

# RESTAURANT TIPPING: SHORT-CIRCUITING THE MORALITY OF THE MARKET

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## ABSTRACT

*Current theoretical frameworks within economics have so far been unable to adequately explain why people tip. This chapter synthesizes anthropological method and theory into a symbolic interactionist approach, attempting to access, through ethnography, the negotiated meanings underlying and actuating tip payment in Vancouver restaurants. Customers tip for a variety of reasons, including (1) for good service, (2) to follow a social norm, (3) out of sympathetic feelings, (4) to demonstrate or enhance social standing, and (5) to secure a specific preference. The disconnect between common rationalizations for tipping, which are often reflections of formalist economic canon, and how customers actually tip, that is, according to social, cultural, and moral factors, suggests that the popular distinction between “economic” and “non-economic” exchanges is ideologically maintained. Tipping illustrates the existence and contours of what Hart (2005) refers to as the two circuits of social life – but also that these two circuits are ideological constructs.*

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How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortunes of others and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.

– Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

It's about salesmanship, whether you're selling food or wine or clothing ... or yourself along with it.

– Christina, server

## THE VAGARIES OF THE TIP

Across the United States, an estimated \$42 billion is exchanged in restaurants alone in the form of gratuities, or tips, every year (Azar, 2007a). Its presence in contemporary North American society is ubiquitous and participation appears difficult to avoid: on average, 10% of Americans dine out on a given day, with 58% doing so in a given month (Lynn, 2006). These exchanges provide financial support to millions of service sector employees and often account for a substantial proportion of their income. Yet, tipping remains an unsettled and fundamentally disorienting puzzle, as it so effortlessly defies and confuses the guiding concepts of both academics and restaurant diners alike. Imagine, for a moment, that familiar scene. The server has almost ceremonially and with a courteous smile placed the bill face down on the table, conspicuously withdrawing and leaving behind a hushed (and possibly awkward) silence for you to consider: *how much do I tip?* As much ritual as proper economic exchange, the ensuing transaction is fraught with revealing ambiguities. This chapter presents exploratory ethnographic research in Vancouver restaurants specifically addressing the motivations underlying and actuating tip payment. It then interprets and contextualizes these results against a number of ongoing discourses, drawing special attention to how these approaches may render, undermine, or even reify the ideology and peculiar moral order subtending capitalist societies.

The theoretical implications of tipping suggest a challenge to prevailing and fundamental assumptions of “the rationality of economic man” (Lynn & McCall, 2000, p. 8), while also presenting a revealing window into how individuals conceptualize the position of markets in organizing social life. Hart (2005, 2007a) describes an implicit yet forceful dichotomy dividing capitalist societies into two separate and morally disconnected “social circuits.” Their respective flows distinguish, for example, personal domestic exchanges from impersonal market ones. Hart (2005, pp. 166–167) explains:

One sphere is a zone of infinite scope where things ... are bought and sold for money, *the market*. The second is a protected sphere of domestic life, where intimate personal

relations hold sway, *home*. ... Money in capitalist societies stands for alienation, detachment, impersonal society, the outside. ... Relations marked by the absence of money are the model of integration and free association, of what we take to be familiar, the inside.

The tip poses an apparent paradox, as it is at once both profoundly moral yet inescapably economic, using money as its symbolic medium. This chapter presents the tip as an especially incongruous and ideologically subversive monetary exchange, a conceptually disfiguring point of collision, where the two circuits of modern life converge and the distinction between “economic” and “non-economic” transactions collapses.

Research on restaurant tipping has generally gravitated toward the economist’s domain, often with an applied focus (Azar, 2003; Bodvarsson & Gibson, 1999; Lynn, 2004; Lynn & McCall, 2000; Rind & Strohmets, 1999). However, theoretical problematization reveals critical shortcomings harbored by standard economic conceptions for fully understanding these transactions (Azar, 2004a, 2007b), as tipping evidently departs from that discipline’s basic assumptions of the “selfish” consumer as economic actor and thus has been generally considered both “irrational” and “mysterious” (Lynn, 2006). Most notably, tips are an entirely voluntary expense that is technically free to avoid, found to be only weakly related to the actual quality of the service rendered (Lynn & McCall, 2000), and given after the provision of service. Butler and Skipper (1981, p. 15) observed that tips are not “specified by contract” and are thus largely “dependent on trust and the anticipation of reciprocity.” Including game theory, which considers the anticipation of future behavior of other transactors (thus allowing “return visitors”), does little to help, as informants in this ethnography and other studies still overwhelmingly admit to tipping when traveling or where the chance of a return visit is extremely unlikely (Azar, 2007a; Conlin, Lynn, & O’Donoghue, 2003). It would appear that either “tippers are poor game theorists” (Lynn & McCall, 2000, p. 24) or that something else animates this apparently anomalous circulation of money beyond the scope of the economic assumptions outlined above.

The question then arises: *why are we tipping?* Although many of the factors resulting in increased tip payment have already been the subject of much scrutiny from economists, these patterns and what actually motivates these patterns are two separate problems. The latter problem, that is, why transactors believe they give and receive tips, why they should give and receive tips, and how these beliefs are constituted, is the primary concern of this ethnography. Here, we enter the theoretical domain of symbolic interactionism, a place the neo-classical economist is poorly equipped to

deal with as we find a field of interaction permeated by a richness of socially constructed and variably conceived expectations, meanings, values, and social norms negotiated in a variety of ways by participants. This indeterminacy, as server and customer often lack a clear idea of what would constitute an appropriate tip amount, further distinguishes the exchange and results in a highly negotiable and hypersensitive field of symbolic interaction. Azar (2005) acknowledges that the inclusion of “social norms” and “feelings” into economic explanatory models remains controversial. Thus, while economists have meticulously broken down how individuals tip, they have also largely sidestepped why.

The question of tipping evokes what Polanyi (1944) argued was the theoretical schism between economic “formalists” and “substantivists,” a debate which anthropologists quickly and enthusiastically joined (Bohannan, 1955; Dalton, 1960; Cook, 1966; Isaac, 2005). In contrast to the “embeddedness” (cf. Granovetter, 1985) promoted by substantivists, the formalist perspective, in essence, that of neo-classical economics, asserts a specific kind of logic as guiding economic and thus human behavior. Bodvarsson and Gibson (1997, p. 189) preface their analysis of tipping by explaining the standard view that “in order to generate unambiguous predictions about the most important elements of human behavior, the strict adherence of a simple, consistent view of human motivation is necessary.” Such a reductive approach, however methodologically expedient or practical, both explicitly and implicitly views the social human as an individuated utility maximizer, fundamentally self-interested, minimizing costs while maximizing benefits. Fourcade and Healy (2007, pp. 286–287) note, “At both micro and macro levels, so it seems, economic theory elevates egoism to paradigmatic status . . . today, the neoclassical approach that formalized modern economic theory generally posits that individuals maximize their utility in all social relations.” The “billion dollar exception” (Lynn & McCall, 2000, p. 7) of restaurant tipping seriously challenges this postulate whose propositions, as we shall see, reverberate beyond the academy and penetrate into the lived experience of the restaurant dining table itself.

The tip’s hybridity presents another challenge to familiar categorizations. It displays properties of conventional economic exchange in that a service is rendered for money, fitting neatly into what is generally understood to be a highly commodified, alienated, capitalist framework alongside other similarly structured market transactions. At the same time, however, we see elements of Maussian gift exchange and other social dynamics that we typically associate with markedly non-market and non-capitalist modes of interaction. This conceptual confusion resounds in the controversies

surrounding the tip's legal and moral status as its practice proliferated in North America in the early 20th century. Zelizer (1994, p. 95), sifting through this period in economic history, found that "tipping presented ... a fundamental puzzle: it lay at the boundary of other critically different transfers, not quite a payment, not quite a bribe, not quite charity, but not quite a gift either." Similarly, Shamir (1984, p. 61) recognized that because of its "flexible and evasive character ... no single line of reasoning can satisfactorily account for the phenomenon," and he surmised that the act rests upon a convoluted and sometimes uneasily conflicting tangle of economic, social, and psychological motivations.

