**The Axiomatics of the Gift. Alain Caillé’s Reinvention of Marcel Mauss**

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**Abstract**

The article presents a systematic reconstruction of the intellectual trajectory of Alain Caillé, the founder and animator of the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences (MAUSS) in France. Going back to early influences of Claude Lefort and Karl Polanyi, it shows the centrality of the symbolical constitution of the economy in the development of an intellectual front against rational choice. It also considers how Marcel Mauss’ famous *Essay on the Gift* has been developed into a “gift paradigm” that aims to unify the various social sciences into a comprehensive alternative to the interest paradigm.

Keywords: Anti-utilitarianism – the gift – the symbolical – the political - Marcel Mauss – Alain Caillé

Alain Caillé, sociologist, economist and convivivialist, is a renowned French social theorist and public intellectual. For over four decades, he has animated the *Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales* (MAUSS)*/*Movement of Anti-Utilitarian Social Sciences, edited the *Revue du MAUSS*, and led the opposition to the colonization of the social sciences by economics and rational choice. Caillé is a fast thinker, a prolific writer, and a tremendous intellectual animator and agitator with a rare capacity to launch new ideas, stimulate new projects and bring ever more people together around a common purpose. In France, one is bound to find several of his books on the shelves of any bookshop. His works on the anthropology of Marcel Mauss, the sociology of the gift, the history of markets, the social and solidarity economy, the ethics of care, the politics of recognition and the philosophy of democracy have found their readerships in Brazil, Italy and Germany. If he’s less known than the other social theorists of his generation, like Axel Honneth, Luc Boltanski, Jeffrey Alexander or Margaret Archer, it is, no doubt, not due to lack of ideas or influence, but because he has not published much in English.

Notwithstanding his visibility, productivity and influence on the French intellectual scene, one cannot really say, though, that Caillé is fully part of the establishment. In this respect, his position is comparable to the one the late Ulrich Beck occupied in Germany. He’s both at the centre of the intellectual debates and at the margins of the academic institutions. As the editor of the *Revue du MAUSS*, one of the few remaining generalist journals with wide diffusion, he has control over some means of publication; as the leader of an intellectual movement, he’s also at the centre of an impressive network of friends and sympathizers of the MAUSS.

Most of his books are written for a specialized public of economic anthropologists, political sociologists and heterodox economists with an interest in reciprocity, solidarity and democracy; others are addressed to a general public or even to the enlightened elites of the world (politicians, entrepreneurs, influencers). He may have a Ph.D. in economics, but his radical critique of the discipline writes off most of what economists do as mythology, tautology and ideology. He’s got another one in sociology, but it’s made up of disparate chapters that chastise modern rationalism and uncover traces of utilitarianism in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), sociology (Bourdieu), history (Braudel) and economics (Hayek). He’s been the assistant of Claude Lefort, but without philosophical formation, his call for a renewal of political philosophy is not really heard beyond the social sciences. He may put Marcel Mauss back in the centre of anthropology, but without fieldwork, one is not really an anthropologist. His intellectual project to redeploy the social sciences as a political philosophy anchored in an anthropo-sociology of the gift is quite consistent, though, as we’ll soon discover, and can count on the support of a great many sympathisers.

Unlike other schools of thought within French academia, the MAUSS is at the same time an intellectual and a social movement. It is carried by the ideas of Alain Caillé and it carries his ideas to universities, the press and civic associations. Narrowly, it focuses on producing the *Revue du MAUSS*; more broadly on building a general sociology as a comprehensive alternative to utilitarianism and a bulwark against neoliberalism. Although the MAUSS is an open, plural and friendly society that welcomes critical and wide-ranging discussions of all things that are possibly related to the gift, it nevertheless has a party line that is set by its founder and an evangelic mission that radicalises, extends and actualises the scientific, moral and political conclusions of Mauss’s *Essay on the Gift*. Given its proselytism, it’s no wonder some have considered this “School of thought”, which continues in its own sweet way the tradition of Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, as an apostolate of generosity to the world.

The *Revue du MAUSS* is a specialised journal that publishes articles, essays and opinion pieces that relate, one way or another, to the gift. As a scientific journal, it addresses itself to a general public. All of its issues are thematic and open with a lengthy presentation of the articles by Alain Caillé and Philippe Chanial, his successor. Often, they also contain at least one article and various short book reviews written by Caillé himself. As a result, the journal functions as a powerful echo chamber of the editor. Over the last 40 years, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, heterodox economists and psychoanalysts have published 2000 articles, amounting to more than 16.000 pages, on the most variegated topics (from sacrifice to violence, prisons to schools, sympathy to care, basic income to solidarity economics, symbolism to associative socialism). Together, the 25 issues of the *Bulletin du MAUSS* (1982-1987), which were followed by 15 issues of the *Revue du MAUSS trimestrielle* (1988-1992) and another 57 issues of the *Revue du MAUSS semestrielle* (1993-2021, with *MAUSS International* as an Anglophone extension since 2021), constitute a unique archive of all things that one can associate with the productive reception (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Marcel Mauss in France.

