

JUSTYNA BARON¹

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF EXCHANGE

Although the issue of exchange remains a crucial element of studies on Bronze Age societies (comp. Gediga, this volume) it is its economic aspect which has been mostly emphasized. That is doubtless a significant aspect, however it may not be analysed separately from a flow of ideas or technologies. The research on broadly understood exchange may be and usually is helpful in interpreting social phenomena occurring in prehistory (comp. Ostoja-Zagórski 1992). Both anthropological and sociological studies have already proved that exchange is a form of socio-economic social communication, expressing itself in such actions as transmission of goods. Needless to say, exchange is only one element of a complex structure (Kempny 1988).

The paper aims to present several selected anthropological theories referring to the problem of exchange regarded both as material and ideological practice.

The economic aspects of exchange was discussed by J.G. Frazer (1918) who indicated the following principles:

1. The processes of exchange result from certain motives making people meet their particular needs.
2. While a payment is given to all people involved in an exchange action, the exchange itself leads to institutionalization of interactions or to emergence of interaction patterns.
3. Such institutionalized systems of interaction not only meet the needs of individuals but also delimit of some social structures, which might then appear in a social system.
4. Exchange processes distinguish groups with respect to a relative access to valuable goods eventually leading to a diversity as regards power, prestige and privileges.

Such anthropologists as B. Malinowski (1981) criticized Frazer's analysis pointing out significance of exchange as a social action itself. He investigated *kula* – a closed ceremonial exchange system conducted in communities of the Massim archipelago and observed that among exchanged valuables two types of

¹ Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław.

non-use items dominated. They were traded to the north (necklaces) or to the south (armbands). Contrary to Frazer, he regarded the *kula* ring is neither an economic nor material exchange system. It was rather a symbolic exchange joining a net of social interactions, however, transactions of economic nature might have occurred in *kula* as well (Malinowski 1981: 127). "In nearly non of the exchange forms we will find any signs of personal benefit, there is no reason to interpret them from purely economic or utilitarian perspective due to the fact, that the *kula* exchange fails to result in an increase of usable goods possessed by both parties" (Malinowski 1981: 242). He formulated the conclusions as follows.

1. The meaning of the *kula* exchange was to break a concept of a rational being who only desires to meet his basic needs and operates according to the principle of least effort (Malinowski 1981: 649; Turner 2005: 290).

2. It is in psychological not economical needs that we find a force initiating and establishing the exchange relations, and thus they are a key factor in explanation of social action.

3. The relations of exchange may also influence individuals which are not directly involved in exchange. As it is proved in *kula*, complex patterns of indirect exchange may support developing stable social relations.

4. Symbolic exchange actions are essential social processes resulting both in diversity of social layers and integration of the society into a coherent and solidary entity.

According to M. Mauss (1973), a "common" exchange of goods, valuables and products realized by individuals in a mode of market transaction, has never taken place in economic and legal systems preceding our times. It is the communities, not the individuals, who share mutual obligations, exchange and make agreements. Clans, tribes and families are the parties of such a contract; they contact each other or fight, both as whole groups and/or at the chief levels. The essential question asked by M. Mauss is: "What power resides in the object given, that causes its recipient to pay it back" (1973: 214). While trying to answer that, he pointed several exchange patterns including the most vivid example called *potlatch*. *Potlatch* is a system of prestation exchange observed among certain American Indian tribes on the Pacific Northwest coast (*ibidem*: 214). The prestation system comprised entire group of goods, ideas and ceremonies which were the subject of exchange. Not only desired goods or technically useful ideas were exchanged by the groups but also festivals, ceremonies, women, children and dances. All the prestations seemed to be voluntary; however, in fact, they were strictly obligatory under the penalty of war, public or private one. In the *potlatch* model, gifts were immediately exchanged to equivalent goods or recipients received them under the condition that next time they would repay with offerings of higher value, which consequently would result in giving them rights to receive new gifts. During *potlatch* gifts of considerable value were exchanged and their nominal price increased along with significance of commemorated events. The ceremony itself performed the following functions: repayment for already received gifts; a public

claim for some certain title or privileges made by a family or a social group, or an announcement of changing social status; surpassing rivals in generosity. When possible, *potlatch* aimed to destroy rivals by imposing obligations impossible to be repayed. Consequently, the rival was unable to manage the obligations and lost his privileges, titles, social rank, authority and prestige.