Of particular interest to this chapter is that tipping, as revealed by these ambiguities, presents a conceptually problematic point of convergence between two ideologically separated circuits of social life: it is but one short-circuiting of both the calculative rationality ascribed to market relations and the sheltered morality residing at the market's periphery. The assertions from informants concerning why people tip when contrasted to the ways customers actually tip renders this superimposed compartmentalization transparent and leaves the emperor without clothes. What remains appears drastically different from what I and even servers themselves at first anticipated and suggests that the tip is as much ideologically motivated and morally compelled as straightforwardly rational.

## METHODOLOGY

Economic research on tipping has generally had a strong empirical footing, but its theoretical inflexibility often overlooks many of the tip's defining social features. Conversely, explicit anthropological forays into the topic have remained somewhat abstract (Shamir, 1984; Foster, 1972). This study attempts to apply a symbolic interactionist theoretical approach, with an emphasis on ethnographic fidelity, to the ongoing discourse on tipping within economics and to relevant anthropological perspectives on exchange. The research used in formulating this chapter is composed of my own experiences and observations serving and a series of formal and informal interviews with servers and customers in Vancouver restaurants. In some contexts, for example, in many restaurants when tables exceed certain size thresholds or in some other countries, the gratuities are commonly included in the final price quoted in the bill as a service charge. This ethnography focuses on voluntary tip payment, where the tip is left wholly at the discretion of the customer.

My own experience consists of 5 years of working my way through the service industry, from serving over Vancouver café counters to waiting tables at a fine-dining restaurant in a five-star Edinburgh hotel. This experience, having worked in restaurants in a variety of capacities and places, has afforded me a sort of emic familiarity with how the tip works and what it represents across a diverse range of contexts. I can recall the satisfaction of receiving a tip larger than the bill, the frustration of finding no tip at all (along with the tension of the ensuing confrontation), the uncomfortable pause after being asked by embarrassed foreign guests how much they ought to tip me, and many other memorable footnotes that inevitably color 5 years in such a profession. While admittedly, my intentions were initially more financially minded than explicitly motivated by an interest in participant observation, the accumulated discussions, observations, and insights made possible by these interactions have been indispensable in guiding this ethnography.

This personal experience complements the formal and more explicitly research-oriented component of this study, conducted in 2007 and 2008. This research consists of a series of structured interviews with several of the more experienced servers I met supplemented by many more informal interviews with other servers and customers. I initiated contact with informants at urban Vancouver restaurants with consistent and fairly moderate price-points and non-niche menus. I encountered an exuberant diversity of responses, ranging from tipping critics to tipping defenders, non-tippers to over-tippers, and from sheepish confessions to judgmental sermonizing. This abundant and richly varied data set, even in restaurants deliberately selected for similarity, was more than sufficient for the exploratory scope of this study, so I opted to maintain this narrow focus. All of the servers participating in this study were evening servers. I interviewed them as their shifts ended, so as to access their perspectives on tipping as closely as possible to their last encounter with it. I interviewed both men and women of varying ages and with varying levels of experience. In nearly all of the restaurants I contacted, both the managers and servers were enthusiastic to participate. I realized that the prospect of studying the tip was often as entertaining for them as it was for me. I have frequently observed the enjoyment many servers find in gossiping about their customers, exchanging advice, and trading memorable and often didactic restaurant anecdotes, with the tip as the central currency of storytelling. In this light, their cooperation is understandable, as my research attempts to access a fairly ripe discourse already established within restaurants.

Defining my field of interest became an important methodological issue, given that tipping is not isolated to any particular group of people but instead diffuses throughout society often in manifestly different ways. As many servers are intuitively aware, a given customer's tipping behavior and corresponding beliefs about what it represents appear to vary sharply depending on that customer's specific background. Again, given the exploratory scope of this study, a more pointed approach seemed more appropriate than directly attempting to assess the heterogeneous and overwhelming totality of customers' views on tipping. Although this study certainly draws on perspectives provided by many customers, this overview is hardly exhaustive, and so this chapter privileges the perspective of the server. As the central protagonist in this study, the server's intimate familiarity and unique frame of reference with respect to the tip provides the most extensive vantage point from which to view the tip's underlying patterns and mechanics. Perhaps predictably, the most articulate and fruitful responses came from more experienced servers and so I analyze their perspectives especially closely. Their assertions concerning the tip, including their inferences about what generally compelled people to leave them, tended to correspond closely with the impressions of customers. While there were few fundamental disagreements in this respect, I did find discrepancies between responses from servers and customers concerning which motivation prevailed over the others and especially on moral evaluations of the practice, both of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The geographic heterogeneity of the tip presents a further methodological hurdle. Although my own experience extends beyond Canada, this study examines the tip as practiced in Vancouver, a unique setting hardly representative of the tip universally (if such a construction is even useful to consider). This setting does, however, come with a few benefits. First, as I can personally attest, tipping in Canada appears as widespread as in the United States, with Canadians leaving an estimated \$5 billion in tips annually (Azar, 2007a). Vancouver is also decidedly multi-ethnic: by 2001, 18.2% of the city's working-age population was composed of immigrants who had arrived in the decade leading up to that year (Statistics Canada, 2003), often originating from backgrounds with more subdued or even non-existent tipping traditions. This pronounced ethnic diversity, combined with the multi-billion dollar contribution to food services from the city's growing tourism sector (Dobinson, 2008), presents an enticing set of cultural interfaces across which the tip's idiosyncrasies become more readily apparent. I shared some especially interesting discussions with servers about these cultural differences, which have

apparently generated a lot of confusing, anxious, and also highly amusing scenes.

I initially planned to interview servers and customers in pairs so as to compare and contrast their interpretation of the same meal and tip. However, it became immediately apparent that both servers and customers felt uncomfortable with this idea – itself an informative demonstration of the social influence that the tip and its delicate protocols can muster. While perhaps from a research perspective this squeamishness made the idea even more attractive, these concerns ultimately forced me to conduct interviews with customers and servers independently, although at the same restaurants. I also did not examine tipping in restaurants with varying price-points, ethnic types, and management styles, again, given the exploratory scope of this study.

## WHY DO WE TIP?

I found that customers tip for a variety of different reasons, and coded responses into the following five categories: (1) *service-tipping* to ensure good service and to discourage bad service; (2) *expectation-tipping* to avoid social sanction, embarrassment, or other negative consequence from violating a social norm; (3) *sympathy-tipping* to satisfy feelings of sympathy, compassion, or guilt; (4) *status-tipping* to demonstrate or enhance social standing; and (5) *bribery-tipping* to secure some specific desire or preference (e.g., a better table or non-menu item). These categories reflect responses from both customers and servers, and are emphatically not mutually exclusive, nor necessarily discrete as they operate in varying combination and extent. Note the diversity of these motivations. While informants seemed to intuitively recognize and experience them as acting in conjunction, accommodating the wide conceptual gulfs that separate these factors proved a much more disorienting (and interesting) exercise. Before moving onto more theoretical discussion and analysis, I will briefly explain and illustrate each motivating factor. One server, Lindsay, a waitress at a South Main Street restaurant, remarkably explained all five categories (which I have numbered) in almost a single breath:

By tipping, you're ensuring you're getting good service [#1], and if you tip really well, the next time you go in, the manager might even buy you a drink, you might get a better table [#5]. I mean, and some people just like to show that they have a lot of money sometimes. It's kind of fun to be like, "oh you know keep the change I guess" [*masculine*

*accent*] [#4]. Hmm – It’s just become expected [#2] and, like I said, many people have been in the service industry [#3].

