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*Critique of Anthropology* 2012 32: 125

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X12437861

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# The ‘potlatch of destruction’: Gifting against the state

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## Abstract

Appropriations of anthropological theory by political radicals are often treated with suspicion by academic practitioners of the discipline, who are particularly wary about ethnographic descriptions of ‘pre-capitalist’ societies as the radical Other of western capitalist modernity. On first examination, the Situationist International, a revolutionary group active in France in the 1960s would seem to fit this problematic romantic appropriation of anthropological theory. However, on closer examination, the Situationists’ use of anthropological theory, and in particular their development of Mauss’s theory of the gift as a revolutionary weapon to be directed against ‘commodity enslavement’, was, despite its rhetorical militancy, more nuanced than many contemporary developments of Maussian theory within the academy. The Situationists’ revolutionary engagement with Mauss led them to develop potentially important aspects of Maussian theory decades before they were taken seriously in anthropological theory. First, in contrast with many anthropological uses of the gift–commodity distinction, that have seen entire cultural orders as being structurally determined by a particular kind of exchange, the Situationists stressed the importance of the *co-evality* of different types of exchange and the potential for objects to move between different types of exchange well before this became a significant theoretical problem in anthropology. Second, the Situationists’ revolutionary engagement led them to develop an analysis of the relationship between different types of exchange and processes of ‘cultural humiliation’; an issue that has been brought to the forefront of anthropological theorizing of colonialism and social change in recent years by Marshall Sahlins and others.

## Keywords

anarchy, anthropological theory, gift exchange, humiliation, Situationists

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Nearly forty years after its demise, the Situationist International remains an organization that is still hard to classify according to conventional political categorization. Theoretically, the Situationists drew a great deal on, and developed, the perspectives of anti-Leninist Marxist currents, such as the Council Communist movement of the post-First World War years in western Europe and the smaller Socialisme ou Barbarie group that split from the Trotskyist Fourth International in the years following the Second World War. These avowedly anti-state and anti-vanguardist revolutionary Marxist currents inhabited a territory where the divisions between Marxist and anarchist revolutionary theory were less clear than in the case of reformist or Leninist 'party' Marxism. Although the group's major theorist, Guy Debord, saw his work as a development of this strand of libertarian Marxism, and was as a consequence at times fairly critical of his avowedly anarchist contemporaries (as he was of just about all of his other contemporaries), the anarchist influence on Situationism was also clear both in terms of those in whose footsteps they rhetorically claimed to stand (such as the famous Spanish Civil War era anarchist, Beunaventura Duruti) and also in terms of their militant rhetorical hostility to all forms of authority and hierarchy; a position that stood in clear contrast to major figures in the mainstream Marxist tradition, from Engels to Lenin. An association with anarchism was certainly made by many of their peers, for example one contemporary favourable review of their work in the American radical journal *Rebel Worker* notes that their rejection of 'commodity enslavement' is a result of their 'anarchist-individualist' ethics (Marszalek, 2005: 278). Of even more relevance perhaps has been their influence, which has largely been on those claiming an affiliation with anarchism, from figures central to the UK punk rock scene of the late 1970s, such as Jamie Reid and Malcolm McLaren, to the activists behind the production of the influential *Green Anarchy* journal in the United States in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

Where the Situationists mark a development from classical anti-capitalist Marxism and anarchism and where they act as trailblazers for subsequent influential trends in popular protest, is in their focus upon the political significance of exchange and consumption. For the classical Marxist tradition, the central theoretical concern and consequently the central arena of political activism was that of production. Although understanding how commodities circulated was key to understanding how capitalism as a system presented an illusory image of itself (Marx's famous theory of commodity fetishism; Marx, 1970: 71–83), this was an illusion that in the final analysis grew out of particular developments within the forces and relations of production. The result of this was an almost unquestioned belief that it was the role of the 'worker as worker' that carried the inherent contradictions that might enable the nature of that role to be subject to revolutionary transformation. No such transformation was possible in the role of the 'worker as consumer' who was atomized, blinded by the fetish of the commodity that was itself ultimately an epiphenomenon of alienated labour relations. The position is well summed up by the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg's (1971: 397) famous claim that, 'Where the chains of capitalism are forged, there must they

be broken!' Luxemburg was writing at the height of the German revolutionary wave of 1918 and her words were intended as a rebuke to those socialists who had adopted the perspective that parliamentary majorities would be enough to legislate capitalism out of existence. But with their focus on the workplace, they expressed a common assumption amongst those who remained committed to the revolutionary road. The potential to develop Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism and the more general development of that analysis into a general theory of the reification of social relations in a capitalist political economy by Lukacs (1971: 83–110), into a wider analysis of how capitalist relations of exchange and consumption helped to structure hierarchy and authority, remained largely unexplored prior to the intervention of the Situationists. The Situationists saw their key task as finding alternatives to the commodity exchange form within which people gained access to the material abundance of late capitalism.