In this article, I want to present a panoramic overview of Alain Caillé’s lifework to an Anglophone readership. Since the end of the century, I have been an “assimilated member” of the MAUSS – more of a “Habermaussian” than a strict MAUSSian. Recently, I have co-authored a book with Alain Caillé on the prospects of social theory (Caillé and Vandenberghe, 2021) and I have also become one of the editors of the digital journal *MAUSS International*. Apart from a short encyclopaedic piece on the MAUSS (in co-authorship with David Graeber), an inspired comment of Caillé’s theory of anti-utilitarian action presented in the Vatican of all places (Vandenberghe, 2008) and a neo-Maussian analysis of the pandemic as a global social total fact (Vandenberghe and Véran, 2021), I have not written about Mauss/MAUSS, Caillé or the gift. To write this article, for the first time I have gone more systematically through his writings, from his early strictures against the abstractions of science, the market and the state to his reinvention of Marcel Mauss and its consequent elaboration of the gift paradigm. Interestingly, his preoccupation with Mauss and gift-giving appears to have been itself a felicitous consequence of the clever acronym he and his friends had chosen in 1981 when they launched the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences.

As a historian of ideas, I have reconstructed his trajectory and shown what he owes not only to Karl Polanyi and Marcel Mauss, but also and above all to the early work of Claude Lefort, one of the founders of *Socialisme et barbarie*, which can, with a pinch of salt, be considered “the French equivalent of the Frankfurt School” (Caillé, 2014: 17). In continuous dialogue with Marx, Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, Lefort developed a political theory of the symbolic constitution of society. Caillé was his assistant at the University of Caen in 1967-1968. The influence of *Les Formes de l’histoire* (Lefort, 1978), a collection of brilliant essays on political anthropology, can be felt throughout all the phases of his intellectual career. Indeed, the portrait he paints of his mentor (Caillé, 2015: ch. 9) almost reads like a self-portrait. I am therefore tempted to situate his reflections within a Normandic school of political sociology (*l’École de Caen*) with three generations of scholars (Lefort, Caillé, Chanial) who dedicated their life to the study and promotion of the gift, recognition and democracy. While Lefort subsequently will turn away from the social sciences, the MAUSS extends his early reflections on the symbolical and the political without opposing political philosophy to sociology (Caillé, 2022).

As a social theorist, I have tried to give his theoretical essays a maximum of conceptual coherence by continuously linking its development to a dialogue with the founding fathers of sociology. To establish a channel of communication between different traditions of theorising, I have also translated the terms of general sociology into those of social theory by pointing to the central problems of the social sciences that both strive to resolve. The best homage one can pay to whom one is personally, professionally and intellectually indebted is to take his ideals, ideas and projects seriously. As one cannot reconstruct one’s lifework without entering into a critical dialogue with it, I have not abdicated my own voice while listening to his and trying to find mine. To avoid an overload of references to his innumerous publications and republications, I have trimmed the bibliography and given priority to books (over 30) over articles (around 700). Although I have read and consulted the archives of the *Revue du Mauss* while writing this article, I have not quoted it. For the same reasons, I have, for once, shied away from footnotes.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The article proposes a systematic reconstruction of Alain Caillé’s lifework and follows its development more or less chronologically, from his early critique of utilitarian reason (negative utilitarianism) to his later development of the gift paradigm (positive anti-utilitarianism). The article is divided in five parts. In the first part, I will present the general framework of his political anthropology of the gift as a systematic attempt to renew and redeploy classic sociology as a political philosophy. In the second part, I will show how Caillé combines Claude Lefort’s political philosophy and the moral economy of Karl Polanyi in a critique of utilitarianism as the dominant ideology of capitalism. In the third, fourth and fifth parts, I will situate his engagement with the *Essay on the Gift* within the context of the French reception of Marcel Mauss, outline the lineaments of the gift paradigm as a comprehensive alternative to the interest paradigm and explore some of its articulations with the theories of care, play and recognition. The article will conclude with a short recapitulation and evaluation of the anti-utilitarian theory of action.

**I. Sociology as Political Philosophy (and *vice versa*)**

At the centre of his work, underneath and above the various disciplines he’s been tracking for half a century as an avid reader, one finds his spirited advocacy of a synthetic re-composition of the social sciences under the guidance of a renewed socio-anthropology that presents itself as a total science of Man, if such an old-fashioned reference to the generic human being (*Gattungswesen*) is still allowed. He calls this renewed socio-anthropology *sociologie générale* and envisions it as “a political philosophy with the trappings of a science” (*une philosophie politique avec des allures de science* – cf. Caillé, 1993: ch.1, esp. p. 72; see also Chanial, 2011). The phrase is suggestive, but to fully understand the full scope of this ambitious project of a “retotalisation” of the social sciences as and in a general sociology, it has to be complemented, unpacked and parsed. The metasociology that is supposed to integrate the existing social sciences and overcome their fragmentation would be a moral and political philosophy. It would find its ground and its unity in a philosophical anthropology, i.e. a normative vision of the *anthropos* as a complex bio-psycho-socio-cultural being. Conversely, this normative anthropology would replace the philosophy of history with a comparative sociology of states, markets and democracies through the ages and across civilisations. It would be animated by a desire to revitalise democracies and re-embed the market economy in society so that individuals would no longer be under the spell of utilitarian compulsion, but could freely cooperate and compete with each other to realise themselves in a humane, decent, convivial society.

