

The Meaning of ‘Free’ Work: service as a gift, and labour as a commodity for Ni-Vanuatu labour migrants

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Introduction

Marcel Mauss’s famous essay on ‘The Gift,’ written in the early 1920s, discussed the social phenomenon he termed the *prestation*, tentatively translatable as ‘provision of a service’ (Mauss 2016). Whereas in liberal economic thought, ‘services’ – and thus people, and their actions – are often treated as commoditized ‘things’, in Mauss’s analysis even the exchange of objects could be seen as transfers of ‘total services’ with a personal character. For Mauss (2016: 61), the *prestation* was a general and lasting contract, in which are exchanged not only material and movable wealth, but a wide range of services and courtesies. While there has been much discussion of the exchange of things-as-gifts, less attention has been paid to human actions, performances, services, or work given voluntarily, or in the expectation that it will be reciprocated in-kind.

Work in small-scale agricultural societies was often arranged as a rendering of personal services, at once economic, political and religious; it could be voluntary, but sometimes it was compelled by an authority (Godelier 1972: 266). Work was often regulated by institutional arrangements, norms and expectations. While assistance was often freely given as mutual help, larger tasks such as the construction of buildings, and ritual tasks, often required more formal reciprocal arrangements, and coordination by leaders. Malinowski (1921: 6–7) discussed how work in the Trobriands was guided by respect for the chief and the magician. Trobrianders had a range of categories of communal or cooperative work, some of which carried expectations that workers would be fed by the chief or organiser of the tasks.

It seems common throughout Melanesia that meals were provided in return for tasks such as garden work. The food was not considered as ‘payment’ akin to a wage. Rather, work parties would expect the garden owner to reciprocate in-kind when they needed assistance. As Gregory (2015: 62) summarises, “Labor-time is often given as a gift and it creates the obligation to return a work-gift at some future time.”

Anthropologists have long argued that motivations for work cannot be reduced to subsistence and necessity, or utility and gain, as had been supposed by earlier economic theories of ‘natural economy’ (Malinowski 1921; Mauss 2016: 185). A variety of social and political motivations and incentives should be taken into account, including prestige, obligation and satisfaction (Firth 1951: 141–147). Malinowski (1921: 7) discussed Trobrianders’ enjoyment of work, showing that they had a “keen interest in their gardens, work with spirit, and can do sustained and efficient work, both when they do it individually and communally.” Different forms of ‘work ethic’ and satisfaction in work can be found across Melanesia (Spittler 2009: 172). For instance, Fajans (1997) wrote of the value that Baining place on work and ‘sweat’.

Despite early ethnographers’ depictions of pristine social activity, islanders in the Western Pacific have been engaged in forms of commoditised and wage labour since mid-19th century. In this chapter, I explore how meanings and values of work in rural Vanuatu have been transformed in the process of European colonization, and the imposition of indentured and wage labour regimes. I focus on the rural communities of Lamén and Lamén Bay, Epi, which have had a high degree of engagement in New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Pacific seasonal worker program. Workers are issued with seasonal contracts and visas for up to seven months to work in orchards and vineyards. Although the island of Epi has a long history of labour engagements, this has been sporadic

and during my fieldwork many adults were experiencing formal wage labour for the first time in their generation.

Mauss (2016: 57–58) wanted to connect contractual law and ethics¹ with the forms and ideas that guide exchange, including the ties between persons and things. In order “to construct a kind of prehistory of our modern kind of legal and economic contract,” he focused on the obligation to return (Parry 1986: 457). For Mauss, total *prestations* were irreducible to calculative market logics and legal frameworks, and had to be approached as ‘wholes’ in which human actions were guided by a mixture self-interest and generosity, freedom and obligation (2016: 194; see also Hart 2007).

The term *prestation* features frequently in Mauss’s text, alongside *don*, *cadeau*, and *present*, and indigenous terms such as *potlatch*. *Prestation* is emphasised in the introduction and conclusion, where its relevance to contemporary Europe, to ideas of contract, and to the multidimensional aspects of ‘total’ returns are foregrounded (Guyer 2016: 19). Mauss (2016: 58) was particularly interested in exploring the *prestation*’s “voluntary character, so to speak, apparently free and without cost, and yet constrained and interested.” The term has an ambivalent history. Guyer (2016: 13, 19) writes that *prestation* suggests status differentiation and an upward movement, suggestive of feudal arrangements or a kind of tax. Hart (2007: 480) interprets *prestation* as “community service,” which may appear volitional, but he too describes it in feudal terms and likens it to labour performed as an alternative to imprisonment. Mauss himself was interested in semantic ambiguity. In another essay, he discusses the slippage between ‘gift’ and ‘poison’ in old German, and how the origins of the wage (in *gage*, *wadium*, *vadi*) “is at the same time good and dangerous” (Mauss 1997: 30). This is true of *prestation* too: as I shall show, the ambiguity of the term was exploited by colonial powers in imposing work regimes.

