FORMS AND NORMS: THE ECONOMY OF
SOCIAL RELATIONS*

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'If you are right, there is no point in any friendship; it all comes down
to give and take, or give and return, which is disgusting, and we had
better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves.'

'Friendship, however, was not a changeless phenomenon, but subject
to the mysterious vicissitudes of the stockmarket: when a friend was in a
state of mounting prestige, he "rose" like a share, and when he seemed
increasingly tiresome, he slumped.'

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With this rubric I entitle myself to discuss the view that social forms are the
emergent properties of choices, decisions, exchanges and transactions. A current of
thought, deriving from Malinowski, leads those swept up and along by it to assert
that the social reality is a negotiated settlement, a network of ego-centred mani-
pulating individuals. Social structure is not the relations between groups of
persons within a system of groups' (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 262)—a social structure
is a bargain.

To say that this current stems from Malinowski means that he was the first to
incorporate notions of human social creativity into the general set of ideas which
identify British social anthropology. It is his reaction to the view that "group
sentiment" or "collective responsibility" is the only or even the main force which
ensures adhesion to custom' (1926: 55) that started the emphasis on choice, inventive-
ness, exchange, which has permeated much of our work and has in some cases
come to dominate it. The principle of give and take pervades tribal life; reciprocity
is the basis of social order; people do not conform to custom out of "slavish
fascinated passive obedience" (1926: 4), but as a result of more complex motives:
indeed, of calculated self-interest, operating in a sphere of moral obligation in
which misdeeds may be penalised but not punished: for unpopular people merely
suffer a loss (1926: 58). The first ethnographic chapter of Crime and custom is called
'The binding force of economic obligations'; and Malinowski's discussion of
reciprocity, of give and take, is always firmly grounded in observation of material
exchange. When he says 'we constantly meet with this give and take' he is not
talking in a figurative sense, for he goes on: 'Even a walk across the island ... would reveal to an open-eyed Ethnographer this economic truth. He would see
visiting parties ... men with loads on their shoulders carrying gifts from one village
to another' (1922: 173-4). And when Malinowski extends the area of application of

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reciprocity from the materially economic to other cultural imperatives—political and legal, sexual, ritual—he does not lapse into the figurative, the metaphorical or the as if (Friedman 1953: 19–23; cf. Samuelson 1966; Koopmans 1957: 135–42): in Malinowski the principle of give and take is not a way of talking about the ineffable complexities of Trobriand social life; it is real, you can see it; and his almost Johnsonian earthiness is turned, not to refute a Berkeley, but more creatively to construct a theory of social order based on choice, self-interest, calculation and exchange (cf. Parsons 1957).

It would be an act of dubious piety to try to suggest that those varied as-ifers which are lumped together under the general rubric of exchange theory and transactionism all derive from Malinowski's vehement repudiation of group solidarity and sentiment: it is valuable, though, to point out that the crucial nexus of calculation, choice and exchange was already created by him, and matched against crude perhaps even caricatured accounts of 'structure', in 1926.

The intellectual history of exchange theory has not yet been written, and I do not propose to attempt it here. But it would undoubtedly trace the clear watershed between those who employ that Malinowskian nexus to account for changes within a structure, and those who, drawing eclectically on a wider range of ethnography and theories, regard structure as an emergent property of exchanges and are thus led to suggest that all or most social life can be seen as if it were a series of exchanges. Another theme which would undoubtedly occupy a large part of such a history is the way that as the attributed scope of exchange has become all-embracing, the principles on which decisions and exchanges are said to be made have been narrowed until we are left with only one: that is, that men maximise rewards less costs.¹ So, in Firth the tentatively advanced 'concept of efficiency' (1951: 36) later becomes 'the principle of economy of effort' which, applied to 'resources [not] conventionally recognised by the economist as wealth', is one of the guiding attitudes displayed by people engaged in innovation (1964: 80–1). In Barth, people aim to 'assure that the value gained for them is greater [than] or equal to the value lost' (1966: 4). He says that not all behaviour is transactional: 'altruism is a kind of fundamental negation of the transactional relationship': but it is transaction which is the strategic move in the generative model of social process. To leave Barth and to consider Bailey is to discover the transformation complete: talk in terms of expenditure of resources does not deny the fact of altruism, but 'there are advantages in translating even moral interactions into the language of resources' (1969: 36–7). On what principle do people allocate resources, suffer costs, seek rewards? The answer is that they work on a market-rational principle: 'Business is business' says Bailey, to explain the behaviour of a Swat Pathan leader (1969: 40, cf. 52). The distinction between a multiplex relationship and a transactional single-interest one is in terms of credit and of duration (1969: 48–9)—each has its costs and its rewards. Economic analogies are appropriate for studying a band of hirings, and 'do not miss the mark entirely' when applied to moral groups (1969: 43).

There is, even in Bailey, an uncertainty about the status of the economic analogy, or metaphor. At times he disclaims the intention to deny altruism; at others, business is business. The analogy applies more to some things, less to others; and we are clearly to take the language of games and markets, umpires and bankers, which
dominates the first six chapters, more seriously than the language of gardening, which appears in the seventh. Professor Bailey 'feels uneasy' with theories which do not give 'man a central role as entrepreneur' (1969: 10, 8). In opposition to structural man we are invited to see entrepreneurial man—manipulating claims, creating liabilities, reneging on his obligations, reinterpreting his rights. The main emphasis is not on rule-governed behaviour, nor even on rule-constrained choice, but on rational exploitation of rules: on self-interested behaviour within a changing, fluid framework of relations; and the sociological product is a set of principles of manoeuvre which hold good in any culture and any context (1969: back cover). Such structure as there may be is a product of entrepreneurial activity: the value of transactional analysis, says Barth, is among other things that 'we can explain how a variety of social forms are generated from a much simpler set and distribution of basic values' (1966: 5).