### **The society of the spectacle**

The Situationists' development of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism into a general theory of the 'commodity spectacle' was central to their political theory and practice. For Debord (2002: 9), separation, 'is the alpha and the omega of the spectacle'. This analysis of the separation of the producers from knowledge of their products and of each other clearly builds on Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Where Debord takes a further step is in his insistence that the late capitalist 'society of the spectacle' marks a further development of this process by which 'having' (the products of dead labour) becomes more important than 'being' (satisfied and integrated into one's living labour). With the emergence of the society of the spectacle, the appearances and images which enable one to see a world that can 'no longer be grasped directly' (most notably mass media, whether that be popular cinema, serious news journalism or advertising), themselves, 'become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behaviour', as much as the simple separation of social life arising from the fetishism of commodities that gave rise to the need for these mediating images. As Meg McLagan (2002: 107), one of the few anthropologists to seriously engage with Situationist theory puts it, Debord's development was to analyse, 'the penetration of the commodity form into mass communication, which he argues results in the spectacle'. For Debord and his colleagues generalized commodity exchange had the effect of creating a separation in flows of knowledge; a separation that was reinforced by the very nature of the images that the commodity-spectacle circulated in order to bring knowledge of the whole to its consumers. Finding ways to break that separation and to explore possibilities for making visible the totality and connections that the commodity-spectacle obscured became for the Situationists the most pressing revolutionary task.

This greater focus on the sociocultural importance of exchange as opposed to production, although something of a novelty within the revolutionary tradition from which the Situationists came, was of course a long-established theme within

anthropological theory. And it is perhaps no surprise that the Situationists as a group drew heavily on anthropological theories of the gift as they began to explore the ways in which the hold of the 'commodity-spectacle' structured late capitalist social life, albeit that this is an influence that is often largely overlooked in accounts of the development of the Situationist International. In particular, Mauss's (1970: 78) stress on the gift as a 'total social fact' whose whole purpose was to make explicit and draw attention to the social relations that it was a part of making had obvious appeal to a group whose main concern with late capitalism was not the alienation of the worker in the realm of production, but rather what they saw as the reification of a social totality into a myriad of separate spheres.

### **Anthropology and activism**

Anthropology has long been a rich source of material for radical anti-capitalists looking for supporting evidence for their views. In particular, ethnographic descriptions of people in 'pre-capitalist' or 'pre-class' societies have often been used to demonstrate that many of the negative features of capitalist society that tend to be taken for granted (greed, competition, inequality, etc.) are not the result of human nature but of society or culture and are therefore not inevitable but open to change. This use of anthropology has a long pedigree in revolutionary theory. As Bloch (1983: 10) notes, anthropology served a double purpose in the work of Marx and Engels; first being a means for helping to develop a 'historical' account of the forces that motivate social change and, second, providing a 'rhetorical' counterpoint to claims for the universality of capitalist social relations.

This second 'rhetorical' use of anthropology is still very much alive and well. Revolutionary groups continue to produce pamphlets in which anthropological accounts of hunter gatherers are used to demonstrate such arguments:

A truly communal life is often dismissed as a utopian ideal, to be endorsed in theory but unattainable in practice. But the evidence of foraging people tells us otherwise. A sharing way of life is not only possible but has actually existed in many parts of the world and over long periods of time. (Molyneux, 2003:14).

Robinson and Tormey (this volume) provide a more detailed description of anarchist appropriations of ethnography as part of the 'generation of critique' of capitalist everyday normality. Such 'rhetorical' uses of anthropology have long disturbed academic anthropologists, even those who are sympathetic to the political theories of those espousing them, as rhetoric can lead one into theoretical simplifications or even falsifications (e.g. Bloch, 1983: 16). These uses of anthropology have become even more unpalatable following the postmodern turn of the 1980s, when the kind of division of the world into western and non-western cultures, which provided easy ethnographic material for radical rhetorical appropriation, fell out of favour and became itself viewed as a kind objectifying violence

by which the object of anthropological study is constructed as the primitive Other outside of history (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fabian, 1983).

