

# The Gift as Insufficient Source of Normativity

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To my mind, the most urgent current task in the social sciences is one in the context of which the unduly cut-and-dried distinctions between positive and normative, between sociology and ethics, between secular pluralism and religious spirituality, and so on, should be abandoned. I would like to reclaim the legacy of a Marxian-type dialectic by stating that the social sciences today (and I would even risk speaking of a single present-day 'social science') have the threefold task of (1) thinking through in depth the directions of a *desirable social change*, (2) asking what are the '*resources for action*' already available for this end within the totality of social actors and (3) identifying the *moral capacities that need to be stimulated and/or created* so that the resources for action which are not yet available, but which are desirable under point (1), may be able to take root and flourish. I defy anyone to disentangle clearly and analytically the positive and normative parts of such a task . . .

If the somewhat acrimonious debate on the status of the gift that I have had with Alain Caillé for the last two years continues to hold my interest and if I have eventually overcome my irritation in the face of what has occasionally seemed to me a failure of understanding linked to the defence of an 'article of local faith',<sup>1</sup> it is because our debate is a fundamental part of the worthwhile task of the social sciences. Nevertheless, I shall make it clear straight away that the expression 'sociological gift' hardly satisfies me, in the light of the description of this task which I have just supplied.

In fact, making a distinction between a 'sociological' gift and a 'non-sociological' gift – thus one which would be 'religious' or 'philosophical' . . . – gives the impression that one is more concerned with knowing which *academic discipline* will be the first rightly to comprehend the phenomenon of the gift, rather than with knowing whether the study of the gift can *help us in our threefold task* (one that is positive-normative, sociologico-philosophical, etc.).

The word 'dehumanization' brings uncontrollably to mind the image of something lost or forgotten. In the ethical perspective once sketched out by Marcel Mauss, it was above all the *basic triadic structure* of giving-receiving-reciprocating which we were said to have 'lost' beneath the market hotchpotch of nauseating capitalism; it was above all the 'steadfast bedrock' of what Mauss calls 'going out of oneself' which we have 'forgotten' in favour of a generalized compulsion to seize for oneself. In this perspective, to reclaim our humanity would mean to remove the encumbered source, becoming (or becoming once more?) what we have always been, namely *homo donator*, to use Jacques Godbout's expression.

For what is at stake, in Mauss's perspective, is the *authentic social bond* and what grounds and sustains it; what is at stake is that enigmatic 'collective subject' supposedly

imposed upon individuals in the indecipherable guise of the freedom to give. Indecipherable, for the opacity of the triadic structure of the gift (what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'common miscognition') is the necessary condition for the efficacy of the social bond. *The veiled source must remain so*, so that the act which results from it – the gift – is not paralysed by the sudden glimpse of the superstructure, and therefore should not be questioned, challenged, relativized, and so on. With Mauss, one is close to Bourdieu's *habitus* approach and to Friedman's 'as if' perspective: the individual, who is literally set in motion by a principle which he cannot fully understand, does not truly know what he is doing – but 'it works', at least according to the theorist who observes things at a distance, inserting the multiple personal acts into an overall image, into a 'total social fact' which he is (and *must be!*) the only one to grasp . . .

However, most paradoxically, the work of Marcel Mauss ends in 'moral conclusions' and, I would say, still more, in a full-fledged *ethical appeal* to recover our lost truth. A paradoxical emblem, if there ever was one: there, we are called on to unveil on ethical grounds what should, on sociological grounds, remain concealed – the 'impulse to give' which the 'collective subject' inscribes, and always has inscribed, in each of us: what Mauss claims to have illuminated is definitely a *permanent human structure*, not an episodic characteristic of social interaction at such-and-such a moment in history.

But what does the reflexive human being do to whom one says that there is a permanent but forgotten structure within him? He seeks to find out where that is and whether it is worth re-collecting . . . In short, he turns himself into a phenomenologist, a psychoanalyst, a meditator, and so on. We shall confine ourselves (for this is quite sufficiently complex!) to phenomenology and psychoanalysis. What do we find in Mauss? Alain Caillé and Jacques Godbout, alongside Jean-Luc Boilleau, have expressed it well: the gift is a mode of circulation of goods and services which, to use Caillé's expression, 'transforms rivalry into alliance (and vice versa)', in other words, also transforms alliance into rivalry. There is thus a co-operative aspect in all competition and a competitive aspect in all co-operation. So far so good. *And yet*: in competition the 'competitive' aspect sometimes degenerates into *sheer instrumentalization of the other*, indeed, possibly into his elimination; in co-operation the 'competitive' aspect sometimes gives way to *sheer respect for the other*, indeed, to a relationship of friendship or love. Thus, the person who ponders reflexively on the 'locus of the gift' in himself inevitably asserts that *something Other* interacts with the impulse to give, on the one hand, distinguishing the gift as 'bearer of life' from the gift as 'bearer of death' and, on the other hand, opening the possibility of 'going beyond' the agonistic and competitive logic demonstrated by Mauss.

