

**Pre-proof, pre-print version of**

**Charity and philanthropy**

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## **Abstract**

Anthropological analyses of charity are often based on Maussian theories of gift exchange and inequalities between donor and recipient, sometimes compounded by spectacular displays of giving or by aid, both humanitarian and faith-based, from the global north to the south. Other accounts complicate this understanding, variously showing the charitable gift as the recipient's right or considering charitable work as a technology of self care. The context and nature of the donation also affect both donor and recipient; money and blood have very different connotations and effects as charitable gifts. Ethnographies of charitable action suggest it is a total social fact, entangling economic, politics, religion and notions of relatedness.

108 words

## **Main Text**

### **Introduction**

Depending on one's perspective, charity has either been somewhat sidelined in anthropology, or it is part of a long and distinguished, original tradition in the discipline. The former view follows from an academic division of labour in which charity is considered to fall within the remit of sociology as part of broader analyses of different trajectories and manifestations of welfare provision. Typically the gaze here falls on welfare states but also changing configurations of 'mixed economies of welfare' over time and in different national traditions. A recent phenomenon, as state care shrinks globally, is the renewal in some quarters of religious charities, both local and international, and the notion of a charitable or non-profit economic sector that is distinct from state and market operations.

Where a longer tradition of engagement, albeit often implicit, might be detected is first, through anthropological studies of development and, second through analysing practices of giving via Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (2016 [1925]) These converge in identifying inequality and hierarchy in the gift that precludes reciprocity, or the gift that occludes or eclipses contributory labour. Indeed, many ethnographies of development practice and intention draw directly on Mauss to

illustrate inequalities as donors and regions are separated from recipients. The dependent figure of the recipient forever unable to shift the balance of indebtedness is a relatively specific construction in an individualistic vision that values autonomy and self-reliance. The validity of this perception is reinforced by recent moves by countries such as Russia, India and Turkey, which have sought to be national donors rather than recipients for the status this is assumed to bring. While charitable giving may not carry an obligation to reciprocate, honour often still accrues to the donor. Gift exchange theories thus continue to inform many studies of charity or donation which foreground questions of hierarchy or egalitarianism, utility or non-utility.

There are important exceptions. Hindu *dan*, like Jain offerings to monks, depends on anonymity and no expectation of return, thus querying the universality of recognition and reciprocity as moral imperatives in giving. Bowie's ethnography of the Chiang Mai Valley in Thailand is unusual in first using the idea of generalized reciprocity rather than emphasizing the moral obligation to return something to the donor and, second, arguing that: 'cross-class, unidirectional forms of giving such as charity may be important in mediating the processes of hegemony and resistance in the sociopolitical constitution of complex societies' (1998: 469). While, doctrinally, merit is achieved in Theravada Buddhism through donation to monks, villagers often reinterpret this in practice as giving to the poor, including strangers. Where monks represent an elite, Bowie suggests that attending to the worldly needs of the poor essentially turns merit-making into a weapon of the weak. Ethnography prompts consideration of how donations are managed as social facts, with all the attendant implications and entanglements.

While Mauss was concerned with non-market motivations for exchange, only a brief section of *The Gift* deals specifically with charity. It is telling that Mauss notes that alms or charity in the Judaeo-Arabic, and therefore Christian world, derives from *zedaka*: the word for justice. This undermines the basis of arguments that charity denies reciprocity and therefore puts the recipient into a hierarchical position of inferiority. Fairtrade raises interesting questions as to whether participants understand this as justice or charity. Consumers may believe they are simply paying a just price for a commodity or that they are also donating aid to a deserving cause. Certainly the language of Fairtrade uses words implying equality such as partnership, empowerment and stakeholders, but this may simply be a gloss on old unequal relationships.

## **Definitions and distinctions**

Distinctions are often made between charity and philanthropy where the former is seen as relieving immediate suffering while the latter has an institutional aspect focused on ameliorating structural causes of social ills. The two are so often used interchangeably, however, particularly by participants, that little is to be gained by overprecision. Similarly, just as a ‘third sector’ cannot be neatly separated from market economies and state organizations, so charitable donations, actions, and intentions tend to blur into other realms; contracts and auditing procedures tether charitable organizations to other economic and political sectors. Arguably, a second wave of quasi-privatization is taking place where charitable organizations are absorbing state services, monitored and controlled by contract as though they were corporate, profit-driven entities. In some cases, profits from social enterprises are transferred to linked charities, again muddying clear or commonplace distinctions between sectors. The effort to quantify and classify the non-market and non-state sector remains big business despite differences between national traditions, non-profit organizations, mutual aid, social enterprises etc.

Depending on the point of view, such accountability practices make actions explicit and transparent or consume donations in expanding administration to monitor process rather than outcome. Tourism and pilgrimage economies, profit and alms giving, intertwine, while it can be hard to disentangle profit-making interest from welfare concern and philanthropy in the case of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Charitable giving by corporates can enhance commercial brand value. The rise of volunteer tourism can uncomfortably merge the tourist gaze and the search for ‘authentic experience’ with gifted labour mediated by commercial organizations. A relatively recent phenomenon in this respect is the number of programmes in the UK and US organising voluntary work abroad for students taking a year’s sabbatical before starting University. Donated labour raises another emerging theme: a Foucauldian emphasis on the care of the self, whether generating faith-rooted ideas of merit or a more humanist-inflected self-cultivation through active compassion.