*Sociologie générale* corresponds more or less to what falls under “social theory” in the Anglo-American tradition and the “theory of society” (*Gesellschafstheorie*) in the German tradition. Like his illustrious predecessors in the French tradition (from Saint-Simon and Comte via Durkheim and Mauss to Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu), Caillé (2015: ch. 3) does not think of sociology as a special science with its departmental-disciplinary logic, but as a synthetic, transversal and dialogical science that studies the human being in its totality, as well as in its unity and diversity. Like social theory, general sociology transcends the disciplines to find their common ground, central problems and foundational concepts. Compared to social theory, it is more political in that it aims to reorganise the existing social and human sciences around a common anti-utilitarian project that is philosophical, normative and scientific at once.

As a conscious attempt to renew the promises of classical sociology, Caillé’s vision of sociology as political philosophy - and *vice versa* - can now be redefined as a general, systematic and historical science that continues the venerable traditions of moral and political philosophy, as well as the philosophy of history, by its own means. Like its predecessors, it does not just want to describe, interpret and explain social life; it also wants to judge, criticise and transform it (Caillé, 1993: 59-63) by making it conscious both of the values, norms and principles that sustain it and of those that threaten it. The scientific analysis of society is, thus, inseparable from the diagnosis of its pathologies, the critique of its dominant ideology and the enunciation of a group therapy to cure its ills.

Like Émile Durkheim, the founder of the MAUSS is dreaming of sociology as a general social science that would analyse social life in its totality, with its contingency and normativity, but without any of the scientism of the Durkheimian School. Instead of carving up the social sciences in sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, etc., it would integrate them in an encompassing theory of society that would investigate the symbolic, moral and political constitution of society in all its complexity. Like Karl Marx, he envisions his critique of the market economy as a political philosophy that would present capitalist societies with a meaningful alternative, yet without any of the metaphysical guarantees of a philosophy of history that promises unity. As a systematic self-reflection of a society that is fully aware of its “historicity”, i.e. capacity to make history, and its “conflictuality”, sociology would lift societies to a higher level of consciousness of its unity and its divisions. Without the economy as last instance, the primacy of politics would be restored so that the collective can openly discuss and democratically decide the future trajectories of societies. Like Max Weber, he thinks of sociology as a comparative and historical science of social action, social relations and social orders. Through comparison of the ways of world making of societies through history, it would throw light on the particularity of Western rationalism in all the spheres of life. By doing so it would historicise the capitalist forms of life and relativize what we have become.

If one takes Marx, Weber and Durkheim together, one may get a sense of the ambit of Caillé’s social theory. Without reference to Marcel Mauss’s vision of a political economic anthropology, however, as a science of the human in its totality (*l’homme total*), one would still miss the defining mark of his work. Indeed, almost from the beginning till the end, it offers a continuous elaboration of Mauss’s celebrated *Essay on the Gift*. Since its publication in 1923-1924 in *L’année sociologique*, the *organum* of the Durkheimian School, this seminal text has inspired many generations of anthropologists (from Lévi-Strauss to Marshall Sahlins and Marilyn Strathern), sociologists (from Georges Gurvitch to Baudrillard and Bourdieu) and philosophers (from Bataille to Derrida and Ricoeur). Where others would rather refer to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* or Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences* to find guidance on theoretical and practical matters, the founder of the MAUSS has developed his own reflections through an extended interpretation of the 134 pages of the ‘Essay’. It is not that he has found all the answers to his questions in Marcel Mauss; rather, whenever a question or a theme came up, he has looked for the answers in the writings of the French ethnologist. The ‘Essay’ is the *Urtext* from which he starts, through which he reloops and with which he ends all his reflections on the human being, society, history, culture, religion, politics, economics and psychoanalysis. For him, this *Urtext* functions as a total social text that offers a template for the reconstruction of the social sciences on an anti-utilitarian basis.

**II. The Symbolic Constitution of Society and the Economy**

**The Modern Imaginary: Scientism, Utilitarianism, and Evolutionism**

Alain Caillé has two doctorates, one in economics (1974) and another one in sociology (1984). Both doctorates analyse the modern imaginary as a rationalist ideology and the dominant scientific paradigm as a mythology (Caillé, 1986). Both submit the social sciences to a constructivist critique that uncovers and denounces the profound dualism of the modern imaginary that pretends to separate myth from reason, ideology from science, and the symbolical from the real. What characterises the modern imaginary is that it negates one of the poles of this series of dichotomies and does not acknowledge the “re-entry” of the dichotomy in its own observations. Because the real is “hierarchically subordinated” to the symbolical, this re-entry of the unmarked term of the binary within the distinction is inevitable. This does not mean that the real does not exist; but as symbolic forms always mediate access to it, it cannot be captured *intentione recta*. What is real varies from one culture and epoch to another. It has to be hermeneutically disclosed.