*Bribery-Tipping:* Many informants explained to me how customers would use the tip to actively secure “extras” to service, for example, a better table, a non-menu item, or some other special desire beyond the usual expectations of a meal: essentially, tipping as bribery. However logical such a rationale may be, none of my informants themselves admitted to using the tip in such a way, which would entail tipping before service for some specified preference, and most claimed they were reluctant to do so in the future. Shamir (1984) suggests that the ambiguity of the tip, where the obligations of customer and server are left unspecified, distinguishes tipping as a social rather than an economic exchange. Comparing the tip to another similar and more obviously social exchange, that of gifts, helps to clarify the resistance of the tip to such a utilization. In either scenario, specifying too directly and vehemently the terms of exchange, in other words, making overly explicit what one expects for what one gives, circumvents the voluntary character and appearance of spontaneity central to both exchanges. In the restaurants I examined, customers perceived the bribery tip as somewhat garish, servers described it as slightly crude and undignified, and both found even the prospect of tipping in such a way a discomforting breach of tipping norms that they would prefer to avoid.<sup>1</sup>

*Status-Tipping:* In contrast to customers, servers readily volunteered their frustrations with the power relations connoted by the tip. Specifically, they voiced their impression that the tip is one instrument of consumption where the customer can (and, they say, frequently does) make explicit his or her differential status, whether that is through generosity or condescension or both. Lindsay expressed her perspective:

You know, every now and again, you get to the point where you’re like, whoa, I’m serving somebody. Like, I’m serving somebody!?! I don’t want to be *servin*g. I mean, you get that subservient feeling sometimes. And so you do it for the money, but then, I think, after awhile you feel like you don’t want to do it as a career. I don’t want to *serve* people my whole life. You know what I mean? The money is great. . . . But I think eventually you get tired of sucking up to some asshole.

Although servers said they were generally happy to receive this extra income, they sometimes construed the tip as a patronizing and thus latently aggressive gesture meant to elevate the giver and belittle the receiver. Zelizer (1994, p. 96) notes one early critic’s public denunciation of the tip as it became increasingly popular a century ago as “what one American is willing

to pay to induce another American to acknowledge inferiority.” Rob, a server at a Broadway restaurant, described how:

People look at me, you know, like I’m the lowest piece of crap on the planet . . . . I don’t know where that comes from. Maybe they have more money. But I mean that position of “serving” or “service industry” job . . . . I’m somehow a rung lower than, say, a lawyer? Who does the same thing, who serves people a certain service?

The power dynamics implicit in the tip tend to receive much attention from those considering its social dimensions. Shamir’s (1984) largely theoretical exploration of the tip reiterates the “social exchange rationale,” which places the tip squarely within the realm of gift exchange. This line of reasoning focuses on its aggressive character and suggests that transactors, through acts of giving and reciprocal counter-giving, vie to discharge their obligations and thus their own potential subordination while trying to cultivate this same sense of indebtedness in others to establish superiority. Shamir (1984, pp. 64–66) explains:

The exchange of gifts is seemingly voluntary, but in fact highly obligatory. . . . Free giving becomes a way of establishing and maintaining social status and power. . . . The customer is both unwilling to be dependent on the service giver and interested in maintaining personal superiority. In order to do so, he tips the service giver and so escapes his obligations under social exchange and imposes his superior identity. . . . The gratuity from this perspective is not an expression of gratitude, as is commonly believed, but rather a *defense* against gratitude. . . . Its aim is not so much to motivate the service giver as to confirm the superior status of the customer.

While the extension of this rationale to tipping encounters several problems (which I will revisit), the view that status inequalities play a central part in setting the tone of the server–customer relationship is common among customers and especially servers. Christina, a server at an East Vancouver restaurant with 18 years of experience, had much to say on this issue:

I mean, essentially, you’re receiving money for servitude. Let’s not get away from that. And there is a slightly desperate quality about that which is, I think, what can be kind of humbling about this business: it is about servitude . . . and that is what we’re being paid for. . . . I think when you’re dealing with ideas of servitude, when you are talking about jobs that, in medieval times, in renaissance times, even 150 years ago, would have been done by a household staff, who is . . . carrying your food on a tray, hemming your pants, polishing your shoes, when you’re talking about those kinds of things, because we no longer live in a culture where we live in mansions or where it’s even politically correct to have a fleet of servants and maids . . . but when you walk into a restaurant you can pretend that you do have them. And I think that that’s the power trip that a lot of people have . . . why some people are so degrading and so patronizing and so condescending to their server, because, for a moment, *it makes them feel like a feudal lord*. So I think when you’re dealing with those sorts of professions, do you know what I mean, where you are

being buffed, and polished, and served, and stroked, your ego's being stroked along with it. It makes you feel like some feudal lord of yesteryear ... you're paying for that privilege. It's why you tip the guy who gives you a massage, a shave, your haircut, but not the guy who does your taxes, you know? There's an element of power.

Her remarks begin to illustrate the tip's psychological as well as social dimensions. As with many rituals, the tip not only plays a role in reinforcing and structuring social relationships, but it may also "cater to psychic comforts and ego gratifications" and "enhance the customer's sense of psychological well-being" (Shamir, 1984, p. 69). As Christina observes, "the tip ingratiates the customer not only to the perceptions of others, but also to the tipper himself." From her perspective, the tip evokes a historically loaded set of nearly caste-like power relations, which customers leverage to make themselves feel privileged. Many female servers independently admitted to fearing groups of middle-aged women for similar reasons. Jennifer, another server at Rob's restaurant, described "Middle-aged women who are bitter and angry. And jealous of us. ... I really think so. They would treat male servers different. I think when you get the bitter middle-aged women, they pay down women and I think they're angry and they'll be really cheap." Christina had come to a similar conclusion, charging that "groups of teachers are brutal. Especially if they're female teachers ... large groups of middle-aged professional women are pretty much the worst. I don't know why." Gender roles, it would seem, also play a central part in the tip's interplay of status inequalities. Christina later began to speak more generally and attempted to discern a motive behind the occasional customer's hostile behavior, especially when followed by a generous tip:

Some people really do talk to their service staff like they're less than human, and I hate to say it, but they're the ones who tend to tip well, and I think there's maybe a little bit of misogyny wrapped up in that, probably a little bit of racism sometimes, and I think that they're paying to appease that beast.

Jennifer, again independently, similarly said: "I find that there are people who abuse the server, being mean and snappy, and then they tip *big*. And my theory is that ... they're paying for the privilege of being mean to the server. It happens. More often than I'd like." Ironically, as I will discuss later, servers also suggest this dimension of tipping as providing them with the opportunity to consummately exploit this apparently anxiety-inducing status differential, by manipulating, accommodating, and controlling customers' sense of comfort and sense of their respective roles, giving the server a sort of countervailing agency.

*Sympathy-Tipping:* Both customers and servers believed tips were at least partially given out of a sense of sympathy, and, at times, charity, guilt, or pity. Servers especially would regularly describe the “unspoken rule” among current and former service-sector employees and particularly restaurant workers, which instills a kind of compulsion to tip generously, and emphasized how their shared experience (how “we’ve all been there”) engenders a special kind of appreciation. Rob described how one of his customers, who he later found out was a server at another Vancouver restaurant, returned hours after his father had paid a bill with no tip to supplement it with a large tip because of the guilt he experienced. Many informants said they also felt a sense of solidarity rooted in the mutual awareness that servers earn minimum wage, and described an emotional reaction and sensitivity to what they perceived as the structural inequality that serving represents. The tip is thus given partly to appeal to the customer’s personal sense of fairness or equity, to assuage a “guilty conscience” as Rob suggests. One limitation of the social exchange rationale for tipping is that, in contrast to ritual gift exchange, the tip is usually given privately and inconspicuously. Both servers and customers acknowledged that something more psychological also contributes to tip payment, something directed inward and resembling Adam Smith’s “moral sentiment” quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, essentially internalized feelings of compassion, guilt, or even pity.

*Expectation-Tipping:* Expectation-tipping (simply “following the rules”) was stated by all informants to be a principal determinant of tip payment. All informants recognized that, for better or worse, the custom is now an entrenched, powerfully compelling, and highly respected social norm whose rules are greatly sensitive to deviance. Rob stated simply that “they just don’t want to look bad, which is what happens when they don’t tip,” and admitted that because “some people . . . may not want other people to know that they only tip 10%,” the tip is to some extent coerced through fear of embarrassment. The possible shame and culpability of even associating with a known violator of these tipping rules apparently exerts enough social pressure to compel customers, as in Rob’s example of the son who returned to rectify a tip hours after his father’s infraction, to not only tip on their own bills, but to proactively enforce tip payment on others’ bills as well. The customers I spoke with were generally mortified by the idea of a confrontation with a server over an inappropriately small tip, although some also reacted defensively, criticizing what they perceived as an undue sense of entitlement on the part of servers.