Mauss (2016: 179) suggested that through the introduction of modern European legal arrangements and forms of market exchange, this multidimensional form of social contract had become increasingly abstracted, attenuated, individuated, and reduced to naked calculation in the market: “Exchanges between groups which had an aesthetic, religious, moral, legal and economic aspect have been stripped down to leave purely economic exchanges between individuals” (Parry 1986: 457). As for Marx before him, for Mauss this process implied not only increasing individualism but also calculation and logical abstraction (Hart 1982: 47). The attention paid by Mauss to different types of exchange and contractual theory is an intriguing starting place to investigate questions of freedom and obligation, voluntarism and coercion, with reference to work. In the first section of this chapter, I summarize debates around different work regimes from the colonial era to the present day. I contrast the Maussian approach with free market theories that treat labour as a commodity (Guyer 2012:495).

In the second section I explore why some forms of work in the colonial era were experienced as coercive and exploitative. Although promoted as voluntary (and legally distinguished from slavery), nineteenth century indentured labour regimes were markedly ‘unfree’. While the plantation economy extended the commodification of labour, colonial officers appropriated and extended communal work practices to fit their economic and political interests. Communal labour under colonialism was often more coercive than ‘voluntary,’ though it was frequently described in gift-like language of *prestation* and mutual assistance.

Finally, I look at values and meanings of work in a contemporary rural Vanuatu community which has a high degree of engagement in New Zealand’s Pacific seasonal worker programme. I will contrast work figured as a gift – either as a “voluntary” contribution towards the community as a whole, or with expectation of reciprocity –with

work conceived as a commodity under capitalism, i.e. labour performed with expectation of payment. I do not intend to insinuate that commodity and gift correspond to an ‘us’ (West) and ‘them’ divide. Gift and commodity exchanges have long coexisted and interacted in Melanesia.² In European metropolises, much if not most work – especially in the home –has never been commodified (Spittler 2009: 173). Gift-like characteristics can be found in the heart of commercial centres and industrial workplaces (Carrier, 1992; Martin, 2015).³ Mauss (2016: 178–182) identified gift-like practices in many arenas of 20th century European life and work.

My discussion of free work in contemporary Vanuatu addresses both the sense of experiencing autonomy in one’s work (rather than feeling ‘like a slave’), and the giving of work free of charge. There were growing anxieties within the communities of Lamén island and Lamén Bay about a decline in cooperative and sharing behaviours, as seasonal wage workers were said to be increasingly reluctant to ‘work for free’ and ‘work for others’. But calculative reasoning in which time is treated as a scarce resource appeared to be altering people’s attitude to community work at home, including the attitudes of those who were not performing wage labour.

Free Contracts and the Commodification of Work

It is conventional in liberal theory to assume that, if a contractual agreement to work is deemed free from fraud or coercion, then it is just. If on the other hand the worker is compelled to sell labour power by coercion, necessity or deception, then the free or voluntary basis of a just price or “ethical value” for labour is no longer given; it is a “voluntarium imperfection” (Ryan 1916: 329). This is the realm of “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” that Marx (1990: 280) derides, since under capitalism the free labourer devoid of any other means to make a living has no choice but to sell his labour-power. Thus, the formal

equality presupposed in the free contract masks the deeply unequal relations between buyer and seller of labour in capitalism's "hidden abode."

Durkheim (Mauss's maternal uncle) was similarly concerned to critique liberal economic and political assumptions about the rise of individualism and the role of the market, but he did so by focusing on contract and solidarity. For Durkheim (1958: 174), "all exchange is a contract, explicit or implicit," and this is the basis of social bonds. A contract expresses cooperation and binds parties in mutual agreement. Thus, by definition, it should be free and consensual and based on agreement over "just value". Labour contracts should not contravene the worker's interests (Durkheim 1958: 211). The contract transforms economic interests into morally binding, enduring relations of interdependence, demanding mutual sacrifice and subject to moral obligations as well as law (Durkheim, 2013: 160, 173). Contrary to the assumptions of free market theorists, he stressed that the privatization of contracts required *more* state intervention (cf. Graeber 2001: 152).

Like his uncle, Mauss (2016: 57–58) was interested in the 'archaic forms of contract' and the 'non-contractual elements' that form the moral basis of social solidarity. Mauss refuses the oppositions between freedom and obligation, self-interest and generosity, individual and society, that underpinned much political and economic thinking (Graeber, 2001: 153; Hart 2007: 481; Parry 1986: 456). The gift is the paradigmatic example of how a voluntary act creates a sense of obligation, with a mutual and open-ended quality. Mauss (2016: 179) detected the continuation of custom and moral obligation in many aspects of French society at the time he was writing, when many legal and economic ideas had become impersonal (even inhuman) abstractions.

Although some concept of 'work' can be generally found across a great many languages and historical contexts, for Marx (1990), its abstraction as quantities of commodified 'labour(-time)' is specific to (and a defining feature of) capitalism; a mode of

production in which the market is dominant. Earlier (1988: 71), in his Paris manuscripts, he had written that work “produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity.” The life and free activity of the worker are abstracted and appropriated, resulting in his estrangement and alienation.