As modern thought does not sufficiently acknowledge that its own infatuation with reason is itself imaginary, the symbolical constitution of reality continues to haunt it. The circularity between the constituting and the constituted, the symbolical and the real, the project and its object is inescapable. Access to Being is always mediated, and deferred. Underneath of the dualisms, there’s a deeper reality, an alethic truth that is non-dual (*advaita*, “one without a second”). It precedes the divisions between subject and object. Always presupposed, it can neither be disclosed at once nor brought into the full light of thought. “There’s no return to immediacy. That Being is hidden is itself a feature of Being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 162).

Modern reason uses dichotomies to carve up the world in different provinces of meaning (economics, politics, linguistics, etc.), which it then submits to a scientific analysis that can only confirm its own presuppositions. “The social sciences are only ‘verified’ to the extent that they create their own object” (Caillé, 1986: 26). The reality it supposedly describes is itself, however, the result of a rationalist form of symbolic representation that constitutes and performs the real in such a way that the respective sciences can only register its existence - as if it corresponded to their respective object domains.

Ontology is, therefore, “tautology”, while modern epistemology appears as an “invisible ideology” (Lefort, 1978: ch. 13) that symbolically constitutes the world as a world guided by scientific reason. Depending on the science that analyses the real according to its own departmental-disciplinary logic, modern rationalism takes on a different form. In economics, it appears as utilitarianism; in political science as technocratism; in anthropology as structuralism; and in history as evolutionism. Sociology complements and inverts utilitarianism in an explicit opposition to the utilitarianism of political economy; eventually, it succumbs, however, to the reigning ideology. A generalised desymbolisation of the universe is looming, if we may believe Caillé.

Utilitarianism is the philosophy that works with an “axiomatics of interest” (Caillé, 1986: Part 1) that stipulates that individuals continuously calculate their pains and their pleasures, their gains and their losses, whether they are aware of it or not. “Its central affirmation is that these interests are universally calculated and calculable. […] Action can be explained and calculated *ex post* by the observer, the scientist, and if it can be calculated by the observer, then it is because they have been calculated consciously or not *ex ante* by the subject” (Caillé, 1986: 119).

As such, utilitarianism is nothing new, of course (Caillé, Lazzeri and Senellart, 2001). Early developments in China and India show it is not a particularity of the West either. Within the Western tradition, it can already be found in the philosophy of Socrates and Plato (Caillé, 2004: ch. 2). In its modern form, the idea of a rational calculus of individual interests is linked to the emergence of market capitalism and finds its full expression in the political economy of the eighteenth century. This axiomatics, which encounters its first formulation in the British political and moral philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, is also the basis of the classical political economy of Smith, Ricardo and Marx. It will be fully formalised by the neo-marginalists (Jevons, Marshall and Walras) and operationalized as a political program by the neo-liberals of the Chicago School (Hayek, Mises, Friedman).

The set of axioms only fully works in a market economy. Based on the imaginary constitution of an atomistic individual who rationally orders his preferences and compares prices, classical political economy presupposes the market economy as much as it produces the market society. The work of neo-liberal economists related to the Mont Pèlerin Society (Miroswki and Plehwe, 2009) shows that the analytics of rational choice not only transpose the axiomatics of interest to all the social sciences, universalising its remit well beyond economics and economic life, but that it also promotes the free market as a political project.

Since the creation of the MAUSS in 1981, Caillé has funnelled his critique of Western rationalism (scientism, utilitarianism and evolutionism) to a single point: Utilitarianism. It no longer refers to a particular philosophical system of moral and political arithmetics, centered around Bentham’s radical ideas of government and punishment (Halévy, 1972). Rather it has become “the dominant imaginary of modern societies” (Caillé, 1988: 9). By transforming a philosophical current into the dominant ideology of modernity, Caillé has reduced the spectrum of political ideation in my opinion. In his hands, utilitarianism is not an analytic concept, but a polemical and diagnostic category that lumps together all rival approaches in a highly effective, but rather indiscriminate *concept de combat*. It even includes the anti-utilitarian strands within the utilitarian tradition (the “sympathetic” strand of the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment) and the normative functionalism of Talcott Parsons (the “collective” strand of utilitarianism that enjoins the actors to submit their individual desires to the normative dictates of society so that the “highest happiness of the greatest number” can be realised). The triumph of economistic reason is almost complete in the various domains of theoretical thought and, as a result of neo-liberalism, also in practical action.