The Malinowskian nexus of calculation, choice and exchange has been transmuted from an explanation of system-stability (and of deviance) into an explanatory principle for change, and thence into an explanatory principle for the generation of norms and social forms themselves. But where Malinowski listed seven main types of exchange, and a wide variety of sub-types, 'according to economic principles' (1922: 177–91) there is now only one: market rational exchange.

There are fundamental, not to say fundamentalist, objections to exchange theory. The speech of Dr Aziz, the first epigraph to this paper, exemplifies a deep moral and instinctive reaction to the as-if: exchange theory debases human nature, denigrates the success of human endeavour, and denies the possibility of disinterested. Some critics urge the failure of the theories to cope with power: it is not sensible to speak of exchange, transaction, choice, decision, when a Person is confronted by an Other who is a highwayman, or a group of landlords acting in concert (Asad 1972). The most superficial observation of university government arouses the suspicion that its art consists of delaying decisions until options are narrowed; and the suspicion is not allayed by the number of pleas for tolerance, understanding which include the formula 'We had no choice but to act as we did'. In sociology, where concern with theory is more a specialism than it is in anthropology, a body of writings criticises transactionism not by reference to the facts it should account for, but in terms of its lack of qualities desirable in a theory (e.g. Mulkay 1971). And in some ways similar, because conceived at an equally high level of abstraction, are the criticisms which suggest that sociologists are not sufficiently expert at economics. Both Homans and Blau have been sabotaged in this way (Boulding & Davis 1962; Blau 1964a: 168n1; Heath 1968; 1972), while Parsons's writings on power and influence as banking have enabled one relatively friendly critic to remark that 'Parsons' banks are still on the gold standard' (Parsons 1963a; b; Coleman 1963).

More common is the charge of tautology: Men do what they value. I can observe what they do—but how do I know what they value?—By observing what they do. The steps which Homans (1961: 41–3) and Blau (1964a: 6) have taken to anticipate this criticism did not always disarm it (Firth 1965: 10; Abramson 1970; Heath 1968; 1972). Because the procedure is tautologous it is irrefutable, and therefore wrong. I believe this argument to be correct; but it is so fashionable to refute an argument by saying it is irrefutable that the virus of nonsense seems to have developed an immunity. Moreover it is possible that the pleasure we take in
ethereally simple arguments has caused us to overlook more concrete ones which lie closer to hand, under our noses. For example, once we are told that people pursue profit we have then to be told that sometimes people pursue it indirectly: sometimes they pursue prestige or esteem which enables them to pursue profit more securely in the future. So, Leach assumes that people will choose that course of action among others which gives them most power; but when they do not, they are acting to gain power in the future (1954: 10). ‘Why do men risk life, limb and fortune to meet a challenge?’ asks Blau: it might be because they gain approval, and thus make themselves more attractive exchange partners (1964a: 42–3). Similarly, we give tips to waiters to impress our friends; we sacrifice our desires to appear noble, and expect rewards in heaven for our asceticism here on earth. Certainly such an account strikes a chord of recognition: my action was not truly noble because I had an eye to the audience; but if I simultaneously recognise my own duplicity, I am not as other men are—but if I can even think such a thing as that, then I am lost! The dreadful antiphony of regressive self-examination is familiar to us. And yet: is it so certain that the world is so ambivalent? Certainly, for some, success in business was a sure sign of god’s favour (Weber 1930); we know that a man who squanders his substance in charity is not wholly estimable; a man who fails in commerce is not saintly by that alone—and the honestly successful businessman is a cynosure. The person who invariably sacrifices his desires may cause people to reflect not upon his nobility, but on the true nature of his passion. It is curious that an absolute division between morality and prestige on the one hand, and self-interest on the other, should have so perpetuated itself in social theory: that what a sensible man brushes away as an adolescent circularity when he is tempted to examine his inner life should be entrenched as the saving grace of a sociological tautology. Men give esteem, prestige, to people who pursue profit appropriately and successfully as well as to those who turn away from advantage when the proper occasions arise. The case is plain: whether they pursue or deny their advantage, people are liable to approval and may find it inescapable. Esteem and profit are not alternative goals: there is no division of the one from the other and therefore it cannot be said that a man who claims he is denying profit, and who is generally agreed to be doing so, is pursuing prestige instead. For while prestige discriminates success from failure and honesty from dishonesty it does not discriminate between the rational and the altruistic.

Not all exchange theories are tautologous: Homans, for example, does seem to establish independent criteria for value and for behaviour (1961: 39–49); and it may be that Firth’s proposal for a careful specification of values will permit economic anthropologists to produce those necessary modifications to the science of economising which will make it truly universal. But Burling’s (1962) suggestion that all economising can be accounted for by the market principle together with a detailed study of what it is that people variously value—cakes or ale, prayer or good-fellowship—scarcely seems to mitigate the vice of tautology endemic in exchange theory. In this context talk about the embeddedness of the economic in the social merely produces an irrelevant mystery, concealing from scrutiny the fact that all behaviour is said to involve economising—social, political, religious, sexual. Barth and Blau do not take such a comprehensive view of exchange as Bailey or Burling, for they exclude some kinds of social behaviour. So, Barth
directs our attention to exchanges and choices which are in fact based on a profit-
maximising principle: he does not deny the existence of altruism, but its import-
ance. Blau suggests that some exchanges are not the pure type of social exchange, and the impure types play a secondary part in his main analysis. Blau indeed
insists that there are crucial substantive differences between even the pure type of
social exchange and what he is pleased to call 'strictly economic exchange as such'.
But he qualifies every diacritic he lists, and the substance of his distinctions is
invariably vitiated by contradiction and obscurity. 2

