfer” in “organ transfer” used throughout the text enables the conflicts to coexist.

Nancy Munn’s (1986) work on value and exchange on Gawa within the Kula Ring also uses *transfers* in the same content-stripping way that Graeber, Strathern, Gregory, Parry, and Yan do. In Munn’s terms human action consists of attempts to control intersubjective space-time, extending it out with your Maussian gifts to your partners and allies, such that the waves created by your actions are reified into fame. Fame is the endpoint rather than exchange for the sake of exchange. The means for achieving this goal is to engage creatively with extant types of exchange, rather than simply replicating exchange forms. The result is a transformation of intersubjective space-time. Graeber conjectures that the reason Munn’s theory has been little taken up is that it seems to evade any solid transactional form such that we might say that such-and-such amount of value has been invested in such-and-such object (Graeber 2001:45–46). It is perhaps the best example of theorizing economy through terms that are themselves processual, which it does by developing a language of its own before turning to ethnographic description. I would hope that developing a usable language that can deal with inconsistent transactional forms could facilitate more ethnography of this kind.<sup>9</sup> Linking transactions in terms of *transfers* provides a process-oriented concept that enables description, a unit that can be put to work to describe the traffic of temporality.

## Conclusion

Any coherent analytical method that shifts our attention away from a market versus gift exchange, economist versus anthropologist set of dichotomies, is a potentially valuable resource—especially so given the persistent feeling that contemporary anthropologists who highlight reciprocity are merely arguing against economists who are in fact long dead,

9. Among these anthropologists, “transfer” is used just as it is in the English vernacular, to imply movement in possession without assuming the nature of the connection. It would be likewise informative to look at other languages’ “transfer” equivalents and to problematize the conceptual biases of using the English language, even at this level of abstraction.

while current economists simply ignore or never hear the critique. I have no desire to rehearse anthropology’s exchange-centric denouncement of homo economicus again. Economics and anthropology apparently once had a productive relationship, but it was considered long gone back in 1962 (Burling 1962; see also Hart 1986). The problem of marrying economic and anthropological perspectives on economy was put succinctly by Stephen Gudeman (2001:81), who proposed that anthropologists and economists are caught in a dialectic, both offering clearly distinct but equally essentialist views. Anthropologists overemphasize reciprocity, relationality, and altruism, and economists do the same for atomism, markets, and egoism (but see Schokkaert 2006). As Davis notes, charity and altruism are as awkward to market economists as theft and barter are to “reciprocalist economists” (read: anthropologists) (Davis 1992:24). Their contrast is a product of the dyadic, totalizing tendencies of the disciplines, which we would do well to circumvent, and it so happens that I think *transfers* fills the bill.

We anthropologists have been critiquing economists for their emphasis on markets, but many moved on long ago to an interest in *transfers*, and it is time anthropologists gave their own theoretical clarity to the concept. Economic analysis is in the business of testing the connections between *transfers* in a causal manner. What anthropology can bring to the economic analysis of *transfers* is a microanalysis of the politics involved in correlating *transfers*, both on the ground and in a publicly engaged discipline. Economics brings hard data on whether and in what ways the economic matter moved by *transfers* has empirical effects on later *transfers*, whether or not they are conceptually connected by those involved. A combination would produce analyses that account for both the micro-politics of *transfer* connection and also the blind spots, the cognitive dissonance, and the uncanny connections that are there but go unseen.

I have attempted to hold my gaze firmly on the *transfers* themselves and compare them before characterizing the nature of the obligations or desires generating them. This is not to throw out or ignore the politics that lead to alienation in the production and sale of commodities any more than it is to forget that reciprocity is an ever-present possibility that can take communistic as well as competitive forms. These points are as important as they have ever been. The aim of my argument has been to get away from the idea of transactions as the locus of vague conceptual unity, with its bird’s-eye view and contractual agreement bias, and move toward a language in which things as conceptually challenging as gambling and gifts can be schematized without contradiction using the scale of movement which unites them.

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## Comments

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In an area of inquiry characterized by ever-thicker underbrush, Anthony J. Pickles’s “Transfers” is a welcome effort to clear the ground. It encourages us to ask ourselves just what it is that we are seeing when we look at gift exchange, market transactions, donations to charity, and the like. Pickles reminds us that much of what has interested economic anthropologists amounts to compounds of a single building block, the transfer of something from one person or entity to another. As his paper argues, gambling, gift exchange, endowments, and so on all can be approached as different structures that people make from that block.

