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DESIRED POSSESSIONS: KARL POLANYI, RENÉ GIRARD, AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE MARKET ECONOMY

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"The most radical critique of liberal capitalism ever:" that is how Louis Dumont describes *The Great Transformation,* Karl Polanyi's classic work on the rise of the market system. But the French anthropologist goes on to observe that, when one confronts this same critique with the ethnography of tribal societies, "one may ask whether Polanyi did not in fact come up short; having criticized the economy as an idea, he thought he could retain it as a thing..." (Dumont xiv, xvi).

Is the economy indeed a "thing" that has always existed in some form everywhere, and if so, what manner of thing is it? In a word, what is an economy *for?* Is there a particular aim that any economy must serve? A specific motive that it necessarily brings into play? We will begin by looking at Polanyi's answer to this question.

"No human motive is per se economic," Polanyi tells us. "There is no such thing as a *sui generis* economic experience in the sense in which man may have a religious, aesthetic, or sexual experience." It is market society, with its dependence on a disembedded economic system, which fosters the illusion that the "economic" motives of hunger and gain necessarily underlie every economic system (1968, 63-4).

In reality, however, "human beings will labor for a large variety of reasons as long as things are arranged accordingly." For example, "Monks traded for religious reasons... The Kula trade of the Trobriand islanders... is mainly an aesthetic pursuit. Feudal economy was run on customary lines. With the Kwakiutl," industry appears to have been "a point of honor," and so on (1968, 68). The trick, it seems, is to "arrange things accordingly." An economic system can be "run on noneconomic motives," Polanyi explains, without linking the process of production or distribution "to specific economic interests attached to the possession of goods," as long as "every single step in that process is geared to a number of social interests which eventually ensure that the required step be taken" (2001, 48).

Now, there is a danger in this presentation. It could lead a reader to conclude that other societies arrange things cunningly so that all these social interests are harnessed to ensure the performance of the steps necessary to economic processes in a kind of elaborate ruse—a ruse which the out-in-the-open operation of the economy in our society gives us the ability to see through. Very well, such a reader might acknowledge, the economy is an "instituted process," and, yes, the act of instituting it "shifts the place of the process in society" (Polanyi 1968, 148), but if you track it down to its hiding place and strip away the social contrivances in which it has been embedded, what you will find is still the economy as we know it—indeed, the economy which market society alone lays bare. In this reading, or rather misreading, the "real" economic aims that market society achieves *directly* are elsewhere accomplished only in the most cumbersomely *indirect* fashion. This kind of erroneous conclusion will likely be difficult to counter as long as one posits an opposition between multiple, variable and diffuse social interests, on the one hand, and the apparently straightforward individual interest in the possession of goods, on the other.

Wherever the economy is submerged in social relationships, Polanyi says, a man "does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets" (2001, 48). The problem with such an opposition between individual and social is that a market-minded theorist can overcome it simply by broadening the individual interest in the possession of goods to include the possession of reified social goods. Once social interests are conceptualized as "social assets," to use Polanyi's own expression—or as "symbolic capital," to cite a more recent formulation—they lend themselves to "economizing" even in the formal sense, and Polanyi's carefully constructed distinction between the substantive and the formal collapses, apparently confirming the universality of the market paradigm. And, after all, while social interests vary enormously, every economy invariably deals in one way or another with the possession of material goods. This being the case, any theorist with an innate propensity to "economize with assumptions" (the phrase is Polanyi's; see 1968, 144) will be tempted to abstract out the daunting profusion of noneconomic motives and to view even primitive economies through the prism of the supposed "economic motives" associated with the possession of goods and conveniently embodied by the modern market.

There is certainly something to be said for economizing with assumptions, even if it entails simplification, so we might well look for a single motive other than hunger or gain that nonetheless characterizes economies both primitive and modern. What we need is a motive associated with material goods other than mere individual interest in their possession—one that would allow us to go beyond the opposition between individual and social motives, just as Polanyi urges us to go beyond the opposition between material and ideal ones (see 1968, 72). Only in this way will we be able to understand the modern economy better in the light of the primitive, rather than seeing the primitive as an elaborately indirect version of the modern.

Let's return to the idea of the economy as an "instituted process." "Two concepts stand out," Polanyi remarks, "that of 'process' and its 'institutedness'." So far we have been considering "institutedness." What about "process"? For Polanyi, this term "suggests analysis in terms of motion." The "material elements may alter their position either by changing place or by changing 'hands'" (1968, 148). Now, it's easy to see that production and transportation involve changes in location, but why should an object change hands?