The founder of the MAUSS considers neo-classical economy as a general theory of rationality and society. As a result of the fragmentation of social theory, he considers rational choice as the only general social theory that is currently available. It is hegemonic and is spreading from economics to all the social and human sciences. It even appears in biology, anthropology and psychoanalysis. In French sociology, with the exception of the action sociology of Alain Touraine (who was a member of his committee), its influence can be felt in the dominant schools of the 1980’s (Caillé, 1986: 99-116). It is explicit in the methodological individualism of Raymond Boudon (the French J. Elster) and the strategic theory of organisations of Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (the French equivalent of J. March and H. Simon). In the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, it is euphemised, but all the more insidious. In the name of a sophisticated critique that remains indebted to Marx, it generalises the axiomatic of interest to all symbolic goods and forms of capital (Caillé, 1994: ch. 1). Instead of considering symbolic capital (recognition) as the prime and originary form of capital that determines the conversion of all other forms of capital, it reverses the order and reduces symbolic capital to an expression of economic (money), cultural (education) and social capital (relations).

As an engine of individualisation and commodification, utilitarianism becomes militant in neo-liberalism. It produces a market society that transforms the social bond and molds a new type of personality: *the homo oeconomicus* - an analytical construct that has become empirically real (Laval, 2007), spawning a new type of humanity in its image. As an alternative to the general paradigm of interests, Caillé will work out the paradigm of the gift; and as an alternative to neoliberalism and political complement to the anti-utilitarian movement, he will launch in 2013 the convivialist movement (Caillé et al., 2013 and 2020).

**Revisiting Polanyi**

At the beginning, the central figure of the MAUSS was not Marcel Mauss, the eponymous master, but rather Karl Polanyi, the Hungarian economist and historian, who seemed to have opened up a third way between Marx and Weber that points beyond utilitarianism. His critical reconstruction of the liberal utopia of a self-regulating market and his dramatic account of the destruction of society that subsequently led to totalitarianism strongly marked the anti-utilitarian movement. Polanyi’s historical anthropology of markets, trade and money is central in all of Caillé’s (1986: ch. 4 and 2005) more historical investigations of the political constitution of the economical as a separate domain that follows its own laws. The separation between economics and politics, which finds its institutional counterpart in the distinction between the market and the state, cannot be uncoupled from the long rise of capitalism, according to Caillé. In Western Europe it is linked to the emergence of capitalism from the thirteenth century onwards and to the development of a self-regulated market from the seventeenth and eighteenth century onwards.

In an extended critique of Fernand Braudel’s world-systems theory of capitalism, Caillé (1984: ch. 4) follows, amends and extends Polanyi’s (1957) collective research on the long history of trade and markets. He argues that the free market comes into existence when international trade, which since immemorial times has been going on between maritime cities, is connected to local markets, where up till then prices were fixed and pre-fixed by the authorities. This interconnection of global trade and local commerce occurs with the emergence of nation-states. As these needed taxes to subsidise their struggles against feudal lords and finance their wars, they created regional and national markets and currencies that opened up the local markets and liberated them from the moral constraints of the community. Henceforth, commerce among locals would not be different from the commerce among strangers.

The disconnection of the national economy from the local community and the “disembedding” of the markets from society that subsequently led to a self-regulating market was not the result of a natural evolution. It was the conjoined product of an ideological fiction (the free market of the economists) and a state-driven project (the unity of the nation). When authors like Braudel discover the earliest traces of markets in ancient times, they not only retroject capitalism into the past, but also rearrange the historical sequence so that the earlier stages appear as precursors of a later evolution, creating the “illusion of an eternal present” (Caillé, 1986: 149).

Similarly, when economic historians and anthropologists come across the economic calculus in pre-capitalist social formations and reproduce Adam Smith’s myth of the universality of the “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another”, they invariably commit what Polanyi (1977: ch. 1) denounced as the “economistic fallacy”. They interpret economic behaviour in purely utilitarian terms as a form of instrumental and strategic rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and conflate the human economy with the market economy that has come into existence with capitalism.

While all societies have one way or another to organise the livelihoods of their members, not all organise the allocation of goods and personnel through the market. Without the capitalist liberation of the profit motive and without the transformation of land, labour and money into “fictitious commodities”, there’s no free, let alone a self-regulating market. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (1957: ch. 4) distinguishes three general principles of allocation: reciprocity (community), redistribution (state) and exchange (market), which may co-exist, though in a market society exchange tends to suppress and supplant the former. In archaic societies, without state and also without market, goods of all kinds are exchanged and circulate within and between groups in a gift economy that has all the qualities that Marx attributed to primitive communism. Anthropologists like Sahlins (1972: ch. 5) and Graeber (2014: ch. 5) who have studied non-market economies have shown the importance of generalised reciprocity in ceremonial exchange of gifts to integrate the groups and individuals in a community that receives “from each according to their capabilities” and gives “to each according to their needs”.

In ancient civilisations, territorial chiefdoms and traditional economies, with a state, but without free market, the goods that are locally produced are “pooled” by and sent to a political centre that redistributes the products to the territories under its control for consumption. When the state subsequently liberates the prices from conventional restrictions, the free market and its principle of exchange between anonymous individuals comes into play.