## **The terrain of charity**

With definitional caveats on board, the broad terrain of charity might be sketched out as follows.

Succour for the needy has typically been provided by different configurations of kin, political authority, the wealthy and religious organizations. Motivations vary. One approach is to take a community in the round including those less able to care for themselves. Another angle is to see such actions as simply just, or as a kind of divine justice, which can reframe the act of giving as an act of merit or self-salvation and, for Christians, a direct engagement with faith where the poor embody Christ.

The first key shift in the long modern period, local upheavals aside (such as Reformation England's dissolution of the monasteries) was industrialization where people were uprooted from local communities and structures of support. In late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe this saw the rise of philanthropy from wealthy individuals, often targeting social housing, and religious charities before states took on more of a welfare role across much of the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. International development took off after the Second World War, with the same evangelical fervour as 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious missions, but with the aim of establishing certain political and economic regimes, and blocking others, via indigenous elites.

Alternatives to state welfare began to be championed in the late 1970s with the beginning of neo-liberal doctrines, the weakening of many countries' industrial base and the divestment of state assets and services. In the US, the notion of a third sector emerged in the 1970s: responsive, community-based and neither controlled by central government nor driven by market imperatives. This was of course a conservative, north American vision that valued self-reliant autonomy. Parallel shifts in the global political economy of charity have been via the 1989 Washington Consensus where, following neo-liberal turns elsewhere, international development became more focused on grassroots initiatives aimed at self-help and empowerment rather than emphasizing the need for provision to enable independence. Again, a political trend of emphasising localism and community while strengthening central control echoes through the CSR movement.

In this light, CSR can be viewed as a moral mechanism for extending corporations' authority through close involvement with the intimate lives of its workers, evoking shadows of Fordist and Soviet interventions into workers' lives to create the desired worker-consumer and reproduce a

disciplined, tractable workforce. This take on corporate charity or CSR suggests that attempts to create community partnerships are inevitably sullied by vertical relations of patronage and clientelism.

### **Anthropologies of charity**

Anthropological engagements with charity as a 'field of action or relations' (Trundle 2014) foreground different facets. It is worth spelling these out since each approach or emphasis both reveals and conceals other aspects. An anthropology of charity must therefore acknowledge local traditions of giving; who, how and why the initial donation is made; gendered patterns of charity; what is donated; the labour of charity; and different views of the recipient of charity.

There are markedly different local and national traditions in the provision of care and indeed the impulse or rationale to give in circumstances other than gift exchange relationships. For example, Russian civil society, before, during and after the Soviet period, cannot be understood without an appreciation of how the Orthodox tradition differs from both the European Catholic church and state intersections, and Anglo-Protestant inflected notions of the role of church, state and individuals in caring for the poor. Some societies, such as Japan, lack a tradition of philanthropy outside kin and some state provision for vulnerable family members; the post-Fukushima influx of international relief agencies, which presupposed a convention of charity, therefore created tensions. Government tax breaks on charitable giving can again frame who gives what to whom and how. In the context of contemporary *dān* in India, the same act of *dān* can be constructed differently: affectual (*dān* to poor beggars), traditional (*dān* to mendicants), religious (*dān* to Brahmin priests), and instrumental (*dān* as a form of social welfare) (Bornstein 2008: 236). In the United States, the single act of donating used materials for repurposing can attract tax credits, demonstrate that potential wastes have been correctly moved on *and* generate moral virtue.

The landscape of who makes donations and why needs to be understood in a global context, not only of international aid with the kinds of stretched or broken relationships between donor and recipient that can bring, but also trends among governments and privately wealthy elites. Donation as spectacle and demonstration of power is widespread from potlatches to bread and

circuses events, and the relatively recent, not yet fully studied, rise of huge private philanthropic donations to cultural institutions: especially to the arts and education. Latin America has seen a significant rise here. An unusual instance of this performative giving is the spectacular mass blood donations from religious sects in India orchestrated by charismatic saintly leaders. Government aid, as suggested above, may similarly signal more than simply assistance.

Within Christianity, welfare charities interpret their role and mission quite differently, for example within the post-Soviet world Steinberg and Wanner (2008). What appears are nuanced understandings of how, for example, lingering Soviet ideas of morality are also inflected by Orthodox traditions or how salvationism underpins both economic and religious proselytizing by development and religious agencies, the Orthodox tradition having long promoted support for the community. The influx of international faith-based charities and volunteer workers adds again a sense of selflessness being cultivated as a desirable trait. Working for others also means working on oneself.