Mauss saw industrial alienation similarly, but took a more legal approach by concentrating on the transfer of rights (Graeber 2001: 162). In his conclusions, he wrote of an incompatibility between industrial and commercial law and living morality: “One might even say that an entire section of the law (*droit*), that relating to industrialists and merchants, is presently in conflict with morality. The economic presumptions of the people, the producers, come from their firm desire to follow the thing they have produced, and from the acute sense that their work is being sold without their sharing in the profit” (2016: 179). In comparison to the ‘total prestation’ of the kind Mauss saw in gift relationships, “a relation of wage labor was a miserable and impoverished form of contract” (Graeber 2001: 162).

Mauss welcomed echoes of the gift in the emergence of institutions such as social insurance, mutual societies, family assistance funds, and other forms of social protection (2016: 179-81). He was a guild socialist, sympathetic to voluntarism and the cooperative movement, though not to the Bolshevik revolution (Hart 2007: 478). What mattered for contemporary society was to counter abstractions such as the legal distinction between persons and things, and to add rights beyond the ‘bare’ commoditisation of services.

Mauss was one of many to contend that work/labour is not a commodity. Lujo Brentano had written in 1877 “that labour power is nothing but the person itself and hence, labour is essentially different from all other commodities” (quoted in Evju 2013: 225). Three years later, Irish economist John Kells Ingram complained to the British TUC that “Labour is spoken of as if it were an independent entity, separable from the personality of a workman.” In fact, the worker was a ‘free man’ (quoted in Evju 2013: 225; see also O’Higgins 1997:

226). In 1919, the phrase “labour is not a commodity” was inserted into Article 427 of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1944, a century after Karl Marx drafted his Paris Manuscripts, “Labour is not a Commodity” was the opening statement in the ‘declaration of aims and purpose’ of the ILO⁴.

For Karl Polanyi labour was a ‘fictitious commodity’ in the sense that work is human activity inseparable from life, not a thing produced for sale on the market (2001 [1944]: 75). Ethnographic accounts of work in non-market societies accounts had shown that work was not primarily motivated by economic gain or necessity, but by “reciprocity, competition, joy of work, and social approbation” (2001, p. 277).⁵ Polanyi valued freedom highly – not the liberal bourgeois concept based on individual self-responsibility, private property, contractual relations and ‘free’ enterprise, but ‘social freedom’: to be free *through* social responsibility and interconnectedness (see also Hann, Miller, Santos et al., this volume). This collective capacity to lead an ethical life and to shape society could only be achieved when people were no longer dominated by opaque and alienating political and economic forces (Baum 1996: 27; Polanyi 2018:22; 2001: 265-266). Polanyi recognised the contradiction that in order to extend “freedom of contract” in colonised regions, people were “forced to make a living by selling their labor” and ‘freed’ from non-contractual social relations (2001: 171). I turn in the next section to consider the complex processes in which labour markets were established in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu’s Unfree Labour History

Melanesia has a long history of commoditised labour. Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides) broadly fits the pattern Gregory (2015: 127) classifies into four phases; forced (overseas plantations 1860s-1903), semi-forced (domestic plantations, 1880s-1950), ‘semi-free’ (agreement labour in 1950s-70s), and ‘free’ wage labour (since 1920s). In the 19th century the

archipelago was treated as a labour reserve for indentured labour, known as ‘blackbirding’. Most went to plantations: at least 40000 Ni-Vanuatu were taken to Queensland, 14000 to Fiji, 10000 to New Caledonia, and others to Samoa and Tahiti (Adams, 1986: 59).

The extent to which Ni-Vanuatu could be said to have entered into freely negotiated agreements, first for overseas labour, and then for domestic plantations, has been hotly debated.⁶ In the 19th century labour trade, known as ‘blackbirding’, recruitment practices deviated from legal conventions for indentured labour.⁷ Melanesians usually received no written contract outlining reciprocal obligations and conditions, and in any case, would likely be unable to interpret written or verbal contracts in English or French (Hoeft, 2017: 368).

Although blackbirding is legally distinct from chattel slavery that characterised the Atlantic slave trade, much of the nineteenth century Pacific labour trade fits the conventional definition of modern slavery as a term covering trafficked, forced, and bonded labour.⁸ Especially in the early phases, deception and kidnapping were common practice (Saunders 1982; Mortensen, 2000). Activist descendants of trafficked labourers in Queensland object to the term indentured as a weak euphemism, preferring ‘Sugar Slave’ (Davis, 2017). And even in cases where islanders appear to have accepted their passage (such as those recruiting for a second time), they were often subject to exploitation, disease, and violence in poor working and living conditions (e.g. Saunders, 1982; Shineberg, 1991).