This argument has a number of benefits. The one that Pickles stresses is that it encourages us to consider the ways that the people we study, as well as we who do the studying, put those blocks together to produce something identifiable as a transaction in the stock market, a marriage exchange, or a purchase of groceries in a supermarket. As Pickles notes, these constructs are social accomplishments, and like all such things they require social effort and are problematic.

In pointing to the social nature of these things, Pickles encourages us to attend to the social factors that make some forms of behavior and ways of labeling them more likely than others. The most obvious of these is people’s socialization into a set of understandings of different sorts of situations and of the transfers that are part of them. People of my background learn what to expect when we buy our groceries, how to behave, and how to think about the transfer of money to the check-out clerk and the transfer of groceries to ourselves. And as Michael Taussig’s (1977) description of Cauca Valley peasants shows, there is nothing natural or automatic about this.

That observation raises a further question. Are there broader factors that induce people in different societies to be socialized into some ways of viewing transfers rather than others? Taussig’s description suggests that there are. Eric Schwimmer (1973:

49) suggests something similar, when he says of Westerners and of the Orokaiva people of Papua New Guinea:

Westerners depend on institutions other than gift exchange for the acquisition of desired scarce resources. Hence the institution of exchanging Christmas presents need serve no other end but the fostering of social exchange relations. For the Melanesians . . . gift exchange must serve economic as well as social ends.

These Melanesians were in a society in which subsistence came largely through transfers of a certain sort, were socialized accordingly, and so were prone to think about things that we would call gifts in a way very different from how, Schwimmer suggests, most of those who read these words would think about the transfers that we call Christmas presents (see also Parry 1986).

My point here is a simple one. The idea of transfers encourages us to attend to how the people whom we study think about them, why they think that way, and what the consequences might be.

It also encourages us to attend to how we as researchers think about the transfers that we observe and why we think about them as we do. Here I think that there are two ways that Pickles’s view is more optimistic than might be justified.

The first of these is what appears to be his assumption that focusing on transfers will reduce the chance that our descriptions and analyses will be hobbled by our tendency to put transfers into handy intellectual categories, like commodity payment, gambling debt, and gift. It might, but it is the case that if we are to make manageable the variety of things that we observe in the world, we are likely to need categories of some sort. This is especially the case if we want to communicate with each other, for that requires that we put what we know into common terms that reflect common concepts. It is hard to see how the notion of transfers gets us out of this problem.

The second reason that I think Pickles might be too optimistic is his observation of another way that the world is more complex than our categories: gift societies are not so purely based on gifts as we had thought, just as commodity societies are not so purely based on commodities. As Pickles observes, this produces terminological and conceptual muddle, illustrated by the use of “so-called” as a prefix to qualify the invocation of a type to label a sort of transfers: “in Melanesia in particular ‘gift exchange’ became ‘so-called gift exchange.’”

The muddle is real, but I think its roots lie in areas other than those illuminated by attention to transfers. The key area is the common disciplinary tendency to approach units as a whole, whether the Melanesian societies of my time in the field or the financial sector of those concerned with, for instance, the housing crisis in southern and eastern Europe. When this is coupled with an alternative, perhaps encroaching commodity systems in Melanesia or precarious homeowners in parts of Europe, there is a tendency to simplify each element of the pair and to stress their differences from each other. The result may be the construction of something like opposed ideal types, and as Max Weber (e.g., 1949 [1904]:91–93) observed, these

conceptual entities can be useful in specific circumstances. However, they are not empirical descriptions. So when the ideal type of the gift system confronts the reality in the field, it is inevitable that the reality is, at best, a so-called gift system.

I said that Pickles's article can help to clear the underbrush that is thick in work on circulation in economic anthropology. My purpose here has been only to suggest that it will not do the clearing by itself. We need to do a lot of the work ourselves.

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Pickles is productively continuing the work of Pryor and Hunt in paying close attention to one-way economic transfers. In the first part of this CA commentary I address conceptual issues. In the second part I will suggest some avenues for further empirical work that seem to have promise.

### Concepts

Pickles supports the position that exchange has been very prominent in economic anthropology. But some of us have argued that addressing one-way transfers is also important. I propose that all economic exchanges include at least two transfers. But it does not follow that all transfers imply exchanges, the point that Pryor and Hunt were making. Central to this argument is a clear understanding of "economic." That understanding does not now exist. If one accepts Hunt's crude definition of economic, then the generalization about exchanges and transfers holds. Empirical work on one-way transfers has been slight.

Pickles states the following: "a subcategory of one-way transfers looks positively dysmorphic, lumping together what would otherwise be considered radically different transactions. . . . When theft and charity are in one subcategory that is then opposed as a whole to gift exchange, then the situation is clearly obstructive." Pickles has misunderstood here. The opposition Hunt proposes is between one-way transfers and exchanges.

