

Captain Cook and Gift Giving in Tahiti: Generosity and Sovereignty

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On 13th April 1769, James Cook arrived with the Endeavour in Tahiti, charged with observing the transit of Venus. Before the sailors were allowed to take to shore, Cook outlined rules of conduct to be obeyed, aimed at governing relations with the Tahitians. The 5th Rule of conduct stated that: “No Sort of Iron, or any thing that is made of Iron, or any sort of Cloth or usefull or necessary articles are to be given in exchange for anything but provisions.” The aim of the rule was in all likelihood unambiguous: namely, to regulate the sexual relationships between the English sailors and the Tahitian women, by preventing the trade of goods, in particular the nails that held together the Endeavour, for sex.

In this paper, we examine the accounts of gift giving between the English and Tahitians during the 1769 encounter. Drawing from Marcel Mauss and Jacques Derrida, we will argue that an understanding of the symbolic and political meaning of the gift is essential for deciphering the logic of colonisation, economy and sovereignty. Derrida’s perception of the gift’s impossibility refers to the limit in thinking about alterity, through the mediation of difference through terms of similarity, agreed value, and the reduction of generosity to terms of economic exchange (for example, nails for sex). Further, generosity bears a relationship to sovereignty, since Cook’s code of conduct not only regulated economic exchange, it regulated gift giving in the name of the sovereign: it aimed to remove the possibility of the gift, and if not remove, reduced the circumstances for gift giving to occur. In other words, generosity – its possibility – relies on the constitution of an order of exchange through sovereignty that connects value, circulation and law. No one here is to forget the presence of the King.

Through this reading, we might understand the gift as a leakage in the order of exchange, a gesture which undermines the authority of sovereignty. We find these leakages of exchange in the frequent discussions of the so called “thievery” of the Tahitians, where the journals express the apparent exasperation of Cook at the disappearance of items belonging to the crew and the ship. These acts of “theft” break the rules of exchange laid down by Cook in his code of conduct, by enabling the movement of goods – including those demarcated as not for trade - outside of the formalized channels of Value. If sovereignty founds the rules of exchange, then these *aneconomic* movements also disrupt the authority of sovereignty, and suggest that the so called acts of theft might also be considered strategies of negotiating sovereignty and economic value.

We argue that the gift provides an opportunity to reconsider historical accounts of colonial economic exchange that underpin the foundations of sovereignty. The important questions for us are: to what extent were economic exchanges disrupted by generosity, either as pure gifts or reciprocity surplus to exchange? And how do we understand sovereignty, as mediated not only through the contestation of violent force, but also delayed by acts of generosity superfluous to the formalized circle of exchange?