One of the reasons I chose Epi as a field-site is its long history as a ‘labour frontier’ (after Gregory 2015: 127). Epi was one of, if not the most ‘blackbirded’ islands in the region (Price and Baker 1976:114; Siegel 1985: 48). In the nineteenth century labour trade, there were numerous abuses and violent incidents involving Epi islanders (e.g. Mortensen 2000; Saunders 1982: 20). Later, west Epi became a primary location for plantations during a ‘land grab’, especially by a French chartered company, in the late 19th and early 20th century (Smith 2017). Since labour was difficult to obtain on the island where the plantations were

located, most workers were brought in from elsewhere. Planters sold and gambled workers, sometimes in the currency of ‘years of work’; an example of ‘extreme commodification’ (Jones 2019: 549, 552). Workers often suffered brutality at the hands of the planters (Adams 1986: 54, 61; Jacomb 1920; Panoff 1991). This is particularly true of French-owned plantations, in part due to the fact they were not regulated until 1910s, and even then regulators usually sided with planters (Adams 1986:56; Jones 2019: 545; Panoff 1991).⁹ People on Epi today recall horrific abuses and punishments on the plantations (see also Rodman, 1998).

On Australian and Pacific island plantations alike, Melanesian workers were paid little, and typically given trade goods or truck¹⁰, in lieu of (cash) wages. This was also the case on Epi (Jones 2019: 546), where planters often distributed poor quality alcohol. Goods were often sold at inflated prices, offering further profits for planters and traders (Graves, 1983). Over time, more and more islanders refused indentured work, often preferring to sell their own copra, or would negotiate short-term contracts, and better pay. Even poorer inland villages were able to command higher wages from local planters suffering labour shortages (Adams 1986: 59; Jones 2019: 551).

The residents of Lamén experienced a range of contractual labour in the later decades of the 20th century. World War II brought compulsory conscription of adult males in 1942 (Haberkorn 1990: 155). Conditions were poor, and many died from dysentery. The establishment of military bases accelerated urban development. Rural islanders continued to engage in wage labour, but they mostly returned to the village at the end of short-term engagements. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, most able bodied Lamén men worked at a fishery at Palikula, on Espiritu Santo island. The owners were notoriously duplicitous, and Lamén workers were promised fortunes:

“He said, “This is your number. When it's time to give you your money, you will need your number. Big money! You can buy a ship, or you can marry a white woman”.

They lied so much!” (Recorded interview)

Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, after the departure of Vietnamese labourers from New Caledonia, Lamen men were engaged to fill labour shortages in the expanding nickel mines. Urbanization accelerated, but opportunities for international migration dried up after Independence in 1980, except for work on foreign fishing vessels. It was not until the launch of New Zealand’s seasonal labour programme in 2008 that large numbers of rural Ni-Vanuatu once again had an opportunity for international migration. As in the past, in this new phase workers are issued temporary contracts, are tied to particular employers, and have the costs of their reproduction borne largely by their home communities (Smith 2015).

These forms of commoditized contractual labour were not the only kind of work arrangements experienced by islanders during the colonial period. As in many colonized regions, a range of non-commoditized labour arrangements were in operation. And while these regimes were artefacts of colonial administration, they were often figured by administrators as customary, communal and ‘voluntary’ in nature.

Prestations and Communal Work

While Mauss used *prestation* in a positive sense in his essay on ‘the Gift’, he was aware that the term had an ambivalent history (Mallard 2018: 188, 196). In the early 1900s, Mauss was involved with the ‘Committee for the Protection and Defence of Indigenous Populations’ (*Comité de protection et de défense des indigènes*). The Committee, conscious of abuses in often violent extraction of labour by chartered companies (including in New Caledonia), had written to the Minister of Colonies to request that in-kind payments should be prohibited, and that women should be exempted from some heavy labour. At the same time, they advocated

that the term *prestation* (or *requisition*) should replace *corvée*. For, while *corvée* was associated with coercion and forced labour, *prestations* should be premised on consent, although such arrangements need not take the form of a wage contract (Mallard 2018: 187–189). But, as Mallard (2018: 198) suggests, perhaps Mauss also deceived himself when he naively considered the possibility for a more “giving” and reciprocal relationship between France and her colonies in his later work, *The Nation*.

A system of *prestations* was implemented across many of France’s colonies. But the connotations of volition and reciprocity can be read as a fiction (Mallard 2018: 189), or a façade, masking the exploitation of a cheap labour force in extending colonial infrastructure: “French colonial governments in central Africa created a system of forced labor that they disguised rather thinly as in-kind contributions ‘for the common good’: that is, they claimed that building roads... would benefit everyone, including Africans, and then made Africans do all of the work” (Freed 2010: 213).

Due to the relatively late institution of a colonial government and the fact it was a Condominium with Britain, it seems doubtful that a formal conscripted labour system was imposed centrally in Vanuatu (then New Hebrides). However, when recruitment of New Hebrideans for labour in New Caledonia ceased, a system of *prestations* was introduced in the latter. In 1924, around the time Mauss wrote his famous essay, *‘Les Prestations’* — a labour tax requiring compulsory labour from adult men — was instituted on the Grand Terre, and extended to the whole colony by 1929. This labour was restricted to ‘public works’, mostly for road works. Men could buy out their liability for *prestations* with a payment known as *rachat* (‘redemption’). French colonial officers were instructed to convince the indigenous Kanaks that the system was in their own best interest, and had to document Kanak compliance (Muckle 2015).