Pickles refers to Hunt's retreat. I do have a position. All exchanges are built of transfers (among other features), but not all transfers are connected to (economic) exchanges. IF one objective is to describe and understand an economy, then the exchanges are very important. But so also are the one-way transfers. Pryor and Hunt insisted on how important it is, and I have not retreated from that insight.

There are three obvious conceptual problems that have not been solved. I have mentioned the definition of "economic" above. This links to another conceptual problem. In American English we find it easy to say that a person who cares for and shows attention to another is exchanging those behavioral attitudes for a potential inheritance. In other words, some examples

of transfers of economic goods (and/or services) for behaviors that are not economic occur. These might be understood as an exchange. The nature of that other stuff (reputation, love, loyalty, etc.) is not well understood. I am trying to limit the discourse to what is clearly economic and leave the other features aside for the moment. The success of this strategy depends on a clear operational definition of the concept of economic.

Another conceptual problem is that of identifying, in a given situation, which transfers are linked to other transfers to form exchanges. Some are easy to identify. A market exchange between two strangers that is simultaneous is probably a clear-cut case. But there are delayed transfers that are part of exchanges, and identifying the transactions as exchanges seems to be possible only if the participants agree that an exchange exists. Thus the burden for empirical case studies is knowing the opinions of the participants (assuming all participants agree).

Pickles mentions slavery. This is a case where scientific language is necessary (see Hunt 2007a) for a discussion of the difference between folk or natural language, and scientific language. Pickles seems to be taking his example primarily from the US cotton plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He asserts that being a slave is a one-way transfer. It can easily be understood differently. There have been many slim accounts of labor organization that are called slavery, and they display a great deal of variation. Slave and slavery in this case are folk terms. Some cases of slavery may be one-way transfers. Treating a captive of war or a slave raid as a one-way transfer appears to be appropriate. But in a number of "slavery" systems the would-be slave is an agent, and becoming a slave is the result of one or more exchanges. Further, ending the slave status can be accomplished by another exchange between "owner" and "slave," and the agency may lie with the slave. The condition of slavery varies enormously with the cultural system and with the behavior of the slave. We need a set of good case studies that cover the details and include a number of different cultural systems.

### Case Studies

Our attempts to understand economic exchanges have a long history, and for good reason. They are prominent, and they are important. We have many empirical case studies (including important ones by James Carrier). We have very few good case studies of one-way transfers. The scale and importance of the assets in one-way transfers is not well described. Pickles cites some relevant and important data on the situation in the United States, United Kingdom, and France for recent years. Pickles is at work on gambling. Detailed case studies are very important for progress in our understanding. They not only provide fine-grained data but they also permit, and even encourage, conceptual progress when combined with systematic comparison of case studies.

Some other cases of one-way economic transfers can be suggested. There was much discussion of the civil-religious hierarchy in Mesoamerican Indian villages in the second half of

the twentieth century. In those cases adult members of the society were given the opportunity to perform public administrative service. It usually started with lowly positions. After a few years of rest, a higher stage in the hierarchy would be offered and accepted. Continual success in this career would result in serving at the top of the hierarchy. Office holders were not compensated economically for their service. Often the economic expenses of the office holder were considerable. These performances were central to the continuing survival of the economic political, ritual, and cultural systems of the Indian towns. They seem to be systems of one-way economic transfers.

Communal irrigation systems (varying in size from dozens of hectares to hundreds of thousands of hectares) typically have a set of administrators and a set of water guards. In many cases those who occupy the offices are not compensated economically. Those who are good at their job (honest, calm experts are running an irrigation system, good at peacefully resolving conflicts) may stay in office for decades (see Hunt 1988, 2007b; Hunt et al. 2005).

There seem to be a number of cases of one-way economic transfers in administrative realms. The administration of small islands off the coast of Maine (Murray 2010), leadership of some academic departments, and the peer review of research grant proposals and papers for scientific journals would seem to be cases worthy of further study.

Pickles has moved us forward. There is much work to be done.