The Situationists' use of anthropology, in common with other revolutionary anti-capitalists, certainly did make use of contrasts between the dehumanized capitalist present and the romanticized pre-capitalist past, that most contemporary anthropologists would treat with the utmost suspicion. For example, leading Situationist Raoul Vaneigem (1994: 77), writing on, 'Exchange and gift' in his book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*:

Primitive man's unity with nature is essentially magical. Man only really separates himself from nature by transforming it through technology, and as he transforms it he disenchants it. But the use of technology is determined by social organization. . . Social organization – hierarchical, since it is based on private appropriation – gradually destroys the magical bond between man and nature.

But the Situationist use of anthropological theory goes well beyond such familiar radical rhetorical uses of the primitive Other of alienated capitalism. Gift exchange's perceived tendency to totalize and reveal social relations potentially made it a weapon to be used in the struggle against what the Situationists had come to see as the main arena of revolutionary struggle; the tendency of commodity exchange (not production per se) to reify social relations and hide their interconnectedness. The !Kung San may provide a rhetorical illustration of the non-hierarchical potential within human nature, waiting to blossom as soon as historical circumstances and the victorious struggle of the international proletariat allow, but no-one was suggesting that they might actually provide a model for how that struggle might be conducted. No pamphlets were produced suggesting that collecting and sharing nuts and berries might provide an alternative to the trade union struggle or the need to build the vanguard party. These remained the key to unlocking the future potential of humanity of which the !Kung and their like could merely give revolutionaries fleeting glimpses.

### **Gifting as revolutionary strategy**

The idea that the gift might provide a guide to revolutionary practice in the here and now first took form in the work of one of the Situationist International's predecessor groups, the Lettrist International, an organization that contained many who would go on to be leading lights within the Situationist International, such as Mahomed Dahou, G.I. Gilman and, most notably, Guy Debord. One of the Lettrist International's major activities was the production of a mimeographed magazine called *Potlatch*. *Potlatch* took articles and news stories from the mainstream media and provided subversive commentary or juxtaposed them in ways that the publications that they took them from would not in an attempt to re-make connections that the commodified circulation of knowledge had separated. And it was not only the content but the form of the exchange

that was important to the Lettrists. *Potlatch* could never be sold, but only given as a gift: a gift that, like the potlatch of the North American Pacific Coast as described by Mauss, acted as a provocation to respond in kind and continue the work of de-commodifying the exchange of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> As Debord put it in an article from 1959 looking back on, 'The role of *Potlatch*, then and now':

*Potlatch* took its name from the North American Indian word for a pre-commercial form of circulation of goods, founded on the reciprocity of sumptuous gifts. The non-salable goods which such a free bulletin could distribute were desires and unedited problems; and it was their profundity for others that constituted a gift in return. This explains why the exchange of experience in *Potlatch* was often supplied as an exchange of insults, the sort of insults that we owe to those whose idea of life is inferior to our own. (Debord, 1959)<sup>3</sup>

That this form of exchange was as important as the content of the knowledge in *Potlatch* is also made clear by Debord in a letter written towards the end of his life in which he notes the importance of the way in which the distribution of *Potlatch* was:

rigorous in its rejection of market relations. *Potlatch* – obeying its title – was only ever given away for free in the time it was published. (Debord, 2006)<sup>4</sup>

The Lettrists', and subsequently the Situationists' great claim was that one could choose to reject market relations of commodity exchange by appropriating the separated knowledge that they offered and then re-circulating it as a gift that would provoke others to make their own connections. If the spectacle-capitalism formed a circuit for the circulation of reified commodified knowledge, then the Lettrists' aim was to create a modern potlatch in which they could, 'interrupt the circuit when and where we please', as Andre-Frank Conord put it in his article, '*Potlatch*: directions for use', that introduced the first issue of the journal (Conord, 1954). Potlatch and the gift had gone from being another illustration of an archaic practice that showed that alternatives to capitalist hierarchy were possible to being one of the weapons that could be used to disrupt its flows. As the first issue of *Potlatch* proclaimed, 'We are working toward the conscious and collective establishment of a new civilization' (Conord, 1954).