Unpaid communal labour appears to have been a routine part of colonial administration in the colonial New Hebrides, albeit in a more informal, decentralised form. In 1934 a British District Agent wrote to the Resident Commissioner to request legal power to enforce communal labour for young men evading road maintenance obligations (specified as a task for communal work since 1917). The Commissioner's response was negative: enforcement would be contrary to the International Labour Convention of 1930 (WPA, 1953 (1934) 295/201/34). This Convention was the result of protracted efforts by the ILO to ban forced labour. Mauss was acquainted with its French socialist Director General, Albert Thomas, who had long campaigned against abuses by French companies (Mallard 2018: 189). However, the ban did not extend to work fulfilling "normal civic obligations of citizens," and "minor communal services of a kind which, being performed by the members of the community, [were] in the direct interest of the said community" (ILO, n.d.). France officially prohibited forced labour practices in 1937 (Mallard 2018: 192), but it took several more years before the measures were implemented in the colonies (Freed 2010: 220; Okia 2012: 18).

Communal labour — i.e. labour deemed in the interests of the local community — continued in the postwar years in both French and British colonies. These practices were often overseen by a chief or headman and legitimated as a continuation of traditional communal labour practices (Okia 2012: 16–22). Like the French *prestations*, collective labour systems in the British Empire were often described in the language of the gift, or of mutual aid.¹¹ In the New Hebrides, the British Commissioner assumed communal work was "customary," and that it was the job of the Chief or Headman to ensure that all participated. In 1940, a District Officer provided a list of communal tasks that the Headman could instigate, summarized here:

1. Cleaning public spaces in the village

2. Building houses (including gendered tasks) in return for food from the owner
3. Communal pig fences
4. Yam planting (including gendered tasks) in return for food from the garden owner
5. Cleaning paths or roads (usually Tuesday)

It is likely that house construction and yam planting were continuations of traditional practices, while cleaning tasks (including the fencing of pigs) are remembered on Epi as having been promoted by missionaries and colonial officers. A notion of monetary equivalence appears to have been introduced, even for the traditional tasks. The Southern District Agent added that “Where a villager is in regular employment he must pay his headman a forfeit for days lost otherwise he will get no help for the construction of his garden or home” (WPA, 1953 (1940) 2/40).

In 1953, the Agent for the Southern District again corresponded with the Resident Commissioner regarding the ILO’s regulations on forced labour. The Commissioner appeared to know that communal unpaid labour was routinely used to perform tasks such as clearing roads. The District Agent replied that:

“There appears to be general agreement that communal work is necessary, and especially so on Tanna where some hundreds of miles of road have for decades been kept in just passable state by communal labour. In France local roads are maintained by a system of communal work without protest from the International Labour Organisation to which the fact is reported with full explanation annually.¹² Is there any reason why communal work should not be enforced/ - by means of suitable legislation [*this comment was added later*]/- on Tanna in order to spread the burden of road maintenance (which is in the general interest) over the whole population instead of letting it fall, as it now does, on the few whom the District Agents can persuade to do some work?” (WPA, 1953 F. 1/8)

The Commissioner responded to the Agent that, although he did not consider “customary” communal work to contravene the ILO’s Forced Labour Convention (No.29/1930), “the admittedly loose control at present exercised through Government “work” days is as far as we can go” (WPA, 1953/327 F201). In this way the ‘voluntary’ nature of custom and communal work was appropriated by the colonial power.

Perhaps in response to the ILO’s 1957 Convention, which sought to complement the 1930 Convention by adding certain conditions which had become concerns following World War II, on 30 June 1958, both the French and British Resident Commissioners wrote to all District Agents to ‘remind’ them that all communal labour must be reported beforehand – including any offers of remuneration; “the use of communal labour, whether such labour is obtained through the intermediary of Chiefs or otherwise, is permitted only where the work is of direct utility to the community and those who will be employed have freely consented to give their labour and are not acting under duress of any kind” (WPA, 1953 (1958) 24/58). The British and French District Agents for the Southern District replied that communal labour had been deployed to clear roads since 1917, and that the use of paid Government labour had been resisted by local people, who preferred to do it themselves (WPA, 1953 (1958) F.1:8).

While the above exchanges are drawn from a file concerning the island of Tanna in the south, it is likely similar arrangements pertained on Epi during the colonial period. Missionaries too commanded communal labour projects; from the first missionaries in the area in late 19th century, who arranged the construction of churches, up to Graham Horwell, the missionary resident on Lamén island from 1948 until 1968. When it came to building the District School on Lamén, nearly all the able-bodied men were working at Palikula fishery, and so it was the women and children that did the brunt of the construction work (Horwell 2006: 21). To this day, influenced by missionary and colonial interventions, community work

has remained an important part of weekly routines across Epi. Days are set aside for it, including one day for chiefs to suggest tasks and another for the church. However, one increasingly hears that communal work is in decline, and older people remember a golden age prior to Independence, when paths and avenues were free of leaves, and grass frequently cut.