Here we will limit ourselves to a couple of examples borrowed from primitive cultures. A.M. Hocart tells us that property in Fiji "changes hands very rapidly, especially if it is anything novel," because Fijian custom approves of asking for what one wants and disapproves of refusing such requests (1929, 100). Turning from the South Seas to Africa, we find that the same is true among the Bushmen. "A Bushman will go to any lengths to avoid making other Bushmen jealous of him," reports E.M. Thomas, "and for this reason the few possessions the Bushmen have are constantly circling among members of their groups" (1959,22; cited by Sahlins 1972, 211-12).

In these cultures, then, it would appear that objects change hands whenever someone wants what someone else has. Fair enough—but *why* should somebody want what someone else has? At about this point, it would be customary to appeal to some notion of economic value, but that would be begging the question of economic motives, unless we know why one person should value what another has. Let's see what Polanyi has to say on this question.

Early on in *The Great Transformation*, in the above-quoted passage on safeguarding social rather than individual interests, Polanyi writes that the individual in a socially embedded economic system "values material goods only in so far as they serve" to establish social standing (2001, 48). In the concluding chapter, however, he asserts that the "source" of economic value "is human wants and scarcity—and how could we be expected not to desire one thing more than another?" Thus, on the one hand, the value of goods derives from the social interest attached to them, but on the other hand, their value springs from individual desire. Any desire, Polanyi concludes, "will make us participants...in the constituting of economic value" (2001, 267).

And so we find ourselves confronted once again with the perennial dilemma of individual versus social motives. We can go beyond this opposition with the help of René Girard's pioneering work on the "dual nature of desire, a force oriented toward the Self" which nonetheless turns the individual into "the satellite of an Other" (2004, 7). Where market-minded theorists reduce social interests to individual desires, Girard shows that individual desires are already social. How can we not desire one thing more than another? How can we not desire more than another the thing an *Other* desires, Girard asks, for how else can we be expected to *know* what to desire? In this view, the spontaneity of individual desire is an individualist illusion. The reality is that we learn our desires from others. In this case, it is natural that we should want what someone else has.

The motive we propose, then, in the place of hunger and gain, is *the desire to possess the desired possessions of others.* This motive cannot be reduced to mere individual interest in the possession of goods because the interest in question is not strictly individual; it comes from the other person, just as the possession itself will. The possession is desired because of its possessor. This is explicit in the case of the Kula trade of the Trobriand Islanders. The value of Kula objects turns out not to be purely aesthetic after all, since gifts are "preferably" reciprocated with objects that "previously belonged to distinguished persons" (2001, 52). Indeed, "Some Kula objects are big, greasy white arm shells, without any value except for associations that go with earlier possessors" (1968, 200).

The vast circular trajectory that objects follow in the Kula trade is an apt image for the constant circulation of goods in primitive economies in general. The reason for this circulation lies in the nature of the desire that motivates it. If what people desire are the desired possessions of others—the possessions desired *by* others—it is important to keep the objects moving, not only to provide people with such possessions, but also to keep the desires for the same objects from clashing. Arranging things so that objects constantly change hands is a good way of preventing the conflict that, in Girard's words, "the convergence of two or several hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke" (1987, 8).[13]

The market solution to the problem of convergent desires is different. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy suggests, the mass production of goods in industrial society serves to put the same objects into everyone's hands (see Dumouchel and Dupuy 113). Needless to say, this solution involves equally constant motion. If what people desire are the objects desired by others, they can never be satisfied by the possession of objects that everyone already possesses. That early institutionalist, Thorstein Veblen, foretold in 1899 that no level of material production could ever satiate the "general desire for wealth" when its real basis is "the desire of every one to excel every one else in the accumulation of goods" (32). As a result, just as primitive economies are characterized by an endless circle of exchange, modern economies are characterized by an endless spiral of production.

There may be the kernel of an answer here to the question, raised by Alfredo Salsano, of why Polanyi developed his "broader frame of reference" by investigating primitive economies rather than non-market Western ones (1987, 155). "As far as ethnographical records are concerned," Polanyi notes, "we should not assume that production for a person's or group's own sake is more ancient than reciprocity or redistribution....Indeed, the practice of catering for the needs of one's household becomes a feature of economic life only on a more advanced level of agriculture" (2001, 55), and of course this feature vanishes once again with the advent of capitalism. A comparison between primitive and modern economies is logical, therefore, because neither is based on production for one's own sake; both are oriented to providing people with the desired possessions of others.