Most customers I interviewed claimed to tip according to some rough but conveniently consistent baseline, which streamlines the exchange and allows transactors to avoid dealing explicitly with the tip's latent symbolic potency. This baseline is the reference by which both customer and server parse the tip's meaning. It is often highly specific by customer and mediated by social context. Most servers I spoke to had developed a sophisticated customer typology, a heuristic sense for what kind of tip they could expect of customers from various places of origin or from different age, gender, race, or other group types as they walked through the entrance. Most informants said they themselves tended to tip around 15% on the bill for the meal (the implicit standard in North America, they said), but many servers believed that Vancouver tippers tended to tip more cheaply. Servers described the dreaded 0% tip, or "stiff," but they explained that often the more provocative infraction is when the customer leaves a tip of nearly but not quite 0%, which signals both acknowledgment of participation in tipping and also disrespect or even contempt for the server.

*Service-Tipping:* While many informants recognized the combined importance of the motivating factors I have just described, Jennifer maintained that "there are some people who tip the same no matter what, but I think that's more of a minority . . . because I think it works. I think it encourages better service." This pervasive belief, that "tipping ensures good service" was reiterated in some form by nearly all my informants and often in virtually the same words by servers. What is most striking about these assertions is that they do not coincide with the empirical observations made by economists.

Perhaps surprisingly, Lynn and McCall's (2000) meta-analytic review of tipping, encompassing over 2,000 dining parties, shows that such a relationship between service quality and tip rate is weak and that any effect is overshadowed by strong correlations with mood, attractiveness, friendliness, and social norms. This discrepancy is compounded by the fact that an individual's tip cannot retroactively improve the quality of a service that has already been provided, further contributing to why economists find the exchange so inexplicable. Tip payment, which is itself wholly discretionary and non-contractual, comes after service; it cannot ensure good service but merely rewards it, again, with no contractual obligation to even do so. That any of this did not suggest itself to most of the people I interviewed was frankly astonishing, as they told me, one after the other, that customers tip for good service. This belief, although perhaps not very accurate in practice, is widespread and firmly adhered to among tipping participants and especially servers.

Economists pursuing the related suggestion that repeat customers tip to secure better service for future visits have also achieved limited success at establishing a strong connection between patronage frequency and the provision of these extra niceties (Azar, 2007a; Bodvarsson & Gibson, 1997; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & McCall, 2000). Despite the empirical elusiveness of such a relationship, from the point of view of those in the restaurant, its intuitive logic is clear, persuasive, and readily conforms to popular and familiar sensibilities; many of my informants expressed a great deal of confidence in this principle, that their tip helped secure some tangible but undefined future return. This disjuncture between empirical evidence and the assertions of servers and customers betrays a major divergence between understanding and actual practice: it seems that *how* people tip, as detailed by economists and even servers themselves, appears far removed from participants' understandings of *why* they tip. As I will argue, this wishful rationale conceals the tip's highly ideological nature: the tip depends on transactors' beliefs about its rationality, accurate or not, whose ideological underpinnings are deeply rooted and invite serious consideration.

### THE IDEOLOGY OF THE TIP: RATIONAL OR RATIONALIZED?

This discrepancy between the believed rationality of the exchange against its actualized performance requires special attention. While most customers acknowledged various factors as compelling motivators, servers strongly preferred to think of their tips as service tips, from Rob, who stated that "people tip because they like the service they receive," to Christina, who, without hesitation, also responded to the question with a frank "I think it ensures good service." Not only that, but servers felt a peculiar anxiety when considering the implications of what the tip would mean if it is not a straightforward conventional market transaction like they had thought, where the server's specialized talent and professional skill are of economic value and thus, at least in the server's mind, legitimately exchanged for money. We are here presented with a disconnect between the server's assertion of tipping as rational market exchange, and the starkly contrasting practical reality. After telling me a story of a particularly good tip she once got (100%), Lindsay reflected more generally:

I'd want to know like I really *earned* 15 dollars from them. You know, I almost feel kind of guilty if they leave a really good tip if I didn't really do a good job. . . . I mean, I guess

it's expected in my job, like, we'll expect tips, but sometimes, you know, if you're getting 20 dollars just for bringing some food over to a table, sometimes I think it's like . . . Ah! Like, I want it for a *really good job*.

In moments such as these, the server confronts the underlying puzzle of the tip. If the timely movement and orderly presentation of food is only one (apparently subsidiary) aspect of a diverse plurality of precipitating motivations for tipping, the server is left to ask a prickly and uncomfortable question: what kind of an exchange *is* this, really? While, indeed, a service is rendered and money changes hands, something besides the cold dictates of the market animates the transaction. I argue that their expected transactional roles are as much ritually inscribed, morally compelled, and ideologically motivated as economically rational. This line of reasoning, however, encroaches on the legitimization provided by capitalism's fundamental logic and undermines the ideological alchemy transmuting *given* money into justifiably *earned* or *deserved* money. Such thoughts tug at Lindsay's sense of guilt. If the tip is morally obliged, requiring customers by courtesy, custom, and coercion to leave a payment, what room does that leave for service as an economic value to be bought and sold like any other? Christina explains when seriously contemplating the discrepancy between her extensive experience and skill as a server and the fact that people will tip (or not tip) regardless of this quality of service:

It doesn't hurt because of the money. It feels insulting. It's hurtful I think . . . I bring to the table 18 years of experience. Extensive food knowledge. In my career I have been a food critic, I am an excellent server, I am an excellent judge of needs and all of those things and I do feel that it is hurtful to me to feel like those things are of no value. It makes me question my career choice. It makes me question where I'm situated. This? I love working here. This can apply to any restaurant. But it makes me question things like that.

Once again, to the server's consternation, the tip appears unanchored from the comforting legitimacy bestowed by economic convention. The anxiety Christina expresses results in a cognitive dissonance, which is partly neutralized by a belief in the ideology of the capitalist market: the server maintains that serving is a valuable and respected skill, and not a morally inscribed social position warranting the charity, pity, or patronization of others. Here, the formalist's rationality provides an expedient and beguiling rationalization.

Note that this rationalization "reflects not simply a shift in scholarly fashion, but also trends in the public justification of the contemporary economic order itself" (Fourcade & Healy, 2007, p. 286). Tipping exposes a reification of the market. Fourcade and Healy (2007, p. 302) describe "the performativity of economics," where "economic technologies do not just

describe the world, but are profoundly involved in shaping it – to the point of making real agents behave in the way theory says they ought to . . . in a world saturated by economic thinking, actors are thus progressively turned into calculative agencies.” They note that the very formulation and cultural deference toward economic theory can “alter the economic actors or process” (Fourcade & Healy, 2007, p. 24) such that they increasingly imitate economic models. Here, the incongruity of the tip provokes the fetishization of economic canon over a practical reality where non-market social dynamics actually prevail. This discrepancy between understanding and practice illustrates the actuation of a compelling and pervasive ideological construct, here drawn to obscure the paradox that tipping itself represents. While informants may have thought they were merely describing the tip using the familiar and authoritative language of economics, they had not yet fully realized their role in reproducing its own peculiar ideology.