Labour as Gift and Commodity in Contemporary Vanuatu

It has been argued that managed migration programmes, including the RSE scheme that I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, represent a greater commodification of labour, because they treat the workers in terms of labour capacities before discarding them (Connell 2010: 120; Rosewarne 2010). The temporary migrant is doubly exploited and excluded because the costs of reproduction and the duties of protection are borne by their home community, and the 'left behind' (Smith 2015). These programmes are unfree even by liberal free market standards, since workers are typically tied to one employer (Smith 2019: 362). They are vulnerable to the threat of deportation or of not being hired again in the following season, and therefore become compliant workers, willing to accept low wages, and poor conditions, and unable to protest or unionise (Bailey 2009; Basok 2002). On top of these perfectly legal constraints, workers allege that their wage-rates and deductions are manipulated (Smith 2019: 357). When discussing abuses, Ni-Vanuatu sometimes recall the history of blackbirding and indenture, and subordination to white masters. They may even compare their situation to slavery, although they undertake these hardships willingly, in the hope of a better future. As one team leader stated; "Sometimes we feel like slaves, but we believe there is a Judge God that will turn these hardships into a blessing in many of our children's lives, if this scheme continues."

Perhaps because seasonal workers combine wage-labour with a range of household, subsistence, and communal work, they are acutely aware of differences in work rhythm and their underlying ethics. RSE officials often imply that time management and in particular a work ethic are foreign values to Pacific islanders, who need to be educated accordingly. For their part, Ni-Vanuatu described their experience of working as wage labourers in terms of feeling subordinate to a calculative temporal and profit-making regime, in which ‘time is money’ (Smith 2019: 357–358).¹³ But they readily acknowledge the contrast between the temporal regime in wage work (particularly in the packhouses, which run on a factory pace) and the pace of life at home, where people tend to fit work around the rhythms of health and energy, daily life, the seasonal cycle of crops, and ritual obligations. In their gardens, they are free to work at their own pace, socialize, eat and drink, and rest often, often phrased as ‘Vanuatu time’, or ‘island time’. As one Lamén man put it, “In New Zealand, time is the boss of you, but here we are the boss of time.” People distinguish between centres of wage labour where ‘everything is money’ (*evri samting hemi mani*) and village life where one can ‘live for free’ (*liv fri nomo*), or ‘eat for free’ (*kakae fri nomo*). Such distinctions function as a way to valorise rural identities and ways of life. Living for ‘free’ in terms of not relying on money is associated with ‘freedom’ in a broader sense of being one’s own boss.

However, calculative reasoning based on ‘time is money’ seems to be altering people’s attitude to work for the community (such as tasks related to the kindergarten, church, and meeting houses, generically referred to as *komiuniti wok*, and organized either by the Chiefs and Council, or by the Church). Many residents of Lamén perceived a decline in these forms of work, which they associated with a rise in individualism, foreign and urban lifestyles, diminished respect for traditional authority, and the availability of money and wage work. One seasonal worker told me, “Before [the Village] Chief would call everyone and they would all go. But now many people visit town and they think they know it all; they just

do their own work.” Another, a youth worker, said bluntly, “People don't cooperate to discuss [community work]. They are too individualistic”. A third told me, “Everyone has a lot of money – they don't want to be bothered by all the Chiefs now.” The Chief of Lamén Bay said that regular overseas workers tend to come back “different,” as if they have become “greedy”. A prominent ex-MP told me that she believed that the new houses springing up in Lamén Bay, dispersed and with private yards hedged off from the road, were conducive to villagers’ “hiding away,” and not taking part in community work. People even deployed the English terms “human resources” and “manpower” when discussing these problems.

On Kindergarten Day in 2012, the Kindergarten Committee in Lamén Bay organized a parade and gifts for the children. Following this, a Church Elder came to dedicate the newly completed kindergarten building. He read the parable of the Good Samaritan and, after a prayer, he explained to the onlooking parents that the kindergarten was like the injured man in the biblical passage: “How many people walked past after the building was falling down in disrepair, but did nothing to help? God honours the ‘few’ that came to assist.”

The Chairman of the Kindergarten Committee blamed New Zealand as the main “excuse” for people not coming to work: “The people who go to New Zealand, they work for their money, they don’t work for all of us. That’s the problem.... They never work for free. You have to pay them now.” This corresponds to the common perception that members of the Lamén community increasingly expected money in return for work that in the past would have been given freely, as part of a generalized reciprocity or mutual help. This applied not only to community work, but also to tasks like washing for another household, helping with the garden, or assisting with house construction. It was remarked upon that more and more residents were transacting food for cash, whereas in the past that food would have been shared.

Both the council and the church have attempted to oblige seasonal workers to contribute financially to the community on their return, as compensation for their extended absence from community activities. Such demands for monetary contributions echo the norms surrounding communal labour in the colonial era: community work has its monetary equivalent, or can at least be substituted.