What is this something Other? The psychoanalysts, in agreement here with religious thought (and I should like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to Maurice Bellet and Denis Vasse), call it 'the Law'. The Law – which is not moral but anthropological, structuring – is the agency which, deep within us, turns our relations with others, however self-interested they may be in other respects, into mediations with the Other, with that *locus of exteriority* where the agonistic relation, as well as the subtle interplay of power and oppression, transcends itself – all things which the 'impulse to give' alone is absolutely incapable of preventing . . . Indeed, as I wrote in reply to Alain Caillé last year,<sup>2</sup> what specific activities can be described as illustrations of the solid presence of the logic of the gift? 'The sportsperson's endeavour'; yes, but Aryan athletes competed at Berlin in 1936 in order to demonstrate through this gift of themselves the 'superiority' of the race.

'The great scholar's passion for the truth'; yes, but the great Heidegger was intensely devoted to his National Socialist country and the 'gifts' it had given him, the great Hayek bequeathed to humanity works calling for the dismantling of all structures of solidarity, and many great thinkers of 'solidarity' or the 'resistance of the oppressed' behave like the worst of oppressors in the way they give their works to the community and use the gifts received from the latter; and so on and so forth. These examples are deliberately extreme, for they are intended to demonstrate one thing only: that *the normativity of the gift can only be established by a Law, the giving of which precedes all intra-human gifts*. This Law is not reducible to any 'collective subject' – something which the phenomenologist Emmanuel Lévinas and many other Jewish thinkers, as well as some from the Christian tradition, have striven to hammer home, and which lends a considerable part of philosophical thought on the gift this partially 'extra-social' character which irritates so many sociologists and political analysts.

Why? Because the ethical appeal (and what Michel Maffesoli justly calls the 'sociological metaphysics' of Marcel Mauss is nothing else!) never springs from *within* the social *agon* and its fragile balances of power; it is admittedly inscribed in our interests, sometimes it 'wounds' them (as Levinas would say), *but it comes from elsewhere*, from the Other which is the 'locus' of co-habitation of irreducible differences, where power, symbolic domination, oppression, and so on are proscribed *in the very name* of our irreducible inequalities.

To put it somewhat tersely: *homo donator* is no more protected against instrumentalization and the desire to dominate other people than are *homo oeconomicus* or *homo sociologicus* (or *homo habituensis*), unless he listens to the heteronomous anthropological Law which, coming from the Other as absolute exteriority, mediates his relations with others. It is only by finally recognizing this *irreducibly extra-sociological agency* that the 'sociology of the gift' will perhaps be able to start convincing us of its relevance to the question of humanization.

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Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

## Notes

1. I refer here to an article which I published in issue 15 (May 2000) of the *Revue du MAUSS semestrielle*, entitled 'Mauss et l'éthique du don: les enjeux d'un altruisme méthodologique' (pp. 99–119). There, I defended the viewpoint that Marcel Mauss, because he did not have at his disposal the concept of 'methodological altruism' which I have taken from the works of Emmanuel Levinas, was incapable of conceiving the gift and its ethical foundations in a sufficiently radical manner. Alain Caillé wrote a fairly acid reply to this article and gave me the opportunity to present a counter-response in the same issue. We had already begun the debate at a conference in Leuven (Belgium) in April 1999, on Mauss and the gift, organized by Toon Van de Velde, which gave rise to the publication of a collective volume (*Gifts and Interests*, Louvain, Peeters, 2000). What I have written in the present article seems to me to be one of the last stages of a process of elucidation that has been fascinating and rich in discoveries for me. It will be seen that I emerge more lucid on Mauss, but more convinced than ever of the critical importance of Levinassian ethic.
2. See *Revue du MAUSS semestrielle*, 15, p. 130.