The wit and good humour so notable in Blau and Bailey is achieved by immediate
abstraction: by the assumption that the principles on which the exchanges they
consider are made, are the same ones which guide and inform a professor's wife in a
supermarket. Similarly, the force and power of Barth comes from his selection of a
single type of exchange as the motive force: there is such a firm sense of direction,
the analysis does not fail to be mind-capturing. And yet, such single-mindedness is
purchased at the cost of context: an anthropologist is likely to be uneasy at the way
in which other sorts of exchange are relegated to environment. We have a tradition
of examining social phenomena with the intention of seeing whether they can be
related to each other or not. So, for example, we might ask Barth what the
relation is between transactions and other sorts of exchange: do the other sorts
have no consequences—are they, like altruistic exchanges, 'negations' of rational
transaction, and therefore part of mere environment? Blau says that the impure
forms of social exchange are derived from the pure type: but does the pure type
alone have emergent properties of a structural kind? How curious that social
structures should be created and changed by one kind of exchange among so many.
If we ask Barth to examine the different forms of exchange first in relation to each
other, before putting only one of them in direct relation with emergent forms of
social organisation, we might as well ask Bailey and Homans to pay attention to the
meanings with which people invest their actions. The way to proceed towards a
general theory of social behaviour which holds good 'in any culture and any con-
text' is not that of immediate abstraction, from behaviour to remote as-if principle,
but rather by a slow process of refinement, of producing ever more general
generalisations, and beginning at levels close to the observed behaviour and
meanings of the actors. To use highly sophisticated and rarefied systems of analysis,
borrowed from other disciplines as a kind of metaphor, and to superimpose them
on more or less raw data, is to produce accounts of behaviour which never have
any middle range of generalisation and comparison. To see the everyday inanities
of love analysed with the aid of Paretan optima and indifference curves may cause
anger or amusement: but when we observe abstract principle apparently about to
violate the concretely mundane, the least we can do is to interpose ourselves
mentally between them.

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How can this be done? Clearly lists of things valued—a universal variorum of
values—is not very helpful: to know that some peoples prize some things and others
others is interesting and may give us a salutary awareness of the arbitrariness of our
own values. But it is not the basis for a constructive analysis of how people
economise. When we ask the question, what do people maximise? there are in
fact two sorts of answer. We can say they maximise the more beautiful Kula objects, motorcars which make a lot of noise and go very fast— we can produce a list of objects, of substantives. Quite often we are tempted to summarise the list and to say that they maximise rewards or, more precisely, profits. But obviously this is mistaken for a profit is not substantive object: it is, rather, a relation between rewards and costs: it is the difference between them, and a rational person is one who strives to maximise profits. It is one of the contributions which anthropologists can make to economics, to point out that profit is not the only possible relation between things, and that there are actually existing cases where people maximise relations other than profit.

The literature is not totally devoid of such descriptions. Lionel Caplan (1972) has meticulously detailed the ways in which the appropriate means of payment varies with definition of a transaction as a market one or a traditional one. Maurice Bloch (forthcoming) has distinguished different prudential norms governing the exchange of labour among true and false kinsmen in Madagascar. Cancian has insisted that there is a normative difference between Christmas gift-giving and simple purchasing (1966). Gouldner (1960), in a theoretical article, remembers the distinction between reciprocity (where each party has a claim on the other) and complementarity (where one party’s right is complemented by another’s duty). In social psychology the practice of discrimination between kinds of exchange is perhaps more highly developed than it has been in anthropology since Malinowski. To cite only one study, Muir and Weinstein (1962), using a battery of hypothesis-testing questions, found that while Kentucky women of both high and low class recognised social obligations to reciprocate favours, lower class women were more likely than the others to continue to grant social credit when their favours were not reciprocated: ‘one gives when able, expecting others to do the same’, they said; and their exchanges were more family-centred. The authors call this a form of modified altruism. ‘By contrast, the middle-class pattern more closely paralleled the financial transaction . . . These respondents . . . consciously used an economic model, with business-like (?) businesslike) norms, in their sociable interaction’ (1962: 538).

These are sufficiently varied contributions at different levels of generality to stimulate interest in codifying and classifying them: the procedure I wish to follow owes a great deal to Meeker (1971). He proposes a scheme for the analysis of decision making and exchange at an intermediate, normative, level, and bases it on the observation that people may value any of the possible relations between costs and rewards. For example, Cancian (1966: 468) observed that ‘in the exchange of Christmas gifts . . . it is appropriate to maximise equality of exchange’. So, the rule of reciprocal exchange is one which states the desirable relation between benefits mutually conferred: they should be equal, matched without regard to cost. Christmas presents, as in Cancian’s example, are rather an odd case, because the obligation is to match benefits simultaneously, by ingenious pre-estimation. It is therefore slightly misleading to use them as examples, for anthropologists tend to see the slow difficult gradual approach to a matching of benefits, with its attendant intervals of unbalance and trust, as a primary characteristic of reciprocity. In agonistic exchanges such as the potlatch or the Trobriand hiriiti aulo the rule again states the desirable relation between benefits mutually conferred: a man should
maximise the difference between them, provided he is in the ascendant. In altruistic exchanges, the rule is that a person should maximise his partners' reward. All these exchanges are defined in terms of the relation between benefits mutually conferred by the parties to them. They are all reciprocal, in Gouldner's broad sense, because they involve both rights and duties on each or any side.

Market exchanges in a commercial system require the notion of cost: the rule is to maximise rewards less costs, and the exchange rule is defined in terms of the relation between income and outlay. Competition within a series of market or reciprocal exchanges is more complex: it is distinct from agonistic exchange because the person competed with is not a party to the exchange: you exchange with third parties and not with your competitor; but what you maximise is the difference between your rewards and his, provided you are in the ascendant.

Complementary exchanges require us to introduce the notion of status: the benefit conferred should be consonant with the relationship of the parties to the exchange. The type or quality of the benefit is often conventionally defined, as it is with fathers and sons, husbands and wives (Malinowski 1922: 177-80; 1926: 41 n.; Mauss 1954: 70-1). But in some cases it is not: for example, patrons and clients may exchange indeterminate benefits. It might be that the rule is one which states the importance of maximising equality of relative costs: the relative cost to the patron of the benefit he confers on the client, should equal the relative cost to the client of the benefit he confers on the patron. Or the rule might bring patron-client relations within the area of reciprocal exchanges: it is quite likely that in some actually existing cases this would be possible.

