

Diplomatic Gifts as Ordering Devices

Iver B. Neumann

Summary

This conclusion to the symposium on diplomatic gifts goes on to note two historical types of such gifts. They are, first, fostering of a royal child at another royal court and, secondly, royal and noble marriage exchanges. Using these examples as a stepping stone, I go on to formulate a coordination system of giver and receiver assessments of gift value, ranging from low to high. This yields four types of gifts. Personalised gifts (low value to giver, high value to receiver; unique gifts (high value to both parties), culturally irrelevant gifts (high value to giver, low value to receiver) and fluff (low value to both parties). I hypothesise that polities that approach one another in a situation of contacts with low density will tend to aim for unique gifts, while polities whose relations are dense will aim for gifts that are of equal value to both parties.

Keywords

diplomacy- gifts – summits – hostages - animals

Introduction¹

Since Marcel Mauss wrote his celebrated work *The Gift* almost a century ago, that book has been the touchstone for all theorising of gifts.² Mauss's argument is simple enough. Every gift instils in the receiver a feeling that a counter-gift must be given. The gift must be answered by a counter-gift, and the counter-gift must in due course be answered by a new gift. It follows that, if successfully given, there is no such thing as a one-off gift game. On the contrary, a gift received by definition opens an iterative game. Thus is created a social bond. This argument may be a simple one, but it is far-reaching in its implications, for Mauss's key point is that the bond that is created by gift exchange is nothing less than the basic glue that holds society together.

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² Mauss 1990.

As a social anthropologist, Mauss operated mainly on the level of individuals. To give but one historical example, Mauss opened his book by a quotation from *Hávamál*, our main source on how Vikings saw the world,³ as follows:

If a friend you have whom you fully will trust,
And good from him would get,
Your thoughts with his mingle, and gifts shall you make,
And fare to find him often.⁴

The main way in which Viking chiefs held on to their retinue, was to throw feasts where they participated, for the gifts of food, mead and general hospitality given there had to be paid back by military service for the chief when such was demanded. So it was in Mycenaean Greece, and so it seems to have been amongst the Proto-European-speaking tribes from which these Viking and Mycenaean practices were ultimately derived.⁵ In case that sounds outdated, let us keep in mind that Jean Baudrillard, in his major work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, argued along Maussian lines that what keeps capitalist society together is that the employed tries to reciprocate the employer's gift of wages, often at the cost of their lives.⁶

1 Gifting Humans

For diplomatic studies purposes, we note that there is no reason whatsoever not to extend Mauss's argument from the individual level to the level of polities. With reference to fellow anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's work, Mauss himself does so when he analyses gift exchange amongst the Trobriands of the South Pacific. Viking chiefs gave gifts to one another, and also to leaders outside their immediate peer-group of polities.⁷ There was no limit to the form a gift could take. For example, in the 920s, King of the Norwegians Harald Fairhair (r. 872-930) fostered his son Hakon (who went on to become King of the Norwegians, r. 934-961) to Æthelstan, King of the English (r. 927-939). The fostering was advantageous for the besieged giver, who was able to get his son out of harm's way, and it was advantageous to the receiver, who was given a gift, namely the opportunity to shape a possible future royal of an often unruly neighbouring polity (this he did to boot, by making a Christian out of young Hakon, who as king went on to play a pivotal role in Christianizing his lands). The gifting/fostering of a son by the King of the Norwegians to the King of the English succeeded in creating a very useful social bond between the two polities. The gift became no less than a social ordering device.

Fostering is a kind of gift institution with clear antecedents. The Byzantines insisted that 'barbarian' polities that were brought into their orbit should send/gift a member of the royal

³ Price 2019.

⁴ See <http://oaks.nvg.org/havamal-bellows.html>, stanza 44, accessed 20 July 2020. One contemporary Norwegian legal code (*Gulatingssloven*), formalised such transactions by stipulating that an official gift had to be reciprocated.

⁵ Indeed, gifting seems to be a transhistorical phenomenon; Diplomatic gifts are present in the archaeological material hailing from the earliest states (Van de Mierop 2017, 48). Numelin (1950) sees it as ubiquitous amongst less complex polities as well.

⁶ Baudrillard 1993.