This desire to use the gift as the tool of revolutionary transformation continued into the Situationist International. For the Situationists, the gift functioned simultaneously as a message from humanity's past, a vision of its future once a society of material plenty was freed from the yoke of economic rationalism and, most crucially, a tool to be used to remove that yoke in the present. As Vaneigem (1994: 81) put it:

We must rediscover the pleasure of giving: giving because you have so much. What beautiful and priceless potlatches the affluent society will see – whether it likes it or

not! – when the exuberance of the younger generation discovers the pure gift. The growing passion for stealing books, clothes, food, weapons or jewelry simply for the pleasure of giving them away gives us a glimpse of what the will to live has in store for consumer society.

In the Situationist publication, *The Return of the Durutti Column* (AFGES, 1966), a kind of comic-book illustration of their ideas in which photos and images from mass media publications are ‘detourned’ or have their meanings symbolically altered through the addition of captions or speech bubbles, the idea of the revolutionary gift continues to play a large part. The practice of stealing goods to give them away, as practised by juvenile delinquents, is praised as transcending capitalist order and rediscovering, ‘the practice of the gift’. As a consequence there will be no need for pointless accumulation, and, ‘therefore no more need for laws, no more need for masters’. Later on a caption proclaiming money to be the root of discord and hatred is counterposed with other text proposing that it should be replaced with potlatch (Marcus, 1997: 421–2).

### **The Situationist development of gift theory**

If the Situationists managed to distinguish themselves from many of their revolutionary peers with the re-creation of anthropological concepts as revolutionary tools, they still share with other activists the suspicion in which they are often held by academic theorists. Although the Situationists’ influence as being among the first to acknowledge the ideological-sign component of the commodity, thus acting as forerunners of more mainstream theorists such as Baudrillard, is recognized, it is often a grudging kind of recognition.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, their seeming belief that there is such a thing as a capitalist spectacle economy out there somewhere whose symbolic communication with the masses is, as Debord (2002: 9) put it, ‘unilateral’ and therefore has to be resisted or overthrown, does not sit easily with contemporary commonplace postmodernist wisdom as to the playful multiplicity of the meanings of even mass-mediated commodity signs, or the liberating and emancipating potential of watching videos of other people’s babies laughing on YouTube. Hence the tendency to acknowledge their influence on the one hand, while having to bemoan their now outdated simplistic binary thinking on the other. In order for their ideas about the symbolic value embedded in the commodity to be made safe for the postmodern era, they themselves have to be dismissed – as one media activist approvingly quoted in Harold (2007: 2) put it – as ‘grumpy French anarchists’ or (even better) ‘Groucho Marxists’ (2007: 4).<sup>6</sup>

Even this reluctant acknowledgement is largely limited to fields such as cultural studies, where the circulation of mass-mediated symbolic value in late capitalist societies is a central concern. In anthropology, a discipline from which the Situationists derived a great deal of influence, the Situationists remain largely unknown. Yet the Situationists’ appropriation of gift theory deserves some attention. In contrast to the assumption that activist appropriations of academic



theories inevitably produce simplifications that are of no theoretical value, it was the Situationists' attempt to use the gift as a revolutionary tool that led them to develop gift exchange theory in directions that academic anthropology took decades to catch up with.

Mauss had been centrally concerned with the role of gift exchange in western capitalist societies. The final chapter of his essay on the gift had been a plea for the enduring ties of reciprocal interdependence created by gift exchange to be given a central role within western political economies (Mauss, 1970: 65–83). A single-minded focus on market-based commodity exchange or, as Mauss put it, 'buying and selling . . . a tradesman's morality', threatened social solidarity (1970: 65). The Situationists shared Mauss's concern with the role of the gift in a modern western society, although Mauss, as a reformist socialist, saw the striking of a balance between the morality of the gift transactor and the tradesman as the basis for a good society, and was as horrified by the revolutionary currents of the 1930s as he was by free market fundamentalism (see Godelier, 1999). Despite the fact that their desire to use the gift as a tool in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society was far removed from Mauss's political project, their acknowledgement that the theory of the gift had a contemporary relevance distinguished them from many anthropologists, for whom the gift became, as the subtitle of Mauss's essay put it, 'The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies'. Gift exchange theory became associated with particular ethnographic culture areas, in particular the Pacific societies that had provided so much of the ethnographic material that had been theoretically synthesized in Mauss's essay, becoming the mechanism par excellence for the reproduction of their distinct cultural value systems that could be distinguished from western cultures whose domination by the tradesman's morality was no longer a tendency to be contested, as it had been for Mauss, but the implicit starting point against which other cultural value systems could be contrasted (see Appadurai, 1986; Martin and Frederiksen forthcoming). For example, Mauss and a particular reading of his ideas about the way that gifts had the potential to illuminate a total social perspective on the wider society became a part of the theoretical architecture underpinning Dumont's description of Indian society as being based upon a radically different cultural value system from western society with its focus on individualism as paramount value (see Parry, 1998: 152–3; Rio and Smedal, 2009: 7). And such uses of Mauss's *Gift* as the basis for separate and distinct cultural orders remain influential in anthropology, underpinning for example the work of Marilyn Strathern, whose book *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) draws an explicit contrast between western and Melanesian societies on the basis of the former's preoccupation with commodity exchange as opposed to the latter's preoccupation with the gift.