The situation is clearly complex: it is also empirical. The formulation of rules which describe what people ought to maximise in terms of the relation between benefits, costs, status is a matter of research, of fieldwork; it is a matter of institutions and norms, and is not a language for talking about things, it is not as if: it is, of course, fraught with the same difficulties as any investigation and description of norms; but these are familiarly intractable, and anthropologists have considerable expertise to cope with them. So, while statements about which rules are applied as generalised and abstracted as any statements about institutions in human societies, they are not abstracted from the meanings which people give to their actions.

The question now arises, what sort of higher level generalisation encompasses and embraces all these maximising activities? The wrong way to establish the higher abstractions is to assimilate all the lower generalisations to one of their number. To take a well-worn example, we all know that when we marry our housekeepers gross national product falls, because their labour is no longer paid for, and is therefore not entered in the national accounts. Researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research have turned this upside down and have calculated the value of housewives' domestic labour in the United States by assessing what it would cost American husbands to buy those services (Kendrick 1967; Ruggles & Ruggles 1970: 38-42). The sum comes out at about $144 billion p.a. and, added to the national accounts for 1965 together with imputed values of other non-commodities, raises the G.N.P. by 50 per cent. The conclusion to be drawn is precisely that, and no more: if every American divorced his wife and employed her as his housekeeper, then GNP would rise by a quantum. The fact that it is possible to
put a cash value on some conjugal services does not signify that they are transacted in that way: it is one thing to claim that every good can be given a cash value: that is not beyond ingenuity, nor even empty of mildly polemical interest. It is quite another to say that imputation of cash values into national accounts is the purpose of economic anthropology. Anthropologists must be concerned with the ways in which varied understandings and meanings, intentions and sanctions combine and intersect. So, three sorts of inquiry suggest themselves. The first is into the classificatory systems of groups and communities: what are the rules of exchange which people follow? What goods and services are transacted by each of them, in what circumstances? What penalties meet a confusion of category? This is not simply a matter of identifying spheres of exchange, for these are not necessarily coincident with rules of exchange: in Britain most though not all consumer-goods may be both bought and given; blood may only be altruistically donated, and social approval ought never to be bargained for. The study of the classificatory system demands a description of the pattern established by the allocation of goods and services and relationships to particular rules. The second sort of inquiry is suggested by Meeker and it concerns what happens in states of uncertainty: in some conditions people will be uncertain which rule of exchange applies to their particular case; or they will be uncertain that sanctions can be brought to bear against a party who ignores the appropriate rule. Meeker argues that in these circumstances people will tend to minimise costs, and that therefore they will tend to adopt a market, commercial, rule of exchange: there will be a drift towards rationality, simply in self-protection. It is of course possible that in other societies people will adopt other strategies: where the danger is not that a man will be left destitute, but rather that he will appear superior, people might sensibly choose to minimise differences, and so adopt a rule of reciprocity or altruism in conditions of uncertainty: in short, there are societies in which a man can protect himself better by giving things away than by minimising costs. Such relations between rules are the outcome both of formal properties of exchange rules, which can be described using game-theory matrices, and also of general principles of social organisation and of social control of economic behaviour.

The third sort of inquiry is the investigation of the empirical consequences of the co-existence of different rules: where different sorts of rule exist it is likely that they will mutually affect each other. Industrial societies exhibit two features which make them particularly suitable for preliminary investigations of this relation. On the one hand industrial societies are characterised by the existence of statistical and other records of a high quality. On the other, they have institutions which do not exist at all, or which exist in a rudimentary form, in primitive societies. So, the existence of a full range of developed institutional forms permits the study of the effects of one sort of exchange rule upon another, more easily than in societies where there is a more limited range and where good figures do not exist. Some of the more violent polemics in economic anthropology, and some of the sillier remarks about exchange (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1969: 36), could have been avoided if attention had been turned to industrial societies. For the unqualified anthropological classification of Britain as a market economy is only possible if we ignore exchanges and productive activities concerned with non-commodities.

There is one point to add. The statistical information available is market in-
formation; information of the same quality about reciprocal exchanges, about complementary transactions and so on simply does not exist. The consequence of this is that we are restricted to observing the effects of non-commodity exchanges on the market: to studying the shadows cast on the market by other activities which cannot be directly observed. Thus, although everyone knows from experience that he is involved in gift-giving at Christmas and on birthdays, very little is known about the nature of the gift economy as a whole. In default of such knowledge the procedure is to calculate the value of goods bought as commodities but subsequently involved in further gift-exchanges. And then to identify those parts of British industry which supply the goods, and to work out what the consequences are for the manufacturers. The result tells us little about the economics of reciprocity—it is a statement about the behaviour of manufacturers only. We learn little about the ethnography of gift-giving but we are able to establish a truth which may remain impressionistic when asserted of primitive societies: that reciprocity is not just a dressed-up elaboration of profiteering. The reason we can show this is that in our sort of society reciprocity exists in the context of commercial exchange, and therefore of market information and records (Davis 1972).