Caillé reformulates Polanyi’s three general principles as three different ways to constitute the economy (Caillé, 2005: ch. 12), understood here in the substantivist sense of provision of basic material means that satisfy human needs (thus, without the scarcity and economising that is implied in the formal definition of the economy). The modes of constitution of the economy may be ordered diachronically - as a historical succession from symbolic exchange via traditional to commodity exchange, synchronically - as general principles that one finds in all contemporary societies, or systematically - in terms of their relations to society and their degree of “embeddedness” or autonomy.

The French socio-economist connects the different types of economies to two basic types of sociality (Caillé, 1986: Part 4): “primary sociability” and “secondary sociality”, which correspond more or less to the *Gemeinschaft* (with its mythical elements) and *Gesellschaft* (with its contractual elements) of the early German sociologists. While the symbolic economy of the gift remains anchored in the “primary sociability” of face-to-face relations between persons, the state economy and the market economy introduce a “secondary sociality” of impersonal relations between anonymous individuals into society. As the state and the market are progressively “disembedded” from the community and “uncoupled” from the life-world, the relations between people are increasingly mediated by political, legal and economic institutions that organise the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services across time and space. Coordination between communities and individuals is imposed from without by administrations and markets, whose abstract and impersonal rules and regulations subvert the symbolic logic of reproduction from within, without, however, being able to completely substitute it.

The opposition of “primary sociability” and “secondary sociality” is redolent of the old-fashioned distinction between “mechanic” and “organic” solidarity. It has a nostalgic and romantic ring that is not without charm. While it opens the way to a radical critique of capitalist-industrial modernity, it also exposes itself, however, to the critique of the coloniality of power and knowledge. Its implicit evolutionism redoubles the twinned figures of Orientalism and Occidentalism (Carrier, 1995) of classical anthropology in which the West and its commodity systems appear as commercial, impersonal, individualist, rational and alienated, whereas the Rest and its gift economies are seen as communal, interpersonal, collective, affective and authentic.

This impression of essentialism is confirmed when globalisation of the capitalist economy and digital technology are said to have brought into the world a “tertiary sociality” (Caillé, 2005: 262 and 2014: 73-75) on top of the first and the second world that interconnects planetary networks and virtual fluxes. The relations between people are no longer mediated by institutions, but by algorithms that are built by global corporations, operate at hyperscale and govern our lives without any oversight (Zuboff, 2019). The neoliberal hegemony exacerbates and universalises the utilitarian calculus. As a result, Polanyi’s distinction between a substantive economy (provision and livelihood) and a formal economy (scarcity and profit) breaks down. Cut loose from the normative and political controls, rent and speculative capital go rampant. Caillé is neither optimistic nor fatalistic. He warns that, unless markets are once again submitted to democratic control and the ecological limits to growth are respected, one may expect the collapse of human civilisation as we know it.

Unlike more radical intellectuals on the far left, like Antonio Negri, Serge Latouche, Chantal Mouffe, Christian Laval and David Graeber who once were or still are fellow travellers of the MAUSS, Caillé does not call for an abolition of capitalism. “It is futile, he warns, to place one’s hopes in an alternative, non capitalist system that is nowhere to be found” (Caillé, 2005: 193). There is no alternative to capitalism, though that does not mean that neo-liberalism is the only option or that the financial markets should not be re-regulated. The only solution is political. It presupposes a new balance between Polanyi’s principles of reciprocity, redistribution and exchange in a plural economy that boosts the civic, social and solidarity economy and guarantees a basic income to all (Caillé and Laville, 2007, see also Laville, 2016).

To define the relations between the religious, the political, the economic and the social domains of existence is fundamentally a collective and, ultimately, a political choice. It is not so much a question that pertains to politics (*la politique*), which is a particular subsystem of society, but a more fundamental question concerning the overarching principles of articulation between the different domains of society and, ultimately, of life. Following Claude Lefort, Caillé (1993: 269) conceives of the political (*le politique*) as the “self-referential choice of society by itself”, a “primordial choice” that precedes and founds all the others.

**The Symbolical Institution of Society**

As an intellectual heir to Marcel Mauss and former assistant of Claude Lefort, Alain Caillé continues the tradition of social and political theory that investigates the symbolic constitution of society by means of a political anthroposociology of the gift (Magnelli, 2015). Poised between a line of illustrious predecessors who passed away too early (Pierre Clastres, Cornelius Castoriadis, Michel Freitag, Louis Dumont, Claude Lefort and Ernesto Laclau) and a series of contemporaries (like Alain Touraine, Edgard Morin, Marcel Gauchet and Pierre Rosanvallon) who continue to reflect on the metamorphoses of society in its totality, Caillé stands out by the singular attention he pays to anti-utilitarianism and the gift. While the others have also refused to compartmentalise society into different orders (the religious, the political, the economical, the social and the psychological) and have tried to think the imaginary constitution of society in terms of a political philosophy of democracy, Caillé is the only one who has worked out the internal connection between the symbolical and the political with continuous reference to Marcel Mauss’s ‘Essay’.