Very few ethnographers talked about the coexistence of gift and commodity exchange until the 1980s<sup>7</sup> (or at least talked about that coexistence as a central feature of the social setting they were describing rather than an aberration to be explained away). And certainly no-one was making that relationship, the co-evality of different forms of exchange and their mutual convertibility into each other, into

a central theoretical problematic to be explored in anthropological theory until the publication of Chris Gregory's *Gifts and Commodities* in 1982. Gregory was working as a political economist at the University of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the mid 1970s and was struck by a particular problem. The growing influence of commodity exchange and capitalist penetration was supposed to lead to a withering away of the old culture and the gift exchange systems that underpinned it. Yet gift exchange rituals seemed to be efflorescing across PNG, being performed with more enthusiasm and with bigger gift exchanges than ever before taking place as the money and goods gained from engagement in the commodity economy were ploughed into gifts (Gregory, 1982).

Gregory claimed that his colleagues in political economy, influenced by a Marxist teleology in which capitalism was predestined to tear down the walls of pre-capitalist culture, simply saw the relentless encroaching power of commodification, blind to fact that gifts were now being circulated in greater numbers than they ever had been in the past. By contrast, the anthropologists that he knew were talking about Melanesian society as if it were a collection of village- and kin-based gift exchange systems from which commodities and wage labour were absent. Both sides only saw the side of the situation that they wanted to see (Gregory, 1997).

For Gregory the task was to reconcile the two sides of the apparent contradiction. His solution was the development of a theory that stressed the co-equality of gifts and commodities, and the ways in which the one could be converted into the other, in particular the ways in which western-produced commodities were converted into gifts by their incorporation into customary ritual in PNG. The immense influence of Gregory's work within anthropological theory is perhaps best indexed by the array of major scholars who have lined up over the years since its publication to criticize it for proposing an overly stark dichotomy between gift and commodity exchange (Appadurai, 1986; Bloch and Parry, 1989; Carrier, 1990: 20; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990; Gell, 1992:144; Miller, 2001; Parry, 1986: 465). Gregory's work marks the first attempt to seriously theorize the Marxist theory of the commodity alongside the Maussian theory of the gift, and returns to Mauss's concern in the final chapter of his essay on the gift to historicize the relationship between the two, albeit in a very different cultural context. Gregory builds on a mass of ethnographic data, mostly from PNG, to develop his theory of the convertibility of commodities into gifts (and vice versa), but his is the first major attempt in anthropological theory to draw this evidence together in order to make a statement about the convertibility of objects from one kind of exchange to another.

## The potlatch of destruction

Twenty years before the publication of *Gifts and Commodities*, however, the Situationists were writing about gifting, and the conversion of commodities into gifts, as a revolutionary strategy against what they saw as the commodification of everyday life. We have already seen this in respect of potlatch, the practice which

they took from the ethnographic record as an inspiration for revolutionary activity, and *Potlatch* the journal, which, in its content and manner of exchange, marked an initial attempt to subvert commodity exchange by transforming commodities into gifts. Building upon this perspective, the Situationists became interested in the ways in which objects that took the commodity form (and therefore in their eyes enslaved human beings) could be de-commodified. Potlatch provided the inspiration of humans asserting their power over the commodity – through transforming them into gifts (as with the juvenile delinquents who are celebrated for stealing and then sharing among themselves) and also through their destruction. Their analysis of the revolutionary power of the transformation of commodities into gifts and de-commodification is best illustrated in their response to the Los Angeles riots of 1965.