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Forays into the records of industrial societies can illustrate points which are elusive when made about societies without detailed statistics of economic performance. The procedure is to find parts of the market economy which are likely to be affected by social relationships: not firms which supply goods to other firms, but the manufacturers of consumer goods. Among these we should further select goods which are sold for specific social purposes—as gifts are; or are sold by the less impersonal means: not the supermarket, but the marketplace (Medland 1972). It is where two or more rules of exchange meet that the consequences of non-market exchange can be most readily measured in the performance of the market. One such meeting point is the fairly recent phenomenon called party selling. Party selling is a combination of sociability and marketing which allows us to assess, very roughly, the increment of sales got by gearing one form of exchange with another. Some manufacturers of underwear, children’s clothes, cosmetics, costume jewellery, and patent plastic containers sell their goods only at parties. The junior members of their sale organisation are agents, demonstrators and party-organisers whose job is first of all to persuade people (‘hostesses’) to give a party and to invite to it their kin, friends and neighbours, fellow-members of local associations and so on.* In at least one firm the hostesses are supplied with printed invitations which say that a selling party is to be held, giving the day and time and place. The hostess’s task is to invite as many people as possible, and to provide them with light refreshment. The agent arrives early at the hostess’s house, sets out her display goods, and helps the hostess to choose the gift she will receive at the end of the party: this is usually chosen from a catalogue of special goods—not those produced by the manufacturers of the goods on sale. Its value varies with the value of the sales and with the number of people who have agreed to give parties in the future; so that when she chooses it at the beginning of the party the hostess in effect sets a target for the sales, and the agent is able to mention
the target in some such way as: 'Ann has chosen a big gift today, so we both hope that you'll all see her right and place lots of orders and give lots of parties'. The party is thus not only a sales point, but an occasion on which future sales are arranged, and one on which the firm recruits new agents. At the end of the party the agent announces the delivery date for the goods ordered; the customers are told to bring their money to the hostess before that date, and to collect the goods after it.

It may be of interest to mention the agents briefly, though they are not the focus of interest for present purposes. The first thing to notice is that they are nearly all women; and then, that there are about 50,000 of them at any given time. Most are married, and it is said most are defined by their husband's occupation as belonging to the C1 and C2 categories. Most of them, again, are working to achieve a target income. The Tupperware recruiting brochure, for example, depicts a housewife with two children thinking to herself:

Of course my husband earns a good living, but I can always think of some extra things I need for myself and my family . . . a food mixer . . . or a T.V. set . . . or a washing machine . . . or extra furniture . . . or a car . . . or a new home . . . or extra tuition for one of the children (Tupperware 1969)

It follows from this that the turnover of agents is fairly high. Exact figures are not known, but for one firm engaged in door-to-door sales it is thought to be about 80 per cent. a year, on a sales force of 60,000 (Retail Business, 154, Dec. 1970, 24). At this level of the hierarchy the agent's commission is 33 per cent. from which she has to meet the expenses of travel, of prizes distributed after the games, and of any other small items given to children or guests at the party. She works part-time and, by attending three or so parties a week, may earn between £15 and £25. Some agents are recruited to be managers: in addition to attending their own parties they are responsible for delivering goods to the agents in their control and for collecting money from them. They receive a commission of 36 per cent. on their own sales, and of 3 per cent. of their agents' sales. An ordinarily successful manager earns up to about £3,000 a year: a highly successful one up to £7–8,000. In order to reach this level of earning, however, the manager must work virtually full-time and is usually helped by her husband. Some managers are appointed distributors: they are responsible for maintaining local stocks of the goods—in premises which they must rent themselves—for all book-keeping, for supplying managers with goods, for recruiting managers, and for holding weekly parties for all managers and agents at which selling programmes are announced, and at which agents and managers who have reached particular levels of sales are rewarded with prizes. Distributors in the larger companies are said to earn between £10–15,000 a year in commission from which they meet various expenses. The encouragement of sales is mainly achieved within the organisation: it is customary for the firm to provide prizes for people who, at both levels of the selling hierarchy, have achieved particular targets of sales in periods of weeks during the year; an agent in her first year has a lower target than one in her second year, and so on. The prizes are at first small—a medallion, a statuette in plastic or metal; a brief-case for carrying order forms and printed ephemera—and there are many of them: at one meeting, of the fifty or so people present, twenty-nine received prizes. They were called out before the assembly, presented with their prize, and applauded by
the others. They are called up in order of increasing importance: the prizes are small in value to begin with, but they increase in value as they decrease in number. In particular, managers whose agents become managers suffer a loss of commission both on the sales of the promoted agent and on those of the agents who may be hived-off with her. Just as hostesses are rewarded on the basis of sales and of parties arranged for future dates, so managers are rewarded for the number of their agents who become managers. They may receive motor-cars, caravans, television sets, holidays abroad, visits to receptions held by the chairman of the company, and so on. Agents are recruited to earn extra income in their spare time: the passage quoted above continues: ‘(I can think of many ways of earning extra money . . .). So, one day I decided to do something about it. Not work, in the usual sense. I didn’t have time—I didn’t feel like it, and my husband would never have agreed. I knew, he would not refuse me an opportunity of contributing to the family’s income. So I joined Tupperware’ (Tupperware? 1969). But at the managerial level of success, a woman whose husband is in the C1–C2 category is likely to be earning more than he, and contributing more to the family’s consumption-derived prestige than he does. Moreover, she cannot achieve so much unless he helps—with the distribution of goods to the agents and with the accounts. This is formalised at the distributor level, where the husband and wife are appointed together, and they manage a semi-independent family business. In some cases the apparent reversal of conventional conjugal roles has caused strain, but I am told that in families where the husband is C1–C2, and the wife is capable of being a successful manager, she is likely to be the dominant spouse in any case. While the atmosphere at the gatherings of agents, managers and distributors is a mixture of competitiveness, commercialism and companionship, it is not carried over to the parties themselves.