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### Marcos Lanna

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A. J. Pickles's "*Transfers: A Deductive Approach to Gifts, Gambles, and Economy at Large*" is a thought-provoking paper that brings new questions to a classic issue. One of these is that the ethnographer in the field often asks what is the "default of the 'exchange' unit of analysis"; in other words, not everywhere can one find an institutionalized exchange system such as Kula or potlatch. In my case, I found nonexchange in the sense that patrons in Northeast Brazil were not giving to their clients; rather, there were secret intrapatronal exchanges. I also identify with Pickles raising doubts about generalizing "exchange" as a concept and trying to rethink it in relation to other more general concepts, such as transactions. Last but not least, there is an emphasis on unilateral "transfers," a notion Pickles shows to have been important for many authors and which he builds into a concept. He does not suggest a simple substitution of "exchange" for "transfer" but rather differentiates unilateral "transfers" from what he calls the "Maussian gift," which he correctly describes as reciprocal.

The essay on the gift has been interpreted in different ways. Some have formulated new theories inspired by it, and others follow Mauss more closely, considering what he said in 1924 to

apply today. Alternatively, one can also learn from Mauss without necessarily using him to prepare a new theory. Neither of these was Pickles's aim. By focusing on *transfers*, his aim is to complement Mauss. Gifts, as transfer, become "transactional subcategories." Using transfer as a new concept would "facilitate more ethnographically led and reflective analyses."

The paper also tackles gambling as a form of transfer, given its importance in Melanesia. Transfers are understood "as a manifestation of efforts to decouple economic *transfers* from reciprocal obligation." It is not clear how deep is Pickles's interest in the noneconomic (or, using Mauss's word, "total") aspect of both transfers and gambling, and if either participates in creation processes of an autonomous economic sphere (in Polanyi's sense). My quibble is: Why would either avoid reciprocity? Could not gambling produce images, or some form of mental accountability related to other, noneconomic reciprocal obligations? What would it mean to win a gamble? Is not a gambling system very much derived from an accumulation of bets that afterward is redistributed?

Pickles ask relevant questions such as, "What is unique to gambling that we all seem to recognize it when we see it? Where does it sit in relation to other kinds of transaction, and how variable might that position be? Why, exactly, is it close to financial speculation, and why is it far from a Christmas present?" His answers presuppose substantive comparison, whereas it seems to me that Mauss's heritage, as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially in *Mythologiques* (without ever abandoning the study of the gift—Lévi-Strauss [2000]), means that we have to compare structures, or languages (such as cooking—Lévi-Strauss [1968]), defined by relations between form and content (or the transformation between form and content and vice versa—Lévi-Strauss [2001]).

For Pickles, "by staking money (i.e., by committing it to being part of a consolidated *transfer*) gamblers attempt to gain valuables that have been divorced from reciprocal obligation, and so cause a one-way transfer in their own direction," whereas I would argue that money is staked by the gambler and then centralized by a banker, who redistributes it afterward. We have a reciprocal transaction, even if it is unilateral, when money is staked with the expectation of gain. A banker is not too different from a Trobriand or Kwakiutl chief, even if he only redistributes to a few winners. Mauss, Malinowski, and Polanyi saw the accumulation of yams by Trobrianders chiefs as tributes. Likewise, betting money is centralized, there is necessarily always a return, and, more important, there is an expectation of return by all those who bet. Tributary systems can be progressive or regressive, and similarly, gift systems can objectively contemplate all or some, but subjectively always contemplate all. Mauss taught us that what is more important is not the economic aspect but the relation between this and other aspects, such as the subjective ones. A member of a given house might be satisfied never getting a return gift, as long as his house did. I do not consider gambling to be "far from a Christmas present." If the winner is not obliged to make a return to the losers, the reciprocal aspect of gambling is not found in this. If Pickles is right that there

are commercial interests willing to stress this reciprocal aspect in order to legitimize gambling and that we have to concentrate on “most players’ perspective of gambling,” the industry is one player in the system, and if one accepts its similarity in form and content to chiefs elsewhere, the most important one. Our task is to follow all the circulation involved.

Gambling can also be characterized as a structure that is a function of an event, a lottery, a raffle, rather than the other way around. As Pickles puts it, “In gambling the stake is tied to the unforeseeable result of an event that, when resolved, strictly determines an outcome. Gambling therefore has among its defining characteristics the negation of a mutual assumption among players that one should be obliged to reciprocate the flow of valuables that occurs during the course of a game.” But reciprocation is an obligation of the banker, and there are rules in each form of gambling about how it should be done. I do not agree that the “language of *transfers* opens up the conceptual possibilities of gambling,” or at least I would like to suggest that a more radical opening was achieved by Lévi-Strauss’s (1962) contrast between rite and game, a theory of rite further developed later (Lévi-Strauss 1971), expanding on the 1962 reflection on contingency and “*événement*.” It is important to note Lévi-Strauss’s (2000) later insistence that he had remained faithful to the study of “Maussian gifts.” The latter are not necessarily “ultimately satisfying when resolved” but can create as many expectations and as much anxiety and tension as gambling.