Tipping is certainly not alone in North America in revealing these dynamics. Herrmann’s (1997) ethnography of garage sales uncovered another similar and idiosyncratic exchange system. While superficially resembling straightforward market exchange, garage sales also elicited some economically unexpected behaviors and, at times, seemed to resemble gift exchange as well. Herrmann observed garage sale vendors selling items, often of great personal significance, at nominal prices and with little chance of future reciprocity. Significantly, she also noticed that vendors would sell these items cheaply but only in exceptional circumstances for free. In so doing, Herrmann argues that those obligations and decidedly non-economically motivated relations implicit in the gift are neutralized. Once again, we see this neutralization – of the latent feelings of indebtedness and compulsion to reciprocate – in the ideology of market capitalism humming meaningfully in the back of both transactors’ minds. Transactors must exchange some amount of money, “the grease that enables goods to circulate” (Herrmann, 1997, p. 916), however nominal or insubstantial, to assuage the buyer’s sense of guilt, debt, or obligation, and ultimately facilitate an otherwise incongruous non-market social exchange. Herrmann notes that in the event that sellers attempt to give away items of personal importance for free, the buyer may actually insist on paying to maintain this economic rationalization and, in a sense, “bring it into conformity with the expected market model . . . to confer some value on the items” (Herrmann, 1997, p. 917) for what would otherwise appear to be gift exchange between strangers or even an act of charity. Herrmann concludes that “the metaphor of the market – that is, all the apparent trappings of buying and selling – simultaneously cloaks and facilitates a web of transactions that

are often as much or more socially engaged as economically rationalized” (Herrmann, 1997, p. 912).

In much the same way, during interviews, servers bent backwards agonizing and trying to articulate and legitimize just why they “deserved” the tip, but the more they thought about it, the less comfortable they became. They began to seriously consider what the tip meant if it was predicated on factors apparently unrelated to service quality, the economic value they thought they brought to the table. When Christina confides: “When I get a tip I don’t see it as a gift. I feel that I’ve *earned* it, and I’ve worked for it. I see it as my wage. It’s my income,” she expresses a common striving among servers. She also, perhaps inadvertently, reveals the ideological obfuscation of a non-market exchange beneath a largely artificial market one. While minimally adequate service is no doubt a precondition for tipping, what precipitates its payment and makes it the “right thing to do” in the diner’s mind appears to transcend straightforward economic rationality.

### **“AND ONE MAN IN HIS TIME PLAYS MANY PARTS”**

While servers may prefer to frame tip payment from the perspective of service-tipping, they admitted that much of what they actually do consists of providing a kind of experience and making customers feel certain ways. Servers would recurrently use highly dramaturgical language when describing their job, and the unmistakable and almost pre-packaged aptness of Goffman’s (1959) “dramaturgical” model for interpreting social interaction immediately suggests itself. Jennifer explained:

Make [customers] believe that they’re special. Because they are. For this moment, for this hour and a half we spend together . . . . I get paid to make them feel like they’re special . . . . I don’t think I’m being paid to be nice. I think I’m being paid extra to play a part. I mean, it’s an act . . . figuring out what they want and acting giddy, acting aloof, whatever it is.

While servers would often complain of the semantics of status-tipping and sympathy-tipping, they also suggested that the talented server is distinguished by his or her facility for actively assessing and exploiting this same field of symbolic interaction to cajole, manipulate, and control the social perceptions of their customers to maximize their tips. Christina elaborates:

I think most customers who come in, I think 70% of customers, don’t really want to make a decision, they want you to make it for them . . . . You either make that process

easy for them or difficult for them. You either patronize them and make them feel silly for not knowing exactly what they want, or you help them . . . most people who go out to eat don't want to think too hard about what they want to eat. I know a lot about food, that doesn't mean most people do. Most people actually don't and they want me to help them out and educate them. And maybe they even want me to tell them what *they* want as opposed to having to think about it themselves. People don't always know they want me to make a decision for them. But they *do*.

As I mentioned earlier, economic research attempting to discern the mechanistic determinants of tipping has often been rather meticulous, and from the literature it would appear that servers have a sizable array of semantic tools at their disposal. Studies have demonstrated that a server can, for example, increase her tips by squatting rather than standing when taking orders; by touching the customer's shoulder or chair ("*The Midas Touch*"); by introducing herself by name; by smiling broadly rather than with pursed lips; by putting flowers in her hair; by drawing a "smiley face"<sup>2</sup> on her bill; by writing "thank you" and the server's name on the bill rather than just "thank you" or not at all; by remarking about nice weather or how the weather will be nice in the future; by delivering the bill on a check-holder displaying a credit card logo; and so on (Lynn & McCall, 2000; Oveson, 2004, pp. 465–466).

Ritually speaking, tip payment is highly structured and sensitive to deviance. From the beginning of the practice, "the etiquette of tipping became increasingly complex, instructing not only how much to tip, but whom to tip, when to tip, and how to tip" (Zelizer, 1994, p. 95). The situation places servers in a position of authority, however subtle and transient, in terms of setting the pace or tempo of interaction, managing, as Christina describes, a virtual monopoly on the guiding social cues of the meal. Fred Davis's ethnography of cabdrivers describes a "category of persons who, in some social encounters, are treated as if they were not present, whereas in fact they may be indispensable for sustaining the performance" (Davis, 1959, p. 160). Even more so with servers, this position amounts to holding the reins of the ritual structure, with all of the risk of potential embarrassment and etiquette breaches that this structure entails. The intimacy and visceral closeness of the encounter allows the canny server to deploy a semantic and theatrical arsenal, a performance, designed to guide the now unguarded, somewhat vulnerable, and largely sensitized customer's mood, disposition, graciousness, and sense of guilt, carefully shepherding the customer's money into the server's tips. This performance reaches a surprising level of sophistication, as the impulse to "over-serve" is quickly overcome by aspiring servers. Many informants expressed their

belief that sometimes the greatest tip-earners were also the mean ones. As Jennifer explained, their job is not always to make the customer feel at ease or to be maximally friendly, but to play a specific part whose formulation is highly contingent on the particular social context. That same semantic system, which results in so much discomfort and anxiety for the server, also contains within it the potential for them to control and manipulate it, granting a kind of countervailing agency.

Goffman's dramaturgy, reinforced by the responses of servers themselves, urges us to consider tip payment as a form of symbolic social interaction and communication, where the money that changes hands in the tip represents only one facet of a multilayered and nuanced exchange. Peeling these layers away leaves behind a very different and theoretically incomprehensible sort of encounter, and results in the predicament through which economists currently attempt to wade. The tip traverses a shifting and often imprecise field of symbolic interaction, characterized by individually negotiated meanings and values, highly contingent roles, and the visceral and largely improvised interplay of emotion, personality, and feelings. A satisfying explanation for what motivates customers to tip must look beyond the constricting language of prevailing economic theory and language to directly address rather than exclude the social, cultural, and moral dimensions of the exchange.

## **MAUSS AND THE RECIPROCITY OF THE TIP**

Appadurai (1988) observes that anthropologists have experienced some difficulty reconciling the largely non-monetary transactional exchanges characteristic of their traditional research interests and the money-saturated market contexts that increasingly form a part of them, noting that "the tendency to see these two modalities of exchange as fundamentally opposed remains a marked feature of anthropological discourse" (Appadurai, 1988, p. 11). However, unlike sociologists and economists, the anthropologist's preoccupation with cultural variability approaches this dichotomy from the opposite side of the coin. Hart (2007b), alongside other social theorists (e.g., Appadurai, 1988; Carrier, 1991; Herrmann, 1997; Parry & Bloch, 1989), looks back to French sociologist Marcel Mauss, one of the chief instigators of this discourse within anthropology, whose strongly comparative approach and engagement with the broad diversity of known societies (of which modern capitalism is a minority) may prove indispensable in transcending ethnocentric assumptions of contemporary economic exchange.

In his seminal essay, *The Gift*, Mauss (1970) attempted to discern an abiding rationality and logic to ritual gift exchange, whereby a compelling sense of indebtedness is cultivated between giver and receiver. He asks what force in the gift compels the receiver to reciprocate such a display of generosity so reliably. In the so-called “archaic” societies that Mauss discusses – for example, in that of the Pacific Northwest *potlatch*, Maori gift exchange, the Trobriand *kula* ring, and the New Guinean *moka*, he argues that economic exchanges are “totally” engaged, operating as much on the level of the collective as on the level of individual actors. Mauss’s explanation of gift-giving as ritual exchange ruled out the assertion that actors are truly independent or detached from exchanges and can simply withdraw at any time without consequence. The gift, in Mauss’s sense, is not really “free,” as it entangles each transactor’s pride, honor, prestige, and relative status, and is accompanied by a compelling set of obligations and expectations, depending on whether and how it is handled by each transactor. According to Mauss, “The gift not yet repaid debases the man who accepted it, particularly if he did so without thought of return . . . charity wounds him who receives, and our whole moral effort is directed towards suppressing the unconscious harmful patronage of the rich almoner” (Mauss, 1970, p. 63). Thus, “to give is to show one’s superiority” (Mauss, 1970, p. 72) and to accept such a gesture directed at oneself without reciprocation is to publicly acknowledge it in another. The gift is neither inert nor alienable but bundled with a plethora of meaning and symbolism, connecting the giver and the receiver: the gift bears a trace of where and who it came from and is, Mauss argues, profoundly *in*-alienable.