The agents make it clear that there is no obligation to buy things: the guests have not made any contract with the company by accepting the hostess’s invitation. They are there to have a good time, and to place orders if they want to. They play games to produce the party-mood: one handbook for agents (Tupperware, n.d. (a) see also n.d. (b)) suggests that ten minutes should be passed in this way. For example, at a party where the theme of the demonstration was to be the utensils needed to make cakes, the guests competed to write down as many names of cakes as they could. ‘Make sure the guests know what the prizes are’, says the Handbook, ‘and how to use them and let every guest win a prize.’ The emphasis is on ordinary concerns: making cakes, storing food so that you can see at a glance how much of it there is, storing food so that children cannot reach it. Many of the products have multiple uses, and these are demonstrated one after another: there are mixing bowls which can be used to store the ingredients for a cake, can be converted to a turntable for decorating the cake without walking round it, and can then be used to display the cake and to serve it. There are necklaces which can be converted to bangles, earrings to brooches, and so on. The ingenuity of the product, the multiple ways in which it can be used, is important; and all the goods sold at parties are ones which can be demonstrated, tried on, tried out, are ingenious or in some way personal. Thus the agent has something to say; by pointing out the various uses, she is able to point to undreamt-of needs—how convenient it would be, to be able to decorate a cake without having to walk round the table;—how
useful to have an ornament which can be attached to more than one part of the body. Anthropologists will not consider this merely trivial: they spend a considerable part of their time in fieldwork observing, even learning, the technology of everyday life, and know what aesthetic pleasure can be derived. It should not be surprising that we too have our techniques, and that for some tens of millions of women in our society they are an important if not obsessive concern.

What is there about a party which makes it peculiarly apt for these companies? Parties are, first of all, episodes in the ebb and flow of obligation and trust between acquaintances, friends, kin. They are concentrated, condensed nodes of sociability. Nobody knows in a rigorous way what the form of these relations is because no research has been done; but there is bound to be some variation: some people will be preoccupied with reciprocation; others with having the best time they can at another's expense; still others with doing their duty by the guests or the host: varieties of exchange are concentrated at the party. Secondly, parties are artificial: they are ends in themselves, abstracted from the normal utilities of garden-fence exchange. To use Simmel's language (1950: 40–57) they are a play-form of association in which content, purpose, function are concealed. The phrase 'to give a reception' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 57) not only embodies Maussian reciprocity; it also expresses the particular involution of the event, existing at least on the surface for its own sake, shorn of all the utilities which usually are held to justify getting together. And the party-mood, the playfulness of artificiality, is created by another social abstraction—party-games so far removed from the realities of competition that everyone wins prizes. The sales point is thus both a high point in neighbour-hood exchange, and a lyric episode of artificiality. The house is cleaned, the children scrubbed and excited; the guests eat refreshments and play games: and then they buy. I want to suggest that party-giving is a delicate activity requiring considerable skills to maintain the right level of artifice: it is easy to make mistakes, to attract condemnation for pretentiousness, resentment at the too-palpable imposition. Many of the women who go to selling-parties—and they are just more than half of all housewives—live on municipal housing estates, and have young children; occasions for formal sociability among women are not part of the culture; the skills required may not be widely diffused. Parties are commonest in those areas where there are few opportunities for women to work (Mintel, June 1972, 4–13): with young children, without jobs, without the middle-class traditions of coffee-mornings, local history groups and political clubs, they are isolated in their houses. I have been told that the companies frequently receive letters in which the writer says she has moved to a new neighbourhood or a new town, and knows no-one: could the agent please call? The conclusions I wish to suggest are, first, that selling-parties increase sociable exchanges of hospitality in neighbourhoods; and secondly, one reason for that is that they are ambiguous: parties are desirable but also dangerous; it is possible to make mistakes; they are difficult to arrange—and it is said that for many hostesses, these are their first parties—it is easy to attract criticism. The danger of setting oneself up to be a party-giver is diminished by having an agent to organise it, for she is deemed to have the right social skills. Also, of course, the ambiguity of dangerous fun is matched by the ambiguity of the selling-party: the claim to regard as a giver of hospitality is muffled, set in a minor key, because it is always possible to say that it is not a party at all, but a market-place. In this
way, tentative and unaccustomed approaches to sociability are masked, shielded, insulated; and the overall level of sociable exchange is increased. A new form is introduced—parties for women alone; and as a result of the parties the range of ordinary purposive friendly exchanges is extended to include new individuals.

What is there to say about the market side of the encounter? Sales figures for this kind of selling are not published separately from other sales, and estimates vary between £2.25m. (Marketing, Aug. 1971, 19) and £2.5m. (Mintel, June 1972, 8). These figures are remarkable and unreliable. But the figures for growth of sales are more consistent and worthy of belief: Tupperware has been growing at about 15 per cent. per annum; Claire James at about 18 per cent., and figures within this range have been published for other firms. A compound growth of 15 per cent. signifies that sales double every five years; at 18 per cent., they double in just over four years. National retail sales grow at just under 6 per cent., a rate at which they take twelve years to double. Party sales thus appear to grow 9–12 per cent. faster than ordinary retail sales. It would be convenient if we could now simply claim that this increment of growth was due to the parties: that this 9–12 per cent. is the not-so-pale reflection in the market of the social exchanges of various kinds which occur in the lounge. But some part of the increment must be accounted for in terms of market advantage. For example, the manufacturer selling in this way has more perfect information about stocks and about demand than one who distributes through wholesalers and retailers. The sales staff, too, are specialists in his goods, in a way in which retail shop-assistants are not. There is a very obvious imperfection which also works in his favour, and that is that at point-of-sale the purchaser is confronted with only one sort of goods, and only one brand of them—a natural enough restriction in the circumstances, but one which limits the choice of the customer. It is not possible to put a value on these imperfections eliminated and created; so that allocation of the increment between them and the consequences of sociability must remain a matter of judgement, and more or less arbitrary. Nevertheless, it is in my opinion utterly reasonable to attribute some part of that exceptional growth-rate to the gearing of commercial and social exchange systems. I intend this to be understood not as a language for talking about phenomena, an as-if, but as a not very complex, not very abstract description of the consequences of people's subjective understandings of the obligations and rights of everyday sociability with neighbours, kin, acquaintances.