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### Thomas M. Malaby

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There is a distinct Weberian spirit to Pickles’s suggestion that anthropology take up *transfers* as a considered analytical term, one more flexible in its application than the familiar “transaction.” The spirit is welcome, even if the challenging aspect of such an enterprise seems always to be in how the offering of a relatively neutral conceptual tool seems always to run the risk of charges of “misplaced concreteness.” But throughout, Pickles stresses the pragmatic epistemological position from which he speaks and the heuristic, process-oriented quality of “transfer” as offered, doing so here quite plainly: “*Transfers* are not a reality to be found; they are a concept to be used.” From here, it is compelling to hear how this concept allows us to use “transactions” more particularly, to indicate the practical and ideological attempts to make sense of transfers under one or another of what Sally Falk Moore (1978) called “processes of regulation”—the “establishment and maintenance” to which Pickles refers.

Along the way Pickles raises the possibility that anthropologists and economists may have fallen into diametrically opposed root assumptions about economic action, perhaps all the more opposed given the existence of the counterview (a kind of schismogenesis, although one must think that the anthropologists have been more concerned to define themselves

against economists than the other way around). This is a fair claim on the need to critically examine our categories, but the challenge to do so must apply even to Pickles’s recommendation, and upon consideration the concept of *transfer* as presented may contain at least a spark of atomism in its very construction, one that echoes in certain respects Parry’s discussion of the issue. Pickles at one point moves to set aside Mauss’s question of the “spirit of the gift,” but many of these dimensions of the issue reappear in the latter section on transfer as used in anthropology. I would suggest that, while the concept is clearly a move forward for our language about economic action, yet the term must always imply distinct agents, and thereby at least begin to smuggle in the beginnings of unencumbered selves, potentially eliding some of the very historical and institutional context that Pickles would like to have in a better position to include. As always, however, the proof is in the pudding of specific analyses; it is not about finding a different term that avoids these problems entirely but, rather, how in specific applications we will or will not manage to guard against such distortions.

As a case in point, the issue does become more noticeable in Pickles’s discussion of gambling. The gains, to be sure, are clear; Pickles is convincing that the term will help us remain mindful of the contingent, open-ended nature of economic action, driving home the point, so important to Bourdieu (1977) and Falk Moore, that we too often tend to collapse time and ignore indeterminacy in our analyses. We also want room, however, to pull the frame back, as Natasha Dow Schüll does (2012), to consider not only the *ex post facto* (ideological) accounting of economic action but also how the platforms on which social action takes place, including their game-like forms, are themselves objects of (also fraught, also contingent) institutional projects as well as bound up in the shaping of subjectivities. There is, in a way, a larger field of play, one where a focus on transfers could become an impediment to insight. Another way to put this is to zoom in farther, rather than to pull out, and to recognize that in gambling, as in any social action, the experience as an end in itself bears scrutiny, one that may be foreclosed by a readiness to frame the action as a transfer, a move that prompts us to think at a certain level of analytical magnification.

But the conceptually perfect is the enemy of the heuristically good. We have in Pickles’s argument good grounds for recognizing the murkiness of analyses that do not sufficiently distinguish the contingent movement of economic value, on one hand, from its construction according to a given interpretive scheme, on the other. A process-oriented anthropology must tread a fine line, but it is encouraging to see conceptual headway made nonetheless.

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### Susana Narotzky

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In this piece, Pickles proposes the concept of *transfer* as a theoretical resource for analyzing transactions. Transactions, in

turn, are defined as “reifications” that emerge as a result of the political work of delimiting and sustaining transactional categories, that is, the “form” of the transaction that is socially meaningful. *Transfers* appear as a “theoretical motive . . . force,” as a component unit of every transaction, and therefore in all transactions there is an “exchange of *transfers*.” A distinction is posited between the *transfer* as abstract motivational unit and the concrete transaction defined as “every imaginable instance during which congealed human activity is considered to move.” The attempt to clearly define the component elements and processes involved in transactions is commendable and potentially useful to think with. Still, in its present form, it seems to me to obscure, rather than enlighten, the field of economic anthropology that studies the allocation, circulation, and appropriation of items defined as valuable and its correlation with the making of socially meaningful relations.