To properly understand his analysis, diagnosis and critique of the modern separation of society into various domains, each attributed to a particular science, one needs to resituate his reflections on the symbolic constitution of society in a phenomenological lineage that connects Mauss’s idea of the “total social fact” to Lefort’s idea of the “modes of institution of the social” (Lefort, 1978, Lefort and Gauchet, 1971) via the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, the typically French insistence on the constitutive power of the symbolical and the political as ontological forms comes from a strange encounter in the 1940’s of Heidegger’s musings on “world disclosure” and Levi-Strauss’ reflections on the “symbolic function” that is mediated by Marcel Mauss.

With Merleau-Ponty, whose posthumous publications he will edit, Lefort understands the institution of the social as an anonymous, diffuse and distributed act of intentionality in which a collective subjectivity – a “collective I” (Lefort, 1978: 42) or a “collective cogito” (id., 43)- establishes significative relationships to the world, to itself and to the others. Through reference to the unity of sense that traverses each of its moments and its elements, a society symbolically constitutes itself as a totality and culturally organizes its social coexistence. In primitive (i.e. tribal and clan-based) societies without history, science, state or market, the constitutive function of culture as a totality that structures and unifies all social practices is manifest: “Primitive society has to be described and interpreted as culture, that is to say as a set of institutions and practices that only have meaning through the relations they maintain among themselves, and that compose a totality in solidarity. Thanks to the latter, a certain human coexistence is possible” (Lefort, 1978: 95).

The symbolic institution of society is not a historical act, but an ontological one: It is an originary “donation” (Lefort and Gauchet, 1971:13) by which a given society opens up, like in Heidegger’s clearing (*Lichtung*), a space of intelligibility and visibility in which a world appears – its world with its own style and its own modalities - as a particular way of being-in-the-world that is culturally and politically defined. The collective act that opens the space of signification is not exactly a conscious one. It is an unconscious, pre-intentional and foundational act of society – foundational in the sense that all the conscious and intentional acts of its members refer to, and depend on, this hidden background. A society receives its identity thanks to a symbolic representation of its unity that is manifest in all the social practices that differentiate it from other societies. The particular connection it establishes between all the elements that singly and together refer to an unrepresentable and invisible totality is what defines a given society. The question of the social order (“How is society possible?”) and the question of identity and difference (“Who are we?”) come together in the particular way a given society organises its human coexistence (“How can we live together?”) in a form of life.

At its deepest level, the question of how to organise the social relations within society (relations among its different constituent groups) and outside of it (with strangers, but also with nature and the supranatural) is a political one. The concept of constitution has therefore to be understood both in its phenomenological sense (as a genetic reconduction of the given to the intentional processes that found and sustain it) and in its political sense (not as a substantive, but as a continuous process by which a collective decides about the basic arrangement of its social relations, trying to maintain an equilibrium between consensus and conflict). When an institutional rupture occurs, through war or revolution, for instance, the former constitution comes out of its background into the fore; like in a Gestalt-switch, it becomes “figure”. The transformation of the very form of a society brings into the open the process of production of meaning that was largely hidden and unconscious. The intentions that were not visible to the participants themselves, yet that were implicated in their constitution of society, can now be captured by an observer and, possibly, also by the participants themselves.

When a society is able to explicitly formulate the principles of its organisation, historicity, understood as the fundamental capacity to produce history in accordance with a collective project, the temporal connection between the past and the future becomes intentional. “Every society communicates, for sure, with its past, and finds itself in a certain way invested by it; but to thematise it is to grasp it as a production of meaning that makes the present and simultaneously to discover itself as productivity” (Lefort, 1978: 103). By anticipating the future, the past intention is consciously reworked and transformed into a collective project that opens itself to the becoming of history. History in its totality can never be grasped, however. In the absence of an overarching standpoint outside of history and society, the system cannot possibly be closed. The attempt to make society coincide with itself and to negate its division can only lead to totalitarianism. The acceptance of the radical indetermination of history is constitutive of democracy.

Caillé will not retain the phenomenological language of his mentor, but like Lefort, he’s looking for a foundation of society in an originary act - a primordial contract (Caillé, 1993: ch. 6) as we’ll soon discover - in which a collective subject “decides” as it were tacitly and unconsciously about the fundamental form of its social relations that informs (*mise en forme*) and appears (*mise en scène*) in all its social practices. In this cultural and political perspective, the foundation of society is understood as an arbitrary choice by which a collective constitutes itself and orders its social relations with the spirits, with nature and with others in an operation that is continuously repeated, connecting the past to the future. This choice is arbitrary. Other choices could have been made. Other modalities of being-in-the-world could have been actualised.

Once the primordial decision is made, however, the relations of society to itself and its others are defined. In so far as this definition of the order of coexistence implies not only the formative principle that unifies society, but also the one that fundamentally divides it, it is political in the ontological sense of the term. If the symbolic points to unity and consensus, the political indicates conflict not as a tension that is to be overcome, but as a fundamental and ineradicable dimension of social life (Gauchet, 2005: ch. 9). Indeed, like other political sociologies, Caillé’s is fundamentally a conflict sociology. It does not presuppose social order. Like Machiavelli and Hobbes, it assumes that war is the state of nature without excluding the possibility of peace. Indeed, as we’ll see, gift-giving is the continuation of the struggle for recognition by other means, but also a proposition to transform enemies into allies.