* * * * *

I have argued that the right way to cope with exchange theory is not to produce principled objections at a high theoretical level, but to insert lower level generalisations into the argument—to break the rush from data to abstraction with intermediate stages of analysis. The destination remains a general theory of choice and exchange; but it may turn out not to be located within the matrices of a bilateral monopoly box. Certainly, to bandy alternative as-ifs is not helpful, for we want not merely to predict behaviour but also to capture the varieties of human experience and creativity. The procedure results in a series of formal propositions about the properties of different exchange rules, and of the relations between the sectors of economic activity governed by them. It is in this way that we can, I think, steer
past the Scylla of substantivism, and at the same time avoid the whirlpool circularity that Firth so admirably demolishes: ‘people would not act as they do if they were not maximising their net advantages’ (1965: 10). Exchange theory and formalist economic anthropology have a common ground: a single principle of choice and exchange. If the principle is demoted to a norm and examined in relation to other norms, we can speak of the economy of social relations and begin to analyse its workings without doing violence to people’s own understandings of what they do—and we can locate descriptions of the pursuit of valued ends within the framework of culturally given meanings, of collective representations. I am very inclined to think it ironic that the easiest sort of society to begin this task in, is our own. The sheer mass of information, which is a product of highly specialised market institutions and government control, readily allows us to perceive the consequences of the economics of social relations. What we discover is in many ways like the patterns of primitive societies—but the information we have for those societies is scanty and vague compared with the statistics of the Department of Trade and Industry or the surveys of market researchers (see e.g. Sahlin 1972: ch. 6); and the suggestion that primitive economists cannot usefully be seen as if they always maximise profits has therefore to be made in terms open to the charge of obscurantist romanticism (Cook 1966): there are no noble savages, it is said; all people can be described as if they pursued profits; and obsolescent Rousseauians who assert otherwise are resisting the development of the universal economic theory. There is no doubt that people can be seen as if they pursued anything—you-care-to-name, provided they are allowed by the as-if-ery to pursue it sometimes indirectly instead—by gaining, say, prestige. It is ironic that when we examine the performance of our own market institutions, with the aid of the information which the perfection of the market requires, we discover rational manufacturers, profit-motivated entrepreneurs, taking into account precisely those obligations to exchange non-commodities in a non-rational way which are said to be mirages when observed in primitive societies. Moreover, we are further led to argue that the differences between primitive and market economies do not lie in the presence or absence of particular ways of economising. For there are different norms of exchange in all societies—all have a mix of normative rules, combined and patterned in different ways. Both these lines of argument are suggested by examination of market information.

I have argued that economising is an activity which can and does embrace a variety of rules of choice and exchange in any given economy. In consequence we may find it desirable to look again at theories which assert that social forms are the emergent properties of exchanges and transactions, for these theories rely on there being only one principle of exchange, or only one kind of exchange which has emergent properties. To say that exchange is the fountain and origin of social form becomes rather more difficult if we show that there are varieties of exchange. Not impossible, but more problematic, because we identify the varieties at a normative level: they are social rules which set out the desirable relations between rewards, between reward and cost, between reward and cost and status, and offer people prestige for achieving them. The exchanges occur in an already-existing regulative framework of rules and sanctions: so the statement that the framework is itself generated by exchange seems to demand further elaboration, at the very
least. Similarly, the Barthian position requires modification: it may be that market-rational strategies and transactions do indeed generate social processes. But the other types of exchange affect market-rational behaviour—do they not generate anything? We might feel inclined to insist that Barth’s transactions do not occur in an environment, but rather in a context—a context of the variety of rules of exchange which have to be examined in their mutually affecting totality.

Finally: It is not necessary, I think, to apologise, when celebrating the memory of Malinowski, for discussing the economy of social relations by paying attention—or maybe, giving attention—to material exchanges of pots and pans, necklaces and bangles. The open-eyed ethnographer sees men carrying loads on their shoulders; and if he asks them why they carry them, he discovers that they act from a variety of motives—not from a single slavish fascinated obedience. If his models of change and exchange then become complex, we will not be surprised: that is always the consequence of attending to the reality of people’s understandings, motives and creativity.

NOTES

I am grateful to Dr Derek Allcorn for being the patient monitor and friendly critic of this lecture during its formative stages.

The first epigraph is from Forster (1971) p. 247; the second from Painter (1939) vol. 1, p. 297.

1 This is a recent process. Homans claims it is old: ‘the view that interaction between persons is an exchange of goods is one of the oldest theories of social behaviour, and one that we still use every day to interpret our own behaviour, as when we say “I found so-and-so rewarding”’; or ‘“I got a great deal out of him”; or even “Talking with him took a great deal out of me”’ (1958: 397). The word ‘still’ is sleight of mind, implying that these phrases are rudimentary survivals of an ancient science. There are two points: the first is that we may expect this oldest theory to have left some traces in the language. But reward does not appear in this sense at all in the O.E.D.; the first use of take in this way is dated 1847 (O.E.D. s.v. take). Wilberforce says he was drained of energy by a ritual. To give another example: marriage contracts, brokers, brokerage—all of them real things—are relatively ancient; but the—metaphorical—marriage-market is not recorded until 1850 (in the 1933 Supplement). Browsing in a dictionary of course does not prove a point: pay (sb) is used in as figurative a sense as Homans could approve, in 1727. But—and this is the second point—the use of exchange metaphors and figures of speech does not indicate that social goods (and services) were transacted in a market rational way. I would not insist on this point, for Homans is clearly talking about theories and not about realities; but Blau relies from time to time on Aristotle, de Jouveu, La Rochefoucauld, to support his arguments (Blau 1964: 1, 26, 33, 78, 199, 242 etc.; 1964b; cf. Homans 1961: 245, 283). This indicates nothing more than that Blau’s metaphor of market exchange has run away with him, and leads him to perceive commercial intentions in unlikely places. ‘Retail trade. . . is justly censured; for it is unnatural, and a mode by which men gain from one another’ (Aristotle, Politics, 1.10).

2 So, the pure type of social exchange ‘the reciprocal exchange of extrinsic benefits’ can be analysed with economists’ tools. This is because people who do favours expect a return, ‘just as merchants expect repayment’ (Blau 1964: 314).