The article rests on the formalizations that occurred in anthropology around the gift and reciprocity as an obligation to return, as the entanglement of material and symbolic exchange, and around chains of obligation making the social fabric; yet it is a bold attempt to develop a meta-analysis of exchange theory. The initial idea is to focus on “one-way transfers” instead of on exchange (bi- or multilateral transfers) that frees analysis from the aprioristic framework of a transaction, in which the processes for achieving commensurability and reaching equivalences are the focus. Instead, the author suggests that by using the concept of *transfer*—which he has extracted from empirically defined one-way transfers—what anthropologists will be able to provide is the political processes that produce distinct categories of transferable “objects,” together with the “intangibles” attached to the transfers and the “form” of the transaction, that is, the socially recognized practice. Following from this, the program he sets for us is the “microanalysis of the politics involved in correlating *transfers*,” the work that goes into “connecting and disconnecting all those endless *transfers*,” looking into successful as well as failed exchanges. “Linking transactions in terms of *transfers* provides a process-oriented concept that enables description, a unit that can be put to work to describe the traffic of temporality.”

The article is intriguing in three ways. First, Pickles seems to point at a politics of valuation, that is, the processes by which categories are constituted and evaluated in relational terms, as one of the central contributions of the *transfer* concept to exchange theory; but it is unclear to me how “politics” mediates between the abstract unit and the concrete carving out of meaningful transferable objects and transactional forms. What does the author mean by “politics,” and how does it operate, not empirically in concrete cases but as a constitutive element in his proposed theory of *transfers*? Many authors have recently addressed the issues around valuation registers and techniques (Fourcade 2016; Lamont 2012) and the tensions, negotiations, conflicts, avoidances, and omissions attached to juggling different value regimes (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Guyer 2004), or struggling about the systems of valuation (Collins 2017; De Angelis 2007). It would be useful for the author to engage with

these debates if he wants to make a contribution that seriously addresses the political.

Second, temporality is rightly highlighted as crucial to understanding the chains of transfers that have been the focus of anthropologists’ attention for a long time. Annette Weiner (1980) pointed out early on the entanglements of valuables, relationships, and re-valuations that made social reproduction possible in Trobriand. Likewise, John Comaroff (1980) analyzed marriage payments among the Tshidi of South Africa as an ambiguous, time-bound, and flexible process of wealth transfers that could always be reconfigured and reinterpreted as something else in the future, resignifying relationships concerning multiple generations (alive, dead, and yet to be born). Anthropologists and historians studying exchange (and dispossession) in colonial and other unequal encounters have exposed how transfers, in contexts of value pluralism, can be negotiated halfway between comparability and incommensurability, a process that nevertheless enables transactions to occur at a point in time, although these might be challenged in the future (Curtin 1992; Wolf 1982). What does the *transfer* concept add to these analyses of complex, power-laden, chains of transfers that provide punctuated space-time locations for transactions that will often be refigured or disavowed in the future? The formalization of *transfer* as a “movement of economic matter with a single directionality”—the “mitochondrial *transfers*”—seems to detract from complex analyses of circulation, meaning entanglements, valuation struggles, and fields of power that anthropologists and others have proposed. Paradoxically, it achieves the opposite of what it sets out to do, which is to highlight the forces that make circulation possible in cognitive, ideological, social, political, and material terms. Instead, the *transfer* mitochondrial unit appears to efface them.

Finally, Pickles shows how the use of the term “transfer” in empirical contexts and in scholar debate serves to signify the movement of something that has been defined as transferable whether material or immaterial. This common usage refers to a multitude of practices in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. “Upgrading” the term to a conceptual category within a theory that remains a transactional one may divest it from its heuristic value, unless the processes by which the carving out of categories for objects, relations, and transactional connections is conceptually clear.

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## Reply

I am really grateful to my eminent colleagues for their sustained engagement with my work and to the editors at *Current Anthropology* for enabling this unique forum. To summarize my reading of their readings: *Transfers* was a welcome attempt to deduce a simpler, “heuristically good” (Malaby) metalanguage for transactions in anthropology, even if doubts remain about *transfers*’ critical potential (Narotzky, Carrier) or universal

suitability (Malaby, Hunt, Lanna). I should note at the outset that I was quite surprised there was not more pushback on the potential for collaboration with economists through *transfers*, but perhaps that proposition is best answered by economists themselves. I will respond briefly to a few specifics before addressing the more substantive reservations as a coherent body.