The riots began in the Watts area of Los Angeles on 11 August 1965. Watts was predominantly inhabited by poor black residents and the immediate spark was when a local resident was stopped on suspicion of drink driving and his car impounded. The riots took place however, within a context in which large sections of the local population felt deep resentment at what they considered to be socio-economic inequality and ongoing harassment from the police force. Watts exploded into flames and the riots continued for five days, costing the lives of 34 people, causing tens of millions of dollars worth of damage and becoming a major international news story, focusing the attention of the world on conditions of life in the ghettos of the USA's major inner city areas.<sup>8</sup>

The Watts riots became a major issue for political debate. Conservative and progressive commentators both in the USA and globally clashed over the extent to which racialized socio-economic inequality explained or even excused the looting and vandalism that characterized the riots. The Situationists produced their analysis of what happened in Los Angeles as well, and it is no surprise that they lined up alongside those who blamed institutionalized poverty and racism for the uprising. But the Situationists' position differed significantly from most progressive and even radical commentators in one respect. For most of those who blamed poverty and racism for the riots, mixed in with the sympathy for the rioters was a degree of exasperation or condemnation for acts that seemed senseless, such as the destruction of property or the stealing of objects such as televisions or refrigerators by those without access to electricity. The Situationists' response to the riots was a piece written by Debord, entitled, 'The decline and fall of the spectacle-commodity economy'. In it he passes swiftly on from dealing with those who deny that the riots had any socio-economic roots, to berate:

all those who went so far as to recognize the 'apparent justifications' of the rage of the Los Angeles blacks (but never their real ones), all the ideologists and 'spokesmen' of the vacuous international Left, deplored the irresponsibility, the disorder, the looting (especially the fact that arms and alcohol were the first targets) and the 2000 fires with which the blacks lit up their battle and their ball. But who has defended the Los Angeles rioters in the terms they deserve? We will... Let the sociologists bemoan

the absurdity and intoxication of this rebellion. The role of a revolutionary publication is not only to justify the Los Angeles insurgents, but to help elucidate their perspectives, to explain theoretically the truth for which such practical action expresses the search. (Debord, 1981: 153)

Charles Radcliffe (2005: 350), looking back on his involvement in the radical movements of the 1960s recalls the impact of Debord's piece:

Whilst most radical groups were disapproving or dismissive (or both) of this Black anarchy – the Situationists . . . embraced it wholeheartedly, explained it, celebrated it and greedily asked for more: much, much more.

And it is in the theory of the gift and the inspiration of the potlatch that Debord finds the theoretical truth that he believes such practical action is seeking to express.

Through theft and gift they rediscover a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity, revealing its relations and even its production to be arbitrary and unnecessary. The looting of the Watts district was the most direct realization of the distorted principle: 'To each according to their false needs' – needs determined and produced by the economic system which the very act of looting rejects. But once the vaunted abundance is taken at face value and directly seized, instead of being eternally pursued in the rat-race of alienated labor and increasing unmet social needs, real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the potlatch of destruction. People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities. . . Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration, whatever particular form it may take. Only when it is paid for with money is it respected as an admirable fetish, as a symbol of status within the world of survival. (Debord, 1981: 155)

The looting of objects intended to be sold on the market as commodities and their consequent transformation into gifts or their destruction (both activities that the Situationists theorized with reference back to the theory of the gift and the practice of potlatch), from Debord's perspective, marked a de-commodification of commodities. Pre-dating Gregory's emphasis on the ways in which commodities could be transformed into gifts depending on the ways in which they were circulated, Debord drew attention to the fact that 'whatever form' the commodity took, it was open to 'alteration'. Both Debord's and Gregory's analysis of the mutability of commodities harks back at least as far as Marx's (1968: 79) famous description of capital in *Wage Labour and Capital*, in which he observes that:

A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations. Torn from these relationships it is no more capital than gold in itself is money, or sugar the price of sugar.

But as familiar as this perspective might have been, it is one that seems to have been largely forgotten, both by anthropologists, for whom the potential transformation of commodities into gifts was left untheorized until the 1980s or for the Situationists' fellow revolutionaries, for whom the only way forward was a revolution in the social relations of production.

## Commodification and humiliation

Debord's analysis of the process of de-commodification that he saw as inherent in the distribution and destruction of looted goods also provides one of the clearest indications of the ways in which the Situationists' radically anti-authoritarian and anarchist impulses are part of an analysis in which the root of wider forms of oppressive power are to be found in the 'oppressive rationality of the commodity'.

Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state's monopoly of armed violence. What is a policeman? He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity, whose job it is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for, instead of becoming a mere refrigerator or rifle – a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it. In rejecting the humiliation of being subject to police, the blacks are at the same time rejecting the humiliation of being subject to commodities. (Debord, 1981: 155)

As mentioned above, the Situationists were far from blind to the role of poverty, racism, political disenfranchisement and the emotional distress resulting from these issues, in leading to the Watts riots. Debord's essay repeatedly mentions them, but analyses those factors in the context of what he sees as being the fundamental structuring principle of alienation in a capitalist society: the tyranny of the commodity, whose overthrow is the essential prerequisite for these issues to be resolved. In so doing, Debord also touches upon the importance of an issue that has become of interest to many anthropologists in recent years: that of cultural 'humiliation'. The idea of cultural humiliation is first developed in Marshall Sahlins' (2005) article, 'The economics of develop-man in the Pacific'. Although not attracting a huge amount of attention at the time of its original publication in 1992, at least compared to some of Sahlins' other work, the concept of humiliation that Sahlins introduces at the end of the article has begun to exercise an influence in recent years (see Robbins, 2004; Robbins and Wardlow, 2005). In this article, Sahlins argues for a strong tendency to cultural continuity among Pacific Islanders. These enduring cultures are largely characterized by extended systems of gift exchange in which western-derived commodities are transformed in ways that may seem wasteful and irrational to outside observers who do not understand their particular

cultural logic. In order for cultural change to occur, people have to undergo a form of cultural humiliation in which they finally acknowledge that their own cultural value systems are inferior to those of the West and that the uses to which they previously put western-derived commodities are indeed a sign of a wasteful, irrational and inferior cultural order (Sahlins, 2005: 38–9).

Sahlins' model is essentially a model designed to describe the western colonization of the non-western world. Although intended to be a model with the potential to describe historical change (albeit with a strong preference to describing continuity when possible), it is still a model based upon the division of the world into separate culture areas divided from each other by virtue of different logics of exchange (the West seeks to impose its cultural logic of commodity exchange upon those in the non-western world, who either resist by incorporating the commodity into their own cultural value systems or are humiliated into acquiescence). As such, Sahlins (2005: 34) builds upon the half of Gregory's analysis that stresses the potential for commodities to be converted into gifts.

Thirty years prior to the publication of Sahlins' article, the Situationists were also interested in processes of cultural humiliation. And like Sahlins, they were interested in the ways in which the increasing importance of commodity exchange can be the motor of that humiliation. But unlike Sahlins, for whom this process is essentially the result of a commodity culture imposing its values upon a gifting culture, the Situationists point to the possibility that unequal access to commodities is a source of humiliation and social hierarchy that are central to the constitution of social class in western societies (well before the publication of works such as Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*, that focus on this possibility). Debord's analysis of humiliation differs slightly from Sahlins' as well in the sense that, for Debord, humiliation seems to be an inherent property of the dehumanizing spirit of the commodity, whereas for Sahlins it is more the case that there are some historically specific cultures that have to be humiliated in order for capitalist development to progress. This fleeting description of the importance of humiliation and the possibility for rejecting it in 'The decline and fall of the spectacle-commodity economy' (Debord, 1981), is developed further in the second chapter of Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1994), which is simply entitled 'Humiliation'. Here the argument for the relationship between humiliation and exchange is made in more detail. Although the Vaneigem acknowledges the importance of the humiliations of colonialism and racism, for him these are merely one aspect of a generalized authority inherent in a world of commodity production and exchange: a generalized authority that ultimately humiliates all of those who are condemned to live within it (Vaneigem, 1994: 37). For Sahlins, the humiliation of colonialism is indeed intimately tied to the insistence that the colonized adopt the cultural logic of commodity accumulation and exchange, but there is little sense that this cultural logic does not simply derive from the West but is in fact equally problematic, humiliating and resisted within its alleged heartlands.