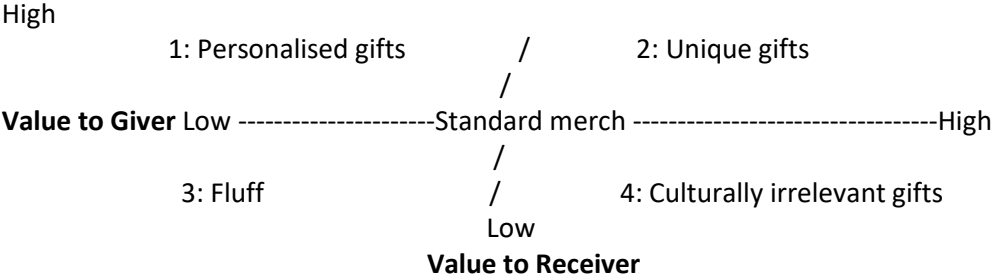
⁷ As the Norwegian state was further institutionalised, King Hakon Hakonsson (r. 1217-1263) even appointed a man for the sole task of handling gifts to the Holy Roman Emperor; Sigurdsson 2017: 65.

family to Constantinople.⁸ In this, as in so much else, the Byzantines simply perpetuated Roman practices. While this institution is, not altogether unreasonably, sometimes referred to by the contemporary term hostage diplomacy,⁹ this moniker tends to occlude some of the gift logic on display in many historical cases. As was the case for Harald when he fostered his son, barbarian leaders often had reason to tuck away offspring in the relative safety of Constantinople, and for the Byzantines as for Æthelstan, the resident royals came in handy as friendly candidates to take over the leadership of their sending polity when succession proved to be messy, as it often did. Amongst German nationalists, it is very well remembered that Arminius (Amann, Hermann) beat the Romans resoundingly at Teutoburg Forest in the year 9 of the common era. What is not equally well remembered, is that Arminius’s son and widow ended up in Italy, where the Romans kept them for a future time, when their tribe the Cherusci might prove to be amenable to receiving a Roman-backed leader. This was in keeping with Roman tradition, and was perpetuated by the Byzantines.¹⁰

Fostering was basically gendered male. The French anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss gendered gift logic in another way, by arguing that the ultimate gift was a woman given in marriage. This argument, which has been justly criticised by feminist scholars for occluding the agency of women,¹¹ has received little attention in diplomatic studies. That is a pity, for there can be little doubt that princesses and noblewomen who married other crowned and noble heads often executed diplomatic functions, for example by serving as the first port of call for embassies from their home polity.¹² Historical gendering of diplomacy remains an under-researched area in need of more attention.¹³

2 Historical Maturing

Humans of royal or noble birth are, to repeat a point, an extreme gift. This is, however, also the very reason why this diplomatic gift may serve as a good starting point for theorising gift giving in diplomacy. If we think in terms of an x-axis that gives the value of the gift to the giver and a y-axis that gives the value to the receiver, with the origin where the axes meet denoting gifts that are deemed to be of exact equal value by giver and receiver both, we could draw up a coordinate system as follows:



⁸ Chrysos 1992.
⁹ Mark 2009.
¹⁰ Neumann 2018. The theme survives in popular culture, see e.g. Hawley 2020.
¹¹ Strathern 1990.
¹² Cohen and Westbrook 2000.
¹³ So much so that the issue is not included in the state of the art overview article: Aggestam and Towns 2019; but see Sluga and James 2017.

Figure 1 Coordinate system of value of diplomatic gift to giver and receiver categorised in terms of high and low.

A word of explanation seems in order. Humans of royal or noble birth are not the only diplomatic gifts for which costs are high. Another would be elaborate pieces of technology, which are culturally relevant to the receiver, expensive to produce and expensive to maintain and repair (2). Gifts whose meaning is culturally and ritually specific to the sender and, as such things often are, costly to make, may prove of little value to a receiver that is culturally and ritually uninitiated and so lacks the context needed to appreciate the gift (4). There are cases, however, where a sender may spend relatively low resources on a gift, and yet find that the gift is valued highly, if not by the entire polity in question, then at least in terms of the immediate receiver (1). A historically recent example would be the gift presented by Bill Clinton to Nelson Mandela on his state visit to Washington: A handmade album of US boxing champion biographies, including the signature of each boxer in his own hand.¹⁴ Paul Brummell's discussion of Fidel Castro's gift-giving of cigars pinpoints the intentions of the giver:

Fidel Castro would use Cohiba cigars extensively as personalised diplomatic gifts. This had two important advantages for him. First, because the brand was so closely identified with the Cuban leader they emphasised the personal quality of the gift. Second, they served as a calling card for the Cuban cigar industry when it needed to reassert its credentials globally.¹⁵

Brummell's analysis invites further study of when this gift worked – that is, when the receiver was a cigar-lover who may keep and smoke the cigars – and when it did not. The former cases would fall in 1, while the latter would fall in 3. Boxing is nothing if not haptic. Cigar smoke is extracted by breath. Once again, the personalised gift of cigars denotes the body.¹⁶

The last possibility in the suggested coordinate system, gifts that are of low value to the giver but might prove to come at relatively high (political and/or economical) cost to the receiver and so end up as being of low value to the receiver as well, is of course rare, since it usually involves a bit of spite on the part of the giver, but examples of such presents do exist (3). A historically recent example would be Libya when run by Colonel Muḥammad Gaddafi (r. 1969-2011), whose standard gift to visiting heads of state was a camel.¹⁷ Camels are hard to transport, they do not thrive when too far from the equator, their practical uses are severely limited outside their natural desert habitat, and in a number of cultural contexts it would be politically unwise to sport ownership of one. In the context of state visits, camels make for pretty fluffy gifts.