The structural concept of exchange was developed by C. Lévi-Strauss (see Turner 2005, footnote on p. 290). He argued against Frazer's concept and stressed that it is an exchange process, not exchanged goods, that has its own meaning. In his opinion, exchange cannot be understood only in terms of individual motives, due to the fact, that exchange relations reflect patterns of social organization, which is an entity.

The principles of exchange observed in so-called "primitive societies" were defined in a study by M.P. Sahlins (1992: 140). He distinguished three basic models:

1. General reciprocity referring to transactions which are supposed to be altruistic, that is when both parties offer a mutual help; material aspect of exchange is dominated by its social value. That, however, does not mean that transactions of that type result in no commitments from the adverse party. Receiving goods is regulated by a poorly precise obligation to repay, when the giver expresses his needs or/and when it is possible for the recipient.

2. Balanced reciprocity which refers to a direct exchange. That includes numerous types of gift exchange, payments and that what we call trade. It has less personal and more economical character than the general reciprocity. The parties perform exchange guided by their particular economic and social objectives and the material aspect of the process is as important as the social one. Unilateral goods influx is out of the question. If the required reciprocation fails to take place, the relations between the parties are broken.

3. Negative reciprocity refers to a situation when one party achieves certain goods and does not have to reciprocate without suffering any consequences. Deception and theft may be a good examples here. That is the most impersonal type of exchange.

The aspects of exchange mentioned above do not refer only to interpersonal relations. According to Mauss, we should not forget exchange between people and the invisible world surrounding them (1974: 230). Offerings made to gods and nature forces have not only the qualities of a gift but they also represent a type of exchange. *Potlatch*, as mentioned above, influenced not only people surpassing themselves in generosity and goods which were given or/and consumed but also nature. Exchange of gifts between people and spirits induced spirits of dead, gods, objects, animals and nature to be generous towards the givers. Mauss argues that the character of that type of exchange results from a natural evolution: spirits of dead and gods were the first beings, people were to make agreements with. That exchange was necessary and avoiding it – dangerous. On the other hand, exchange with such beings was one of the easiest and the most certain actions

to perform. A ritual destruction aimed exactly to be an offering which might be repayed. Owing to that, all forms of *potlatch* contained an element of gift destruction. This is how we may interpret human sacrifices, burning of precious goods or throwing copper items into the sea. Those actions were performed not only to emphasize giver's generosity but also to make a sacrifice to gods and, consequently, to conclude a contract.

The exchange models presented above are today classical theories which have been discussed and criticised for decades, but they also gave an impulse for further studies on that subject (comp. Kempny, Szmátka 1992; Turner 2005).

REFERENCES

- Frazer J.G., 1918, *Folklore in the Old Testament* 2, New York.
- Gediga B., *Remarks on long-distance trade exchange in the Bronze Age and early Iron Age*, this volume.
- Kempny M., 1988, *Wymiana i społeczeństwo. Obraz rzeczywistości społecznej w ujęciu współczesnych socjologicznych i antropologicznych teorii wymiany*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź.
- Kempny M., Szmátka J. (eds.), 1992, *Współczesne teorie wymiany społecznej. Zbiór tekstów*, Warszawa.
- Malinowski B., 1981, *Argonauci Zachodniego Pacyfiku*, *Dziela*, 3, Warszawa.
- Mauss M., 1973, *Szkic o darze. Forma i podstawa wymiany w społeczeństwach archaicznych*, [in:] *Socjologia i antropologia*, Warszawa, 211–415.
- Ostoja-Zagórski J., 1992, *Rola wymiany w pradziejach Europy Środkowej (na przykładzie epoki brązu)*, *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* 40/2, 119–135.
- Turner J.H., 2005, *Struktura teorii socjologicznej. Wydanie nowe*, Warszawa.
- Sahlins M.P., 1992, *Socjologia wymiany w społeczeństwach pierwotnych*, [in:] Kempny M., Szmátka J. (eds.), *Współczesne teorie wymiany społecznej. Zbiór tekstów*, Warszawa, 131–172.