First, Hunt is quite correct to emphasize that alleged examples of “one-way transfers” require a critical appraisal of just how “one-way” they are in practice, and I appreciate the inclusion of some specific examples in what has become a pretty technical discussion, as well as the nuance Hunt adds to how slavery practices should be characterized. Similarly, Lanna rightly points out, on the one hand, my oversimplification of Maussian gifts at one point as “ultimately satisfying when resolved.” I should rather have said that they “imply there ought to be a return.” On the other hand, I see little to gain in comparing my effort to open up conceptual space with *Transfers* against Lévi-Strauss’s contrast between game and rite (1996:30–33). Many will recall Lévi-Strauss’s neat claim that games use structure to create inequalities between competitors where they had not existed before (i.e., winners and losers), while ritual creates a unity of participants from an original asymmetry between the sacred and the profane. For what it is worth, I think Lévi-Strauss’s inversion is a bit too neat; it begins with a competition-centric characterization of games, and so probably produces an overly unity-centric characterization of ritual (I prefer Suits’s [1978] definition of games, but there is no space to explain why). Lévi-Strauss’s contrast is undoubtedly more intellectually productive than my article, as Lanna observes; I just think it neither contradicts my own contribution nor particularly speaks to it. The UK gambler would say there are horses for courses.

I see the rest of the critiques and reflections as more or less connected, so I will try answering them dialogically, working my way outward from the particular to the general, starting with Lanna and ending up at Carrier.

Lanna questions whether gambling is in fact a one-way transfer, because during play a reciprocal relationship exists with the pot/banker so long as all the gamblers/banker commit to returning the stake and paying out to the winner. Lanna correctly identifies an automatic and involuntary reciprocity because all players must abide by the result of the gambling event for a gamble to have occurred instead of a swindle. This is the magic of gambling, by enforcing categorical obligation within the event it always creates a novel imbalance shorn of obligation outside it. So while it may be objectively true that gambling produces imbalanced *transfers* through a unilateral return, subjectively the result always appears as a “one-way transfer”; that is, the reciprocity is effaced as just “part of the game,” transforming into a single movement of wealth and so “free money.” I think gambling illustrates the utility of a *transfers* approach precisely because of the dissonance between objective attributes and subjective experience.

That said, I too have experienced the many ways that gambling mimics the form of other, more “traditional” forms of redistribution and absorbs much of the language of reciprocity.

In *Money Games* (2019) I dwell on precisely this problem when I contrast North American Pawnee and one Highland Papua New Guinea style of gambling. In the latter, collective bets produce opposing wholes that subsume individual contributions, mirroring bridewealth payments where wealth is considered female, productive, and collective; among Pawnee in the 1890s, war allies bet different forms of wealth as if they were equivalent in face-to-face encounters, the items bound together before being communalized and staked on a single outcome, the result being that wealth appeared like a scalp taken in war: a trophy of individual male prowess within a collective male endeavor (see Lesser 1933). My point is that such reciprocal obligations and the ensuing micro-*transfers* are contained and even enabled within what must always be a one-way transfer at the close of the gambling event, allowing gambling to take a huge variety of forms that explore different perceptions of wealth and its properties.

This brings me to Hunt’s acute observation that under a “transfers” framework the “burden of knowledge” falls on the anthropologist to know the opinion of each party in a transaction so as to learn how the *transfers* are configured. This may be ethnographically challenging, but focusing on this aspect and especially the confluence or dissonance between official and participants’ perspectives has continually enabled economic anthropologists to offer novel contributions to the analysis of circulation (as Narotzky reminds us in her comments), and I would hope to prompt more of it. Hunt’s concern centers on a hidden pitfall: How to know which *transfers* are considered “economic” among different parties to a transaction? Every crisis an opportunity. I see little value in finding my own “clear operational definition of the concept of economic” in order to get to work collecting comparable ethnographic material. *Transfers* is an attempt to fashion better conceptual conditions with which to learn how ethnographic subjects come to an often less than wholly “clear operational definition of the concept of economic,” as well as understanding the inverse: on what basis are some of the anthropologist-identified *transfers* of potentially useful energy (care, attention, companionship) decoupled from the “economic” in subjective experience? Then again, when the person/people/peoples under consideration do not operate on the basis of a distinction between the economic and the noneconomic (see Carrier’s comments), then we can describe that situation more easily using *transfers* if we are likewise unburdened by any need of a “clear operational definition of the concept of economic.” This answer is unlikely to satisfy Hunt, but I think this a desirable attribute of a process-oriented terminology.