On the strength of the coordinate system presented in figure 1, I would suggest two hypotheses. My first hypothesis is that, in historical situations where polities are not well acquainted, giving polities who aim to firm relations will aim for gifts that are of high value both to themselves and to the receiving polity. The gift in question would be a costly signal of

¹⁴ French 2010.

¹⁵ Brummell 2021.

¹⁶ For An overarching discussion of how embodiment is performed in diplomacy, see Neumann 2020.

¹⁷ Leira and Neumann 2017. While animals are now often unwieldy gifts, this is by no means an inherent property. For example, as assumed by Kustemans above, when two horse-based cultures gift that animal, such a gift horse would be an immediately usable item.

good intentions. The reason is that the reciprocation of such a gift will be expected to be high as well. By Maussian lights, the exchange of high-value gifts will make for strengthened social ties overall. If the exchange of gifts is one of the few institutions to order the overall relationship, this will be of key value. Work on royal gifts-giving in early modern Europe could be read in this way, for rulers in a gestating states system tried to impress and express esteem by directing their prestations 'in a North-Easterly direction', as a quantitative scholar might put it (meaning that gifts end up in 2).¹⁸ The ten-meter long, 280-kilo heavy depiction of the Chinese Wall gifted to the United Nations in 1974 to mark that state's arrival and continued presence on this central world stage would make for another example.

My second hypothesis is that, in historical situations where polities are fairly well acquainted, which in contemporary conditions would go for all states, giving polities will aim for gifts that are seen as being of equal value by themselves and the receiving polity both. In terms of the coordinate system on display here, they will go for the origin, that is, the place where the x-axis and the y-axis meet. The reason is that the reciprocation of gifts has already been well established. By Maussian lights, the exchange of such balanced gifts will make for maintenance of the relationship. If the exchange of gifts is only one of a number of the institutions on which the overall relationship rests, then this will be an adequate and sufficient way of making gifts. Note, however, that there is a threshold below which the value of the prestation cannot fall if it is supposed to count as a gift. The President of the United States, Barack Obama, may have come dangerously near this threshold in 2009, when he gifted the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown 25 American DVDs.¹⁹

3 Further Vistas

Gift-giving remains one of diplomacy's constitutive practices.²⁰ It was Poincaré who first compared our knowledge to a ball. When a ball expands, so does its surface area. Poincaré's point was to highlight how any increase in the volume of knowledge will also increase our awareness of what we do not know, of what lies outside our knowledge. So it is in this case. I have already noted how the gender of the gift needs more attention. We need to know more about the use of, and particularly the appropriation of, gifts in general.²¹ We need to know whether there are examples of using diplomatic gift giving to restore flagging relations.

Finally, and this was a key point to Mauss, we need qualitative and also quantitative studies of the delay of reciprocity in gift-giving between polities. One hypothesis here may be that the closer two polities are, the more deferred is the return of gifts. At this stage, the reader may ask if relations between states may not deepen to a point where gift-giving becomes superfluous. If the gifts grow smaller and smaller, and the time intervals between them grow ever longer, then this, it may be argued, would be the logical outcome. While it is certainly true that gifts as ordering devices lose some of their force as other ordering devices grow in importance, I think it is a mistake to argue that they will ever fall away. Empirically, this is not happening between other polities that have extended contact, say families who

¹⁸ Auwers 2013.

¹⁹ See Haugevik 2018, chapter 6; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/03/06/gordon-brown-went-to-the-white-house-and-all-he-got-were-some-lousy-dvds/>, accessed 9 November 2020.

²⁰ See, particularly, Faizullaev 2013; Heins et al. 2018; Kustermans 2019.

²¹ Constantinou 2020 is exemplary in this respect.

have inter-married for centuries or firms that have daily dealings but still exchange gifts on a regular basis. Logically, if Mauss is right that gifts institute the originary social bond and are a total social fact, then some remnant will by definition always stay in evidence, otherwise the social fact would not be total, in the sense of being trans-historical and trans-cultural. For these reasons, gift-giving remains, and will continue to remain, an ordering device that contributes to the stabilisation of inter-polity relations.

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