Individuals may give as merit-making activities, which may thus reference a sacred offering (sacrifice), improvement of the self and/or enhancement of another person's well-being. The element of being part of a group of people working to create and give donations can be a powerful motivation for charity labour. Such acts, in the context of international aid, also evoke imagined communities of recipients. In the religions of the book, faith and charitable action are elided. This abstract compassion can meet with another perceived abstract duty: to improve the character of the needy, and restore them to a life of self-sufficiency' – and both may clash, as many ethnographies show of faith-based charities in action, when volunteers meet individuals who do not meet expectations of grateful or indeed worthy recipients: the 'deserving poor'. One common 19<sup>th</sup>-century strand that persists in much Anglo-American policy and thought is the emphasis on helping the poor to help themselves rather than looking to structural causes of inequality and poverty. Arguably, the microcredits and grassroots empowerment of many contemporary international development agencies is in the same convention. The moral right of mendicants and monks to receive gives a very different hue to the role of the recipient. Trundle's (2014) ethnography of American women in Italy engaging in charitable activities unpicks the intersections between north American emphases on community and individual autonomy from

the State, Italian traditions of local and state welfare, and the cultivation of the self through Protestant and humanist norms and practices.

The gendering of unremunerated labour within and outside the home is relatively consistent. The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a rise in charitable work in industrializing countries. Anxiety about the effects of rapid immiseration took the double form of compassion and fear of the unruly mob crammed into horrific living conditions. In the U.S and Europe, aid and reform took a number of forms. Alongside an increase in regulated public spaces and housing with large-scale philanthropic giving directed towards improving social housing and raising money through sales of work and visiting the poor and sick became an appropriate occupation for middle-class women. This in large part was down to what was perceived as women's natural capacity for care and therefore their moral duty to take their domestic skills into the city streets. Fundraising and charitable works also allowed women to transcend the domestic sphere and access public roles. The gendering of labour appears to continue. Two-thirds of volunteer workers in the UK in 2012 were women while those acting as trustees or governors were mainly by men. While post-socialist scholars revealed the gendered double burden, during and after the socialist period, where expectations were that women should provide the domestic labour of care plus waged work – relatively few anthropological studies are concerned with the growing preponderance of unwaged labour outside the home.

While money is perhaps the commonest object of charitable giving, there is also mediated giving through donated items which can be sold on, such as clothes and books, or food given directly to the hungry or to charities preparing food. The recent rise in Britain of food banks for the relief of hunger has revealed those hardest hit by austerity measures. The lack of an ability to eat and feed other people properly has also been shown to diminish the person socially. Labour, whether physical labour or in the form of advice can again be seen as a donation typically mediated through organizations directed towards single issues or co-ordinating expertise for those unable to pay for it otherwise. Gifts of bodily substance, notably blood, seem to engage more with ideas of Maussian gift exchange, than with ideas of charity – although state regulation and policy shape the gift of blood. Richard Titmuss's (1997) classic comparison of British and American donated and remunerated blood spins on notions of welfare, altruism, and generalized



reciprocity. Donations of blood and body substances have the capacity to transform the relationship between donor and recipient, suggesting new consanguineal relations; potentially troubling for donations between affinal kin.

The donation itself, which is directed towards enhancing someone's else's lot in life, may be money given freely, or with conditions on its use and the recipient's reform; it may be labour, advice or material objects from social housing to food. The nature of the charitable gift can alter the mode of the transaction including transacting partners.

The anthropology of charity is an expanding field with new forms of donation (e.g. CSR, corporate gifts, major art philanthropy), and an increasing attentiveness to the politics of aid, beyond relations of inequality. Humanitarian relief, for example, is concerned with a politics of life: choosing who to save and who not, whose lives should be risked in offering help; how recipients are publicly represented as victims rather than combatants and by emphasizing suffering rather than geopolitics (Fassin 2008: 3). The cultivation of the self via charitable labour, whether with a humanist or religious inflection, is a particularly rich seam as religious and humanitarian relief groups move into vacated economic and political arenas. Where the fall of state communism seemed to usher in a collapse of community, religion was often the means or prompt to re-form social orders: social justice, charity as well as self-salvation (Steinberg and Wanner, 2008: 5).

## **Conclusion**

Charity, considered as a relational social fact, is concerned with how giving and receiving are socially managed and mediated. While giving, in this instance, could be qualified with the intent to improve another's lot, the complexity of relations involved in areas such as CSR or giving to wealthy spiritual institutions suggests that it is only by ethnographic investigations of how charitable fields of action unfold that we can understand choices in how actions are represented and how regulatory or religious contexts can alter the significance of apparently the same action. The intersections of local and international norms, expectations and traditions give rise to particular formations of charity, newly inflected by awareness of environmental, economic, and political injustices, while the voluntary sector (whether called the third sector, or the Big Society)

and gendered labour are increasingly assuming a vital structural position as state provision continues to withdraw not just from welfare but from schools, healthcare, environmental care, even prisons. The entanglements of charity with faith, economics, politics and ethics suggest rich fields for further attentive excavation.

### **SEE ALSO:**

Anthropology, social and cultural  
Blood  
Civil Society  
Corporate social responsibility  
Development agencies  
Development, history of  
Disaster relief and management  
Economic anthropology  
Empowerment and community participation  
Ethics and politics in development  
Fairtrade movement  
Gender and economics  
Gift  
Humanitarianism  
NGOs and civil society in development  
Voluntary organisations in development

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