Narotzky similarly argues that upgrading *transfers* into a conceptual category may divest it of its heuristic value in common usage unless the other conceptual components configuring *transfers* are defined more precisely. Where Hunt points to the “economic,” Narotzky asks what is meant by politics “as a constitutive element in [my] proposed theory of *transfers*?” Apparently, without a clear definition then the effort must fail, but I think we can muddle on just fine without it. More so than

is the case with the “economic,” perhaps there is some level of abstraction upon which *transfer* “politics” can be the subject of an intellectually productive generalization; I doubt it, but I will certainly give it some thought. At this early stage I want to avoid over-determining the nature of politics because it is the “politics” that becomes the ethnographic object under a *transfer*-centered framework. Let me be clear, the term “politics” is not intended as a substitute for culture, structure, ontology, or suchlike, because I do not wish to assume a shared framework of valuation or a shared understanding of the nature of the parties—or even that there must exist parties before, during, or after the transaction. I use politics to describe social life in motion, in conflict, and always up for grabs. I think by centering our analysis on the politics as it relates to the way transactions are fashioned from *transfers*, then we can more easily compare our efforts. If I put further parameters on the “politics” at this point, then I would be presupposing both the nature of the “dependent variable” and in the same moment presupposing to some extent the nature of the party or parties. If after a thorough exploration of cross-cultural examples of the “politics” constituting certain mutually recognized transactional types I came to a theory about the nature of the politics necessary for those transactions to be mutually recognized as a type, then that would be another matter. But that really is something for another, brighter day.

Having responded unsatisfactorily to the charge of conceptual under-theorization, I turn now to the potential for *transfers* to over-determine the ethnographic object. Be prepared for more disappointment. Narotzky goes on to highlight four signature ethnographic works as “analyses of complex, power-laden, chains of *transfers* that provide punctuated space-time locations for transactions that will often be refigured or disavowed in the future.” Narotzky argues that a focus on *transfers* appears to efface their complexity. The reason it might do so is not clear to me. I only see them all effectively summarized within the terms I laid out, and demonstrating the utility of a light-touch framework as a tool to partially draw out what is comparable.

Malaby delivers a homologous evaluation in a more concrete manner: the term *transfer* risks definitionally implying the existence of distinct agents and thus a bias toward considering people as “unencumbered selves.” Malaby and Lanna both point to the same evidence: the experiential enjoyment of the act of gambling and its consequences for perception are downplayed by a concentration on the constituent *transfers*, and given this aspect of gambling is also a major site of interested action and even exploitation, then something has been lost. Given the Melanesianist obsession with the implications of relational selves, I feel particularly conditioned to share a concern that unencumbered selves might be smuggled into the debate through recourse to *transfers*. Then again, I am confident that my response is ethnographically determined because it is precisely the micro-*transfers*, relations, and reciprocities in-game that Papua New Guineans appear to enjoy so much. They were having the most fun figuring out relations through

in-game *transfers*, while in other contexts this aspect may be downplayed and the game may even appear as a void to disappear into (Schüll 2012). In essence I agree that reducing gambling entirely down to its component *transfers* would mischaracterize the gambling experience as self-contained and cover up its exploitation, but as Malaby and Lanna also note, I am advocating *transfers* not really as an exclusive approach to transactions but as a complement to Maussian and other approaches and an opportunity to mix ethnographic logics in the cement and see what stands up. I share the anthropologists’ resistance to any kind of conceptual determination, but we must also address exchange-determinism and the determinism that comes with unreflective common usage of English language terms. Somewhat ironically, I would advocate exchanging “exchange” with *transfers* at certain points as part of a holistic approach not because we need more conceptual determinism but because we need less, and a greater awareness of how enshrining certain conceptual models may hobble us. *Transfers* makes room for more, together, and allows comparison by operating as a minimally meaningful connecting concept.

Finally, I thank all the commentators for their generosity, Malaby in particular for his commendation, and both Carrier and Hunt for their calls to action so that we might proceed to clear more of the underbrush that surrounds our concepts of circulation. I fully agree with Carrier that anthropologists’ tendency to create opposed units (us/them, gift/commodity, etc.) can be a useful Weberian technique, but more often it leads to a double bind wherein we either actively reinforce those oppositions or endlessly critique them. These units are still largely ordained by our methods: discover “gift economies” as a Weberian ideal type > conduct fieldwork > critique. It is surely over-optimistic, but *transfers* learned as a heuristic tool might yet offer some budding anthropologists more analytic flexibility. It helped me in Papua New Guinea. Instead of leaning on the concept of exchange, in *Money Games* (2019) *transfers* helped me compare various kinds of card gambling, bridewealth payments, futures trading, Moka ceremonial exchange, street sales, sharing, produce marketing, savings organizations, gifts of money, slot machines, and the Kula network. These became rolling transformations of an aesthetic approach to *transfers*. I came to *transfers* from a desire to overcome the easy oppositions that plague Melanesianist anthropology in particular, but I think *transfers* could be useful to others as well. So, yes, I suppose the proof is going to be in the pudding.

—Anthony J. Pickles

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