He describes the *hau* in Maori gift exchange, the spiritual component of the gift, and how it compels reciprocity to the initial giver, marking the gift and forming a powerful connection between those who circulate it. Just as the *hau* inscribes the gift with some moral content demanding reciprocity, and just as Herrmann’s garage sale commodities become inalienable through past ownership, so too do tips represent something more than the money that ostensibly comprises them. Foster notes that “even though we may never expect never to see him again,” the waiter “in some fashion haunts us” (Foster, 1972, p. 167) long after the money itself has changed hands. Tip payment, as in these other exchanges, is socially defined, culturally regulated, and involves not only specific transactors, but also the moral status of the community bearing witness and obliging conformity. Mauss refers to this wider social engagement and cultural embeddedness of economic exchange as “total prestation,” where the gift, in a typically Durkheimian fashion, links social actors and comes to represent the dense

web of social relationships and overarching societal structure connecting giver with receiver – and tipper with server. While on an individual level, tipping may appear superficially irrational, we must recognize wider definitions beyond narrowly operationalized notions of economic benefit, such that we include Mauss's consideration of prestige, honour, and relative social status, as well as emotional and psychological factors. Shamir (1984, p. 65) references these considerations in his analysis, noting that "the tip, like the gift, is given under voluntary guise, but in fact under a constraining normative framework" with social implications much as Mauss imagined.

Azar (2004b, p. 756) acknowledges, however delicately, that "feelings and social norms should be included in the utility function of individuals," while Bodvarsson and Gibson (1997, p. 200) admit that "an explanation of gratuities lies beyond the ability of neo-classical economics with its assumption of strict, myopic self-interest." Although tipping is absurd from such an individuated one-off point of view, the tip becomes much more comprehensible when we acknowledge, as Mauss did, that "human beings everywhere find the personal character of the gift compelling and are especially susceptible to its evocation of the most diffuse social and spiritual ties" (Hart, 2007b, p. 481). We must recognize the collectivized and morally significant character of many ubiquitous micro-scale economic exchanges, of which the tip is emblematic. Mauss's reasoning allows us to appreciate that tipping, now almost an institution, transcends individual transactors; it is an activity shared by servers and customers generally, an interaction dispersed into a real (or imagined) community, variously serving collective and individual interests.

Davis's (1959) ethnography of taxi drivers found that despite the anonymous roles of large cities, the kind of informal constraints and regulations that apparently govern tip payment there similarly necessitates something at least approximating a community. Mauss considered these types of exchanges as logical, interested, and functional on a level that includes but is not limited to individuals. The profound social engagement, dramatic visibility, and involvement of social standing and prestige in giving and taking, he reasoned, effectively and tightly controlled the countless potential prisoners' dilemmas that both constitute and threaten any society. In such a way, collective interests beyond those of the individual can overwhelm the occasional errant thought of stiffing one's server. Across these various contexts, from the restaurant, to taxicabs, to hotels, a particular tip represents the focal point of a confluence of social and cultural processes. It is a moment where, as much as transactors are involved in a straightforward optimizing calculus, the cultural medium bridging

transactors crystallizes into a plainly visible dollar payment leaving the customer's hand. Mauss prompts us to consider the tip as both performance of social impulse and deliberate calculated action, where the line dividing theory from praxis intractably blurs.

While this contextualization of the tip may help in rendering it more coherently, the tip also becomes a distinct reminder that, submerged beneath layers of "economic prejudices" (Mauss, 1970, p. 64), the social scaffolding of economic life still endures, and that "if we were not blinded by ideology, we would recognize that the system of *prestations* survives in our societies" (Hart, 2007b, p. 481). Reflecting on contemporary economic exchange, Mauss (1970, p. 66) muses that "the theme of the gift, of freedom and obligation . . . of generosity and self-interest in giving, reappears in our own society like the resurrection of a dominant motif long forgotten." He criticized what he viewed as the perverse structural tendency in modern capitalism to inhibit this sociality of economic life that he observes operating so strongly in other societies. For him, exchanges like the tip represent oases of "good faith, sympathy and generosity in the contracts of hire and service, rents, and sale" (Mauss, 1970, p. 67) in an otherwise dehumanizing economic desert. However, if we are to extend Mauss's line of reasoning to the custom, we must first address its discordant hybridity. Despite sharing many characteristics with gift exchange, it remains firmly yet incongruently attached to money and the constraints of the modern commercial market.

## **MONEY: THE FRATERNIZER OF IMPOSSIBILITIES**

Hart (2007a, p. 14) criticizes the tendency by anthropologists to inflate the contrast between commodified exchange in capitalist societies and exchange in non-market contexts, sometimes allowing themselves to imagine that "money symbolises the world they have rejected for something more authentic elsewhere. This lines them up with the have-nots and against the erosion of cultural diversity by globalisation. Accordingly, they have long had little of interest to say about money." Money is, of course, also increasingly unavoidable: it is the instrument of tip exchange, and ultimately of the whole capitalist system, forcing us to confront its role in defining all kinds of exchanges.

The role and uniqueness of money in tipping somewhat strain the extension of Mauss's interpretation to it. While he viewed gift objects as inalienable and as possessing some strong connection between it and the person who gave it, the tip is made of money, the ultimate alienable commodity, to be exchanged

fleetingly between anonymous transactors. I argue that despite this character of money and rather than losing significance, those situations where money and activities like gift exchange converge actually reveal a semiotic extravaganza and provide useful insights into the ways individuals organize their social lives. The results of this ethnography are in full agreement with Fourcade and Healy (2007, p. 300), as they note that “the intertwining of market activity and moral valuation is so pervasive . . . that the image of a clean division between market and non-market spheres is of very limited utility.” Monetary transactions – rather than rendering “social life cold, distant, and calculating” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 1) – form a compromise with the moralizing cultural forces within which they are embedded.

Zelizer (1994, p. 6) discusses how earlier theorists were “deeply worried about an ever-expanding market relentlessly invading and desiccating all social spaces.” Marx, assessing the interchangeability that money facilitated as it increasingly commensurated anything and everything, argued that money turns “the world upside-down” and “serves to exchange every property for every other, even contradictory, property and object: it is the fraternization of impossibilities. It makes contradictions embrace” (Marx, 1978, p. 105). Incongruous commensurations (*how many berries for your jet plane?*) became increasingly possible, early theorists argued, as money “rendered everything quantifiable according to one scale of value and permitted previously unthinkable comparisons among objects, persons, and activities” (Maurer, 2006, p. 20). Christina tried explaining what it was like to receive a quantifiable dollar value for something as intangible and ineffable as what servers provide: “You are constantly being reviewed, and analyzed, and critiqued, and judged. And that final judgment is what’s left after the bill is paid. And that’s why when it’s nothing, it’s hard not to take it personally, right? Because it is a judgment of your performance, of your *character*.”

The prevailing notion was that money presented a one-way street toward Weber’s rationalization, Simmel’s colorlessness, and Marx’s alienation. Zelizer (1994, pp. 6–7) describes early theorists’ identification of money as:

The perverse magical wand that disenchanting modern life. Money turned the world . . . into an “arithmetic problem.” On purely technical grounds, monetary accounting certainly promoted impersonal rational economic markets. . . . As an objectifier – “a god among commodities” – money not only obliterated all subjective connections between objects and individuals, but also reduced personal relations to the “cash nexus.”