Seasonal workers resisted the payment of such a fee. Some argued that government workers did not have to pay, so why should they? Others said that their families contributed enough to community work in their absence. This was not primarily an issue about onerous financial obligations. The monies requested by the Council were modest compared with the sums that seasonal workers typically accumulate overseas. The demands for community work were not particularly burdensome; most weeks went by without any community work at all. Moreover, many workers made generous gifts to the community, such as purchasing materials for community projects, or sponsoring boat trips for annual New Year festivities (*ponane*). Workers were more willing to give money to the community if this was represented as a voluntary gift, rather than a mandatory fee. Commands to work or share tend to be less successful than exhortations to give time and labour voluntarily, freely. Workers were often generous in donating to church, and supporting ‘fundraisings’ where the donation was ostensibly voluntary (even though chiefs stressed that every household was obliged to offer support). Returnees preferred to affirm their autonomy and enhance their reputation than submit to demands by an authority, whether secular or religious (compare Miller, this volume).

Community leaders often berated seasonal workers for only ‘working for money’, or working for themselves, and refusing to ‘work for free,’ and for the benefit of others. Those who remain represent themselves as performing disproportionate amounts of communal labour. They are increasingly suggesting it is *they* who are treated like slaves. The Chief of

Lamen Bay told me that “Those that go over there, they do not recognize our struggle to keep the community in place... [The seasonal worker] works over there for his own money, but those of us who stay here, we stay as “slaves” working free for the community.” Complaints about ‘working for free’ or working ‘like slaves’ restate the conceptual links between calculations of work, time and money. Statements invoking ‘slavery’ suggest that ‘working for free’ is exploitative in itself. The ‘time is money’ equation of commoditized labour regimes is transforming attitudes to non-commoditized, communal work, even as people explicitly denounce the calculative ethos of the former.

Conclusion

Mauss’s holistic concept of *prestation*, encompassing religious, aesthetic legal and moral elements, is a useful framework in which to examine the social character of work across time and space. The *prestation* resists reductive definition, and calculation. It can shapeshift between freedom and obligation, self-interest and generosity, and person and thing. Language and gestures conveying its apparently voluntary character often disguise that underlying it is “a fiction, a formality, a social falsehood” (2016: 1). Mauss’s analysis points to the paradox that the *prestation* is “essentially ambiguous and always evoking the contrary of each definition” (Gasché 1997: 100).

The division between service and freedom is a “Gordian knot” in Abrahamic religions, one from which the Protestants have sought to tease out ideas of freedom, individual consent, and personal responsibility (Guyer 2016: 17, 20). The particular Western liberal ethic of ‘freedom’ is of relatively recent origin. Outside of modern European traditions, mutual implication of freedom and service is often the norm.

The question of freedom in different labour arrangements, and work ethics is similarly complex. Can work ever be entirely free? Is free work limited to a self-actualizing *homo*

faber? In pre-industrial Europe the ‘free man’ was the man who did not need to work, and arrangements resembling wage labour were likened to slavery (Graeber 2006). Only with the rise of industrial capitalism and the Protestant work ethic, does wage labour become a cornerstone of ‘freedom’ and independence in liberal thought (Fraser and Gordon, 1994: 316). Marx, Mauss, and Polanyi all pointed to how the (mis-)characterisation of the ‘free’ wage labour contract as an exchange between equals in the marketplace belies forms of alienation and exploitation that subordinate human life and dignity to a calculating regime. Labour is not a commodity, they agree.

But neither is work given without expectation of payment necessarily a (free) gift. Work is often motivated by a mixture of interest and obligation; competition and reciprocity. Some unpaid labour arrangements are very obviously unfree. Colonial arrangements, even when disguised in the language of gifts, mutual aid, and community service, were routinely based on coercion, and extraction. I have shown this to be the case in the deployment of the term *prestation* itself in colonial settings, which disguised arrangements that can be seen as quasi-feudal. This shows how the ambiguity, “social falsehood” and even the “poison” that Mauss (2016: 1; 1997: 30) recognised in the gesture of gift could be exploited by colonial powers.

While Mauss saw continuities with the gift in modern contracts, he criticised the ways in which formal labour contracts and free market theories reduced ethical values and motivations to the cold logic of utilitarian calculation: “*Homo oeconomicus* is not behind us; he is in front of us; like the moral man and the man of duty... Man... has not long been a machine, made complicated by a calculating machine” (Mauss 2016: 190; also Graeber, 2001:163). This calculative reason could also be destructive: “The brutal pursuit of individual goals is harmful to the purposes and the peace of the whole, to the rhythm of its work and its joys, and – by feedback effect – to the individual himself” (Mauss, 2016: 191). Rather than

accepting at face value formal legal and economic definitions of labour, we would do well to return to a broader concept of work as a total social phenomenon, and to question the *voluntary* character of all of its forms.