But recognizing this means reversing the direction of the comparison. If we replace the so-called "economic motives" with the motive of giving people things that come from others—if this is the noneconomic motive the economy must ultimately satisfy—then it is the market which relies on an

[13] For the analysis of a rite that stages the convergence of two hands on a single object, see Anspach 1988.

elaborately indirect fashion of "arranging things accordingly." Among the Fijians or Bushmen, if one wants what one's neighbor has, all one need do is ask in order to receive it directly. If we want what our neighbor has, we produce things for others in return for income which enables us to go to the store to buy a replica of it.

The comparison comes out the same if one chooses to think in terms of social standing. Veblen said of modern economies what Polanyi says of primitive ones: "Ceremonial display serves to spur emulation to the utmost" (2001, 49). In modern society, people gain prestige from the display of what they buy with what they earn from what they give others—a notably roundabout arrangement compared to the primitive one in which people gain prestige directly from the display of what they give others.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the primitive arrangement rests exclusively on a human propensity to economize prestige. In fact, the medieval European monks cited by Polanyi are far from the only ones to engage in economic activity for religious reasons—even if, as Hocart declares, "there is no religion in Fiji." No religion in *our* sense, he goes on to stipulate, but "only a system which in Europe has split up into religion and business" (1970, 256). For if primitive economies are embedded in social relations, these social relations are themselves embedded in a religious order. Hence the finding of a group of anthropological investigators led by Daniel de Coppet that in such cultures "exchanges among the living can only be understood in the relations that the latter maintain with the dead, with spirits or with a divinity" (Barraud *et al.* 510).

Thus, Fijian religion centers on potlatch-type exchanges held between paired groups who "come with their gods," as Hocart says, "and impersonate them" (1952, 46). Each side must refrain from consuming the goods it has prepared itself, reserving them as ritual offerings for the other side (1970, 62). Similarly, in aboriginal Australian cultures the "fact of exchange" as such is not primary, according to Alain Testart, but derives from the principle on which the totemic rituals and taboos are based: one must "always *cede* what one has, *pass* it on to another, *give* it to the corresponding moiety (9-10; emphasis original). The Australians and Fijians believed that the bounty of nature could only be assured by respect for these rules of ritual, while flouting them was thought to bring divine retribution.

It is necessary therefore to modify somewhat our statement concerning the *directness* of primitive economic relations. The primitive economy is a ritual process, and this means that relations among humans are mediated by gods or spirits. If people are compelled to yield their possessions up to others, they are not compelled to do so directly by those others, but by the invisible beings who, as Durkheim would have it, incarnate society. Such invisible beings in some measure relieve individuals of responsibility for the systematic dispossession of each other's goods needed to keep them in circulation.[14]

Perhaps the indirectness of this ritually instituted process holds a clue to the indirectness of the market system as well. With the advent of the market, Polanyi emphasizes, "*instead of the economic system being embedded in social relationships, these relationships were now embedded in the economic system*" (1968, 70). As a result, "Society as a whole remained invisible." And, one might add, there were no longer any invisible beings to incarnate it—only the "invisible hand": that is, the belief in the efficacy of so-called "economic motives." We may conclude by proposing that this belief itself serves a religious purpose. As Polanyi observes, the market illusion leaves the individual magically "free from all responsibility for... economic suffering in society" (2001, 266). Faith in the naturalness and inevitability of the "economic motive" absolves those who conform to it from direct responsibility for the suffering caused by their treating each other as commodities. Yet, like the primitive system of relations embedded in ritual, the modern system is geared to give people things that come from others. If it does so in such an elaborately indirect fashion, that is precisely because the modern system is embedded in the ritual of the market— a ritual founded on the religious belief in the "economic motive," the motive of gain.

"The mechanism which the motive of gain set in motion was comparable in effectiveness," Polanyi remarks, "only to the most violent outbursts of religious fervor in history" (2001, 31). And this suggests a final thought. As the cult of the market now spreads throughout the developing world, awakening desires to possess the desired possessions of others without making such possessions readily available, those who find themselves excluded from the ranks of the elect will naturally turn to more traditional forms of faith. What is the violent outburst of religious fervor afflicting so many nations today if not a backlash against the religion of the market at the very moment of its apparent planetary triumph?

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[14] For a more developed exposition of this thesis, see Anspach 2002.

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