As Hart, Zelizer, Maurer, Fourcade, and Healy, and others point out, this view, the “powerful ideology of our time that money is a single,

interchangeable, absolutely impersonal instrument – the very essence of our rationalizing modern civilization” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 1), persists as the dominant meta-narrative within the social sciences. Anthropologists, too, adopted the notion that “money and the violence of its abstractions erode the sociability subtending human existence, and the very idea of society itself” (Maurer, 2006, p. 19).

Despite decrying the double-edged nature of this money-catalyzed progress, early foundational theorists tended to dismiss cultural holdovers and resistance to money’s colonization of social life as “residual atavisms” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 7), and as “sentimentalities that lose their significance completely with the growing indifference of money” (Simmel, 1978[c1907], p. 441). They saw money as a totalizing force, as its displacement of the cultural, the social, and the moral moved inexorably toward completion. A growing number of social scientists, however, question such a rigid dichotomy between these two spheres of social life, those distinguished by money exchange and those that aren’t (Fourcade & Healy, 2007).

Tipping delineates the frontier of this monetary colonization of social life. Although “we often experience markets as animated objects exercising a power over us that is devoid of human content, a force that is usually manifested in money form” (Hart, 2005, p. 167), tipping shows how, as much as money augments and subverts social relations, the cultural and social contexts within which money becomes embedded also incorporate an appropriate money’s meaning into new forms. As Mauss himself recognized, although “it appears that the whole field of industrial and commercial law is in conflict with morality . . . . Today the ancient principles are making their influence felt upon the rigours, abstractions and inhumanities of our codes” (Mauss, 1970, p. 64). The tip’s myriad idiosyncrasies, its drama, ambiguity, and comedy, are testament to how “people personalize money, bending it to their own purposes” (Hart, 2007a, p. 14). While money undoubtedly casts a long shadow, tipping reminds us that its presence is not fatalistically total. As we shall see, tip payment shows how this fraternization of impossibilities actually unfolds, and illustrates how individuals deal with the incongruities that money technically allows.

## THE TWO CIRCUITS OF MODERN LIFE

The inclusion of money in an exchange changes its signification drastically (Hart, 2005, p. 165), and indeed, servers’ perceptions of “what is in the tip” are acutely sensitive to its presence. Tipping seems to form a discomforting

connection between two divergent circuits of social life in capitalist societies: the first, “the everyday, is short term, individuated and materialistic; the other, the social, is long term, collective and idealized, even spiritual” (Hart, 2005, p. 166). These circuits are often identified by the presence or absence of money coursing through them and each demand markedly different behavior. They actuate familiar and well-worn maxims stressing the fundamental duality at the heart of capitalist society, bisecting it into mutually exclusive and morally distinct spheres. Whichever specific visage this dichotomy assumes – public versus domestic, work versus home, outside versus inside, business versus pleasure, it supplies the rules, controls the flows, and governs the moral appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of a given transaction. Hart (2007a, p. 13) suggests this distinction manifests, for example, in the “attempt to separate the spheres in which paid and unpaid work predominated [where] one is ideally objective and impersonal, specialised and calculated [and] the other is subjective and personal, diffuse, based on long-term interdependence.”

Maurer (2006, p. 22) notes how, traditionally, “monetary meanings and uses were often treated in isolation from wider transactional orders.” With tipping, we see this isolation of “monetary meanings” perceptibly collapse. While Hart observes that the project of keeping both circuits separate demands and spends considerable conceptual effort, “it is difficult to keep the personal and the impersonal apart; yet our economic culture demands nothing less of us” (Hart, 2005, p. 166). This conflict is apparent in the tip. Discussions with informants revealed a discomfiting quality of tipping, where elements of social relations typically ascribed to one circuit (like money) overlap incongruously with the other. My discussions with Rob especially evoked such an avenue of interpretation:

I have people who say that they don't tip – they don't feel they need to tip – because I am already getting paid. This was from a lady who was from a small island. You know, like Galliano or something like that. And she dressed like she was sort of Earth-friendly and hippieish and stuff. She probably lived on an island most of her life. She's probably not used to coming into the city or doesn't come into the city that often. She's probably not used to going out for dinner, so from her perspective, she probably . . . we'll say, and totally extrapolating on this, but we'll say she lives on this island, she's got lots of friends so she goes to her friends' houses for dinner because there probably aren't any restaurants. So for her it's this weird concept. Why *would* I pay extra?

She is so used to meals being a part of her domestic circuit that securing the personal niceties of service through a cash payment (indicating the circuit of calculative impersonality) would be not only strange but also inappropriate. I encountered this confusion and unease with the tip

frequently when serving guests from other countries where the tip is less prevalent or even actively discouraged. Seen from the outside, tipping appears to violate basic social sensibilities. Many servers struggled to describe what differentiates retail or other service industry jobs, which are largely “un-tipped,” from serving. Rob explains:

I think what's different here as opposed to, say, retail or like a coffee shop, is that with retail and the coffee shop there's a counter. There's still that separation, whereas here there isn't. I am right in a table's *aura* for lack of a better term . . . that area of personal space around you . . . there's sort of an intimacy with serving that doesn't exist at the coffee shop because you've got a counter dividing you. Whereas with the person who's serving you there's not. So there's already, sort of, this wall of like, “you are there and I am here.”

In order to disarm the incongruity of receiving perhaps uncomfortably intimate attention without such a division, Rob says, we tip. Shamir (1984, p. 66) proposes, just as Herrmann did, that the exchange of some token amount of money neutralizes the dissonant social elements of the transaction: “By choosing money as the currency of return (rather than smiles, gifts, etc.) the customers attempt to transform the social exchange into an economic exchange, thereby further reducing their obligations and defending themselves against the implications of social exchange.” In so doing, the metaphor of the market and the pretense of economic rationality are maintained. Rob struggled to describe this immaterial barrier, approximated literally and metaphorically by the coffee counter, subdividing social interaction into its two supposed halves. The coffee counter serves as a placeholder for something much more difficult to describe. It is an effective metonymy for that which is present in non-tipped professions but absent in serving: a comforting reassurance that economic and moral life do not intermingle. Although serving lacks such an impersonalizing counter, the tip, and the money it is made of, appears to provide a similar but tenuous substitute. As I pressed Rob further, he drew the following analogy:

I mean if you go over to someone's house for dinner to hang out and drink some wine . . . and there's a little bit of money . . . how can I describe it? I'm going to think of a good metaphor. It would be the same idea as – this is gonna be a really strange metaphor but hopefully it helps – I once had a friend who ended up becoming a callboy, and his reasoning was “well, I'm already having sex anyway, so why not get paid for it?” . . . My reasoning for *not* doing that was that adding money to it adds this element where before he was just meeting random cute people and having sexual relations, so there was this element of fun. When the money enters in, I think that element of fun sort of gets left out. Because now you have to do what the other person wants. Because there's money involved. Do you know what I mean? . . . there's this kind of . . . *divide*. You don't have that when you go over to someone's house for dinner because they're your friends.

As money spans an interaction, in the transactors' minds, its signification and meaning switch drastically. While tip payment provides a comforting veneer of market rationality and thus a means of legitimization, it also, ironically, undermines this precarious disguise by simultaneously connecting personal life, through money, to the impersonal market. Rob rather persuasively (if uneasily) compares tipping to prostitution. Although somewhat provocative, his analogy speaks to the incongruous identity of tipping. Exchanges such as these effectively expose and collapse the two ideologically configured circuits of social life, which are generally assumed to be separate, and thereby short-circuit the cold impersonality ascribed to market relations and the morality attributed to acceptably social non-market relations. Such incongruities push our collectively "heightened sense of division between an outside world where our humanity feels swamped and a precarious zone of protected personality at home" (Hart, 2007a, p. 13) to its limits. Exchanges like the tip suggest that while money increasingly permeates social relations, the idiosyncrasies of moral life are likewise transforming money in return.