If Mauss is right that the conceptual division between self-interest and obligation is entrenched within commercial and industrial law and economic understandings of the market (Parry 1986: 458, 466), then the binaries of gift/commodity and altruism/self-interest can be expected to become more pronounced in Vanuatu as the market-based economy expands and the division of labour becomes more elaborate. The experience of wage-labour regimes in which ‘time is money’ is affecting attitudes to work even in the supposedly non-commodified sphere of communal work in rural Vanuatu. This is not a straightforward matter of a ‘disembedding’ of economy from society. Rather it is a redefinition of the terrain for debate and critique. The people of Epi continue *both* to assert autonomy *and* to make claims on others in terms of obligations to the community. What it means to work for free or work for money, to work autonomously or to work for others, depends a lot on where you stand in the workplace or the village, and their inherent social and political relationships.

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Notes

1 Jane Guyer (2016: 2121) translates *la morale* as ethics rather than morality, due to its connotations of guidance, discipline and teaching.

2 Indeed, Gregory (2015) deployed his much-misunderstood gift/commodity heuristic precisely to show how the market did not displace gift exchange, but led certain forms to flourish.

3 Economist George Akerlof suggests that aspects of wage labour can be considered as a gift: people are motivated by sentiments they develop for institutions, and workers may work harder if they feel the firm has an interest in their welfare. Although Akerlof discusses these exchanges in terms of utility, he approximates Mauss when he argues: “the optimal contract may not set wages at the minimum acceptable: if part of worker effort is a gift, likewise, part of wages paid should be a gift” (Akerlof 1982: 550–551).

4 <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/introduction-to-international-labour-standards/the-benefits-of-international-labour-standards/lang--en/index.htm> . On its centenary, ILO issued a statement evocative of Mauss: “We propose a human-centred agenda for the future of work that strengthens the social contract by placing people and the work they do at the centre of economic and social policy and business practice... We hope to see explicit recommitment to inclusive social contracts around the world, based on the collective understanding that in return for their contribution to growth and prosperity, people are protected against the inherent vicissitudes of the market economy and their rights are respected.... To be successful, such efforts demand solidarity among people, generations, countries and international organizations” (2019: 54).

5 As Spittler (2009: 162) argues, Polanyi contrasts embedded human action with the abstraction and commoditization of labour, but does not foreground work in his analysis.

6 See Adams 1986. Munro (1995b) outlines a historiography of the Labour Trade in Queensland in terms of two main tendencies. Australian ‘revisionists’ (esp. Scarr 1967; Corris 1973) emphasized the agency of the Pacific Islanders. According to them, most labourers were recruited voluntarily and many returned. But “counter-revisionists” (Graves, 1993; Saunders, 1982) saw the trade in critical political economic terms of coercion and exploitation. Concerning the Fiji labour trade, there was a similar heated debate between the ‘market’ approach of Shlomowitz (1986), and the ‘class’ approach of Brass (1991). Brass has been criticised for a vulgar Marxian analysis (Munro 1995a: 246; Grubb 2001), Shlomowitz for over-emphasizing supply and demand in restrictive conditions that can hardly be seen as a ‘free market’ (Munro 1995a: 246).

7 Indenture has been formally defined as “a contract committing one party to make a series of payments to or on behalf of the other – settlement of transport debt, subsistence over the (negotiable) contract term, and final payment in kind or, less usually, cash at the conclusion of the term. In exchange the payee agrees to be completely at the disposal of the payor, or the payor’s assigns, for performance of work, for the term agreed.” (Tomlins in Hoeft 2017: 363)

8 See also Jones (2019). A recent claim by the Australian Prime Minister that Australia has no history of slavery was met with much resistance, not least from Australian South Sea Islander descendants of blackbirded labourers. (e.g. Buchanan 2020).

9 Shortly before the Treaty of Versailles, an English lawyer named Jacomb (who had been trying to prosecute abuses on plantations in then New Hebrides) suggested a League of Nations was required to tackle colonial maltreatment of “native races” (Jacomb, 1920). While the clause for racial equality ultimately failed, the Treaty did give rise to the ILO and the amelioration of some forced labour practices (Maul 2007).

10 Graves (1983:87) quotes G.W. Hilton's definition of the truck system as "the name given to a closely related set of arrangements whereby some form of consumption is tied to the employment contract." He adds that "Truck in Queensland was also associated with a system of deferred pay and the consumption by workers of goods on credit from the "truck" shops."

11 For example, in Malawi, it translated as 'help' (thangata), while Ugandan *luwalo* and *kasanvu* were named after 'traditional' work practices (Hansen 1993; Okia 2012: 16–22).

12 Although *corvée* (unpaid, unfree) labour in French colonies had been formally banned in 1937, labour practices deemed 'communal' were allowed until 1946. They were apparently modelled on feudal arrangements in pre-revolutionary France, and the allocation of local responsibility for road-building in rural areas in the 19th century (Okia 2012: 131 n.67; Price 2017: 39).

13 Workers and sometimes employers resist treating workers as a 'pure commodity,' preferring to build enduring moral obligations through gifts and hospitality as 'non-contractual elements' in the labour contract (Smith 2019).