One of the implications of Sahlins' (2005: 24, 39) description is the ways in which gifting and the transformation of gifts into commodities can be seen as a resistance to colonialism and its humiliations. Gifting as an act of resistance was, as we have seen, an idea developed by the Situationists 25 years earlier. Potlatch is re-invented in the Watts riots, or, as Vaneigem puts it in his discussion of humiliation, 'a new reality can only be based on the principle of the *gift*' (1994: 31, emphasis in the original). One does not necessarily need to wholeheartedly agree with every aspect of the Situationists' analysis of the meaning of looting, or indeed the inherent humiliating potential of the commodity, to see that the model of commodity-based humiliation that Vaneigem draws from it is potentially more nuanced than Sahlins', not only because it sees the potential for this humiliation to affect the inhabitants of western society, but also by virtue of the way in which it perceives humiliation as an ongoing contested dynamic in which tendencies for commodity humiliation or its rejection are in constant flux. And rather than this more nuanced perspective being some kind of accident that the Situationists developed despite the drawback of appropriating anthropological theory for activist rhetoric, it is precisely their desire to engage with contemporary political debates and socio-economic cleavages at the heart of western political economies that led them to view humiliation as an ongoing tension central to those political economies rather than a juggernaut that those political economies inflicted on other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

The Situationists' attempts to counter what they viewed as the reifying effects of the commodity-spectacle economy were not limited to appropriations of the anthropological theory of the gift. Through *détournement* of received media images they sought to make connections between aspects of social life that they believed the commodity-spectacle tended to separate. Through the process of psychogeography and *dérive*, they sought to see the hidden social traces of the living city that they felt the commodity-spectacle hid from view. Indeed, both of these have received far more attention from those seeking to understand or emulate the Situationists, with writings about psychogeography and the Situationists being comparatively easy to find and various activist groups, such as 'Adbusters', and prominent anti-globalization activists such as Naomi Klein (2000) drawing explicit inspiration from *détournement* in their attempts to subvert the intended symbolic meaning of images produced by the advertising industry. The still limited academic literature on Situationism tends to either ignore or give a relatively small amount of attention to their engagement with gift theory, despite the clear evidence of its influence in the Situationists' writing and practice. Likewise in anthropology, despite the discipline's ability to make use of revolutionary theorists and concepts (such as Gramsci's notion of hegemony), Debord and the Situationists remain largely overlooked, and it is only recently that the ways in which Mauss's own libertarian socialism underpinned his development of gift

theory seem to have become of interest to academic practitioners of the discipline (Godelier, 1999: 4, 64, 208; Graeber, 2001: 151–2). It would be a pity if this oversight continued. For, whether one finds it entirely convincing or not, what the Situationist development of gift theory demonstrates is there is a potential for anarchist and revolutionary theory to engage with anthropological theory in a far more productive manner than the simple cherry-picking of ethnographic illustrations that another world might once have been (and therefore might once again) be possible.

## Notes

1. On the intellectual and artistic genealogy of the Situationists, see Sadler (1998: 1–4), Coverley (2006: 83–92), Radcliffe (2005: 374–5), Marcus (1997: 51, 126, 164, 181, 2002), McDonough (2002), Plant (1992: 1–37). For more on the Situationists' enduring influence on anarchist and revolutionary movements, popular culture and academia, see Plant (1992: 150–87), Marcus (1997, 2002), Savage (1991), Harold (2007).
2. For more on the influence of Mauss and other writers on gift exchange and potlatch on the Lettrists, Situationists and *Potlatch* journal, see Marcus (1997: 384,394–6), Sadler (1998: 36–7), Plant (1992: 72, 130, 135–6).
3. Marcus (1997:23) offers an alternative translation in which for Debord what is distributed are 'previously unpublished desires and questions, and only their thorough analysis by others can constitute a return gift'.
4. This English translation is available at: <http://www.notbored.org/potlatch.html>
5. See Plant (1992: 150–87) for a discussion of the ways in which later influential postmodern theory, such as that of Baudrillard and Lyotard, represents a de-politicized development of the work of Debord and the Situationists.
6. The best example of the common contempt for the Situationists among some writers who seek to make a living raking over their ideas and making them palatable is to be found in Coverley (2006: 22), who describes how, 'the Lettrists merged with even more insignificant groups and the Situationist International was born'. Coverley warns his readers that, 'those looking for a cogent expression of psychogeographical ideas will be disappointed by these uninspired offerings', before going on to devote a full chapter out of the four chapters that make up his book to their analysis.
7. Some partial exceptions include Firth's work on social change in *Tikopia* (1959), the work of Monica Hunter (1936) and also her work with Godfrey Wilson (Wilson and Hunter Wilson, 1945) on industrialization and social change in Africa.
8. For more on the background and shockwaves of the Watts riots, see Horne (1995) and Abu-Lughod (2007).

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