Zelizer's (1994) history of the transforming uses of North American money in the late 19th and early 20th centuries found, preserved in the popular media of that period, a heated controversy surrounding the increasing popularization of tip payment. Early critics feared what tipping represented: the conflation of two mutually exclusive social spheres, the moral and the economic. There were even attempts to outlaw its practice. To its critics, the tip was something insidious, "a crass corruption of the gift, a mercenary bribe that paid for a stranger's personal service" (Zelizer, 1994, p. 94). They argued that "even when not morally corrupting," the tip was at least "socially demeaning. What sort of gift was it, after all, if it humiliated the recipient? ... Since the recipient was not indigent, tipping was, in fact, worse than charity ... a 'gross and offensive caricature of mercy ... it curses him that gives and him that takes'" (Zelizer, 1994, p. 96). Tipping was seen as symptomatic of money's increasing influence in social life: it was a symbol for the subversive force of capitalism, threatening to undermine moral behavior, commodify social relations, and join the two ideologically (and by their estimation, rightly) separated circuits of social life.

While the servers I spoke to believed this story of the commodified tip – that its payment conforms with market convention, its actual practice, as Lynn and McCall (2000) and others have demonstrated, actually defies such expectations and the tip remains beholden to various socially, culturally, and morally defined factors. Rob's mention of prostitution is especially informative. Rather than entertaining the incongruous notion that the tip is partly a payment for kindness or personal intimacy – a fraternization of

impossibilities similar to receiving, for example, a money birthday-gift from a friend or even, as Rob hinted, an unwarranted offer of money for sex – it is less troubling, and, indeed, less dissonant to simply disguise it. Thus, the ideology of the tip, itself an expression of the compelling mythology of two separate social circuits demanding very different things from us, is maintained. The tip is paradoxically both a physical manifestation and subversion of “this duality ... the moral and practical foundation of capitalist society” (Hart, 2005, p. 166).

As money continues to traverse, permeate, and augment social interaction, we must acknowledge how the social and cultural processes that money joins likewise appropriate it to their own ends. We cannot dismissively and simplistically label money as the impersonalizing harbinger of the perfectly alienated, rationalized, and colorless capitalist society. Here, Maussian and other non-market dynamics envelope money and the commodifying market ideology that it embodies to create a unique and often deeply personal activity that is neither purely economic nor purely ritualistic, but instead both. In all its ubiquity and conspicuousness, the ordinary tip allows us to question the maintenance and tenability of an artificial dichotomy compelling us to cleave social life into two halves, a rational economically driven one and a non-economically driven social one. We must acknowledge the inherent messiness, indeterminacy, and significant overlap characterizing and confusing the interface between “economic” and “non-economic” exchange and recognize “the exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity” (Appadurai, 1988, p. 11) for what it is.

## CONCLUSION

I realize that I have offered few if any useful suggestions on how one ought to tip. Instead, my intention here is to draw attention to how tipping is conceived, to identify the value systems upon which its protocols and etiquette so precariously rest and how these beliefs filter back into the practice itself. As Shamir (1984, p. 75) notes of the tip, “neither economic, nor bureaucratic, nor primary social rules can be fully followed and yet they all apply and exert their influence.” Customers tip for diverse and often seemingly contradictory reasons: to avoid punishment, because it is just, out of guilt, to improve self-image, for good service – the list is long. Because of its disorienting hybridity, the tip defies familiar categorizations and the usual expectations of economic exchange cease to provide useful guidance. The individual, upon confronting such an anomaly, defaults to convenient

assumptions, categories, and conceptions. As such, the tip becomes a uniquely revealing window into our conceptual navigation of economic life. It becomes a prism through which an individual's underlying value system is projected.

The performance of tipping, however observationally intelligible, remains largely incoherent with respect to the traditional expectations of prevailing economic theory. The practice of tipping – by its moral signification, its obstinate defiance of the economist's constricting rationality, and the multifaceted ways in which individuals experience, actuate, and comprehend it – points to a deficit in the restrictive categories we have chosen to understand, shape, and ultimately fragment social life. The two circuits of modern life, in demanding conformity to their sometimes arcane obligations, cut a swath through capitalist society that is real in consequence yet paradoxically artificial: they are less a reflection of its essential structure and more a reification of a pervasive ideology overtop of it. The discrepancy between repeated assertions by informants intuitively connecting the tip to service quality and increasing empirical evidence pointing to just the contrary exemplifies this disjuncture between understanding and practice, and the tip appears as much rationalized as truly rational. We fetishize a peculiar interpretation of exchange, that of formalist economic canon, at the expense of "its real fundamentals and . . . the very heart of normal social life" (Mauss, 1970, p. 67). This superimposed compartmentalization, partitioning the rational, impersonal, and self-interested from the social, cultural, and moral, collapses with tipping. The tip encompasses all of these seemingly incongruous elements and collides them over American restaurant dining tables every day to the tune of \$42 billion a year.

That the tip is made of money poses a special challenge to anthropological perspectives on exchange as well. The theory of the gift economy assumes the circulation of inalienable commodities between connected transactors. Money, the most profoundly alienable and anonymous of commodities, stands in stark contrast. However, rather than rending cultural flesh from economic bone, money's presence augments but is itself also enveloped and appropriated by the social and cultural contexts within which it becomes embedded. Both servers and customers would describe the tip in vivid and artful detail, depicting highly emotional encounters that were variously comedic, dramatic, and inspirational – hardly the rationalized, colorless, and alienated affair drained of cultural meaning that its opponents initially feared. Tipping represents both a commodification of social relations and a socialization of money. It delineates the frontier of money's colonization of social life, but as tipping demonstrates, that boundary is hardly a wave of destruction, but more a story of adaptation and amalgamation.

Although money's presence or absence is certainly helpful in identifying the hazards, risks, and various moral shoals individuals must navigate in order to conform to our ideologically configured social circuits, money's near omnipresence and idiosyncratic appearance in incongruous situations at least confuses the layout of this bifurcated treasure map. The problem is more than sophomoric: where are these boundaries? Where does the personal end and the economic begin? Perhaps a more fundamental question needs to be more explicitly considered, and that is to what extent such a demanding yet phantom boundary even makes sense. For Hart (2005, p. 167), such an ideological duality "forcing individuals to divide themselves, asks too much of us." The distinct sense of discomfort many find in the practice, as in Rob's comparison of tipping to prostitution, reveals this ideological inheritance in action as it attempts to excise the social and moral from the "economic" circuit of our lives. Reacting to this ideology, Mauss (1970, p. 67) recommended: "We should return to the old and elemental. Once again, we shall discover these motives of action still remembered by many societies and classes: the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast."

The tip, a contemporary example of this "unity of individual and society, freedom and obligation, self-interest and concern for others," presents a modest but penetrating reminder that "modern capitalism rests on an unsustainable attachment to one of these poles" (Hart, 2007b, p. 481), as it quietly and casually erodes the ideological sprawl of the market. When I asked Christina what she thought of tipping given everything she had told me already, she remarked:

Is this an ideal system? I don't know, because where does it stop? Because now I find myself tipping the barista at the coffee shop, I now wonder whether I should be tipping my dry-cleaner, you know? I obviously tip my hairdresser and my cab driver but where does it stop? I have a lawyer now, do I tip my lawyer? I'm assuming I don't.

Where *does* it end? Tipping certainly does not stop with restaurants, nor does what tipping represents even end with tipping. A tip, that ubiquitous and plainly visible dollar payment, presents only one short-circuiting of this vast immaterial architecture subtending capitalist ideology and society. From charitable donation to prostitution, from governmental earmarking to birthday gifts, from garage sales to tipping, the omnipresence of money (and the rationalizing force it purportedly carries) is matched only by its omnipresent intermingling with the cultural, social, and moral substrate of human interaction.

## NOTES

1. Again, I selected restaurants with fairly moderate price-points, with main courses typically under \$20 (Canadian). Having worked in a decidedly upscale fine-dining restaurant in the past where I myself received several unambiguous bribery tips (the only ones I have ever received), I would propose that the prevalence of the bribery tip may depend on a given restaurant's price range and intended clientele. The reluctance and unease I encountered could easily be specific to the types of restaurants I selected.

2. This strategy seems to work only for female servers. Male servers using this strategy actually received a *decrease* in tip payment (Rind & Strohmets, 1999).

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