It is normal, however, to say that merchants require payment; the locution repayment perhaps confuses the distinction which anthropologists find it proper to make, of purchase from reciprocity. Blau’s sentence continues: ‘. . . for economic services’. There is a certain confusion in Blau about the distinction between goods and services, and its importance: cf. p. 93 n.8.

In the following list the features which are said by Blau to distinguish social from economic exchange are given first, and are followed by the qualifications which may legitimately puzzle the reader who wishes to find out precisely what the distinction may be.

(a) The utilities of social exchange cannot be distinguished from its other rewards. But in economic exchanges too decisions are rarely confined to a single factor, which confounds rational decision-making’ (96–97).

(b) Exchanges which take on intrinsic value are not susceptible to economic analysis (e.g. p. 314). But the intrinsic—extrinsic dichotomy is a relative one (pp. 37–38); and the prototype of intrinsic rewards in exchange—i.e. love—is given a lengthy excursus, at 76–85.

(c) Social approval is different from money because it cannot be haggled over: exchangers
cannot fix a price in terms of social approval (pp. 62, 99–100). It is nonetheless treated, as Homans (1961: 35) treats it, as the common currency of social exchange: e.g. at pp. 171–9, where status enhancement and compliance, insufficiently distinguished from each other (Heath 1968) and from social approval, are given full economic treatment.

(d) Social exchange generates 'feelings of personal obligation, gratitude and trust; purely economic exchange as such does not' (p. 94–5). It is nevertheless the case that the inertial consequences of trust, etc., are treated as economic facts (p. 101).

(e) Social exchange is characterised by notions of social justice (or 'norms of fairness'); economic exchange by normal and average price. The distinction is 'crucial' (p. 153). In social exchange, the actual rate and the fair rate of exchange are 'somewhat parallel' to normal and average prices in strictly economic exchange.

(f) At various points Blau seems to speak to anthropologists when he emphasises the reciprocity of social exchange and suggests the parallelism of it and 'exchange rituals in simpler societies' (p. 106). His position varies between saying that market exchange, simple society exchange and social exchange are refractions of Ur-exchange, or generic exchange (p. 111); and saying that social exchange is a universal form supplanted only in complex societies, and only in some parts of them, by strictly economic exchange as such (e.g. pp. 89, 99). Sometimes Blau says that reciprocity is distinct from other exchanges because it creates 'bonds of trust over time' (but cf. (d) supra); at others he clearly implies that it is not distinct from market exchanges, e.g. in the passage quoted at the beginning of this note.

Where P is the total resources of the patron, and p the cost of the benefit; and C the total resources of the client, c the cost of his return benefit, then P:p :: C:c.

Tupperware hostesses are supplied with a Magic Guest List which lists people who could be invited to the party; new recruits to the organisation are sometimes given the same list, to suggest people who might be asked to give a party. This list is as follows: Newcomer to Tupperware. Near neighbour: Anyone looking for a Job [i.e. potential recruits to the organisation]; other neighbours; Local Shop Assistants; Hairdresser; W.R.I. Members; Young Wives; Clinic Acquaintances; Doctor's or Dentist's Wives; School Gates acquaintances; Relations; P.T.A. members; Children's Friends' Mums; Friends from Specific Areas; Husband's Friends' Wives; Night School Acquaintances; Church Group Members; Close Friends.

Retail Business 154 (Dec. 1970, 26) quotes 97–7 per cent. from a survey conducted 'some time ago'.

Retail Business 154 (Dec. 1970, 25) quotes the Direct Selling and Service Association's estimate of 220,000 representatives of member organisations. This includes ordinary door-to-door salesmen. Marketing, Aug. 1971 estimates Tupperware's sales force at 10,000; Pippa-Dee's at 4,000 (p. 18). These are only two of nine or ten companies involved in this type of marketing. For this reason I regard the estimate of total sales force in Mintel June 1972, 5, at 25,000 to be over-cautious.

Retail Business cit. p. 26: 88-5 per cent. Sarah Harman, a graduate Law student at the University of Kent, interviewed eleven divorced mothers living in London. Nine of them, rather than claim maintenance from their ex-husbands or from the social services, were Tupperware agents.

The results of a sample survey conducted in March 1972 lead one to believe that 51 per cent. (AB: 54 per cent.; CiC2: 60 per cent.) of all housewives have attended selling parties at least once. Of those who attended parties rather more than half—57 per cent. (AB: 75 per cent.; CiC2: 53 per cent.)—agree that there is an obligation to buy something for the hostess's sake; 85 per cent. (AB: 58 per cent.; CiC2: 88 per cent.) think that it's an enjoyable way to buy things, and 90 per cent. do in fact buy things (Mintel, June 1972, 4–13).

Estimates for sales by individual firms have been produced from time to time: Claire James (Lingerie) £3m. in 1970 (Retail Business, cit.); Sarah Coventry (costume jewellery) £4m. in 1970–71 (Mintel, cit.) Tupperware (plastic containers, etc.) £8m. in 1970–71 (Mintel, cit.); Pippa-Dee (clothing) £4m. in 1971 (Marketing, cit.). The figure for Tupperware is almost certainly an under-estimate.

Value of retail sales, seasonally adjusted: Index numbers of sales per week, current prices.

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<th>All Shops</th>
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Source: Trade and Industry 8, i (July 6 1972) p. 27.
It would be possible, in theory, to compare the performance of door-to-door sales companies, where the market advantages listed in the text also apply, to that of party sales companies. But Avon Cosmetics, for example, are sold through repeated sociable contacts between the customer and the agent; some agents, too, now hold parties. So in that case the distinction is not clear-cut. In other cases—e.g. Swipe, an all-purpose cleanser manufactured by Chemical Associates—there are often peculiarities of the sales structure, with a reportedly high number of sales internal to the company; or the product is not sold exclusively door-to-door.

REFERENCES


