

April 17: The Gift that Kept on Giving: Radium and Marie Curie's 1921 American Tour

Abstract

Marie Curie made two trips to the United States; in 1921 and 1929. In this talk, I will focus on her first visit in 1921, the purpose of which was to receive a gift from the women of America, who by popular subscription had collected \$100,000 for the purchase of one gram of radium, the most valuable material on earth. As a comparison, it is as if a crowdsourcing campaign today succeeded in raising the equivalent of the 2012 Nobel Prize sum of \$1.3 million for a worthy scientist somewhere. But then, America's women scraped together *twice* the amount Einstein received for 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics. And it was all for Marie Curie. One could argue, that in 1921 Marie Curie reaped the reward of a decision made by her and Pierre Curie in 1902. Twenty years after ceding radium to others by abstaining from patenting their discovery and the processes of its extraction, the Curies' disinterested action of sharing information and samples was collectively reciprocated when the United States' female populace gave Marie Curie an equally disinterested gift in return. This reciprocity—laden with a fascinating set of symbolic and financial gestures—is the main reason why the 1921 Tour and the American Gift adds an important dimension to the overall story I am trying to tell in my book. The circulation of radium and Marie Curie the person/persona was sustained by a complex interplay between divergent economies, legalities, and values. And yet, the American Gift was something quite unique. Peripherally related both to a traditional science economy of academies, prizes, and honorary degrees intermingling with state and industry initiatives, this was a public campaign using all the mechanisms of the mass press and celebrity culture to enlist the interest (and monetary investment) of women across the social spectrum. This largely informal economy came with significant formal consequences, consequences turned out to be more complex and more rewarding than Curie could ever have anticipated. And print culture held it all together. Not only was the American Tour of 1921 a marketing and publicity marvel on its own, it also coincided with and set in motion an intensification of Curie's own production of text commodities. As I hope to show in *Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property, Celebrity Culture, and the Power of Print* (under advance contract with the University of Chicago Press), the economy of the gift and the economy of print were inextricably linked, creating a very specific—and largely unrecognized—research platform for Curie.