**Society against the State and the Market**

In tribal societies where political power is absent and not concentrated in the hand of a leader, let alone in a State, the social divisions within society are not negated, but rather, as Pierre Clastres (1974) has shown in his ground-breaking analysis of the political organisation of Amerindian communities in the Amazon, recognised - and conjured. It is precisely to avoid the emergence of a separate instance that would divide an egalitarian society between a chief who commands and the others who obey that they have as it were chosen to maintain horizontal relations among themselves. If they have no State, it is because society has decided “against the state” and projected the locus of power outside of itself – in a transcendent entity that commands and orders its members from outside without ever allowing it to be represented and concentrated in a person (Lefort, 1992: 303-336 and Gauchet, 2005: chs. 1 and 2). Similarly, if they have no market and no exchange, it is because the have decided “against the market” (Caillé, 2005: ch. 2) and have refused to produce more than they need.

The two are intimately interrelated, according to Pierre Clastres (1974) and Marshall Sahlins (1972). If hunters and gatherers have refused to settle to practice agriculture and produce a surplus that could be appropriated by a chief, it is because they have organised themselves so as not to let political power emerge. By culturally controlling their needs, they have restrained their means of production in a subsistence economy without abundance, but also without scarcity. To maintain their leisurely life (only two or three hours per day are dedicated to supply of food, the rest is spent talking, eating and sleeping), they have spurned work as toil.

The absence of political power and economic surplus should not be interpreted in evolutionist terms as a deficit, however, but positively as a definite political mode of institution of a society that structures its social relations to nature and to the others with reference to a transcendent order that maintains its fundamental unity and represents it symbolically to all its members. Archaic societies are anarchistic societies. If they are without state and without markets, it is because society actively “contains” the economic and the political - in both senses of the term: it limits them, but it also maintains them in the womb of society. To avoid its division, society projects its unity outside of itself – in another world, in the spirits or the gods that represent it symbolically to its members. The outside is constitutive of society: by imprinting sense and meaning to the members’ practices, it acts as a focus of integration of all their social energies and, thereby, gives it its unity.

In indigenous societies, the religious, the symbolical, the political and the economic are essentially intertwined in a social totality. As everything and everyone are interconnected in a seamless web of meaning, societies constitute themselves as a single unity with reference to an external point of reference that functions as a “constitutive outside”– an exteriority and alterity that separates the profane from the sacred (the religious) and the allies from the enemies (the political). To underscore the fusion of the religious and the political in the symbolical constitution of society, in dialogue with the political philosophy of Lefort and Gauchet, Caillé coins the concept of the “politico-religious” (Caillé, 2009: ch. 6, 2019: chs. 13 and 14). Together, the religious and the political constitute the moment of institution by which societies relate to themselves and produce themselves as such, in their singularity and contingence, by tracing a frontier between the inside and the outside, the enemies and the friends, and the believers and the non-believers. While the religious has more to do with representations that connect the realm of the visible to an invisible realm, politics is more about practices that configure the relations between friends and enemies. The collective representations and practices are themselves interrelated by the symbolic that both represents and performs the collective.

With the passage from archaic to traditional societies, the religious and the political will progressively emerge as separate domains of action. They will crystallise into religion and politics with specialists who take care of their specific functions (allocation of meaning and distribution of power respectively). While the Church and the State will remain entangled during millennia, they will eventually be separated in modernity. Secular ideologies (liberalism, conservatism, socialism, etc.) will take over the integrative function from religions. In complex societies, the political and the economical will further differentiate themselves from religion and emerge as autopoetic action systems (politics and economies) whose regularities and laws are to be studied by different scientific disciplines. With the emergence of capitalism, the state and the market that remained anchored in society up till then will be “disembedded” from tradition and go their own way, following their own reasons and their own laws.

Caillé (1993: ch. 8) interprets the autonomisation of various domains of action into a series of functional social “orders” (the religious, cultural, political and economic subsystems of Parsons, Luhmann and Habermas) as the result of a wholesale transformation of the mode of institution of the social. Underneath, above and in between the different orders, there remains, however, a more fundamental symbolic and political dimension that determines the articulation between the different orders. From the perspective of a political sociology of human co-existence, the uncoupling of primary society (relations between people) from secondary society (relations between functions) can indeed be understood metaphorically as a collective “decision” to organise society in a more “rational” way in line with the modern imaginary. Caillé draws voluntaristic conclusions from this constructivist argument. What has been unlinked and deregulated by the political can be relinked and normatively re-regulated – if only the citizens could become conscious of their constitutive power to produce and transform society.

The idea of a unitary subject that produces society “with will and consciousness” is obviously a fiction (Caillé, 1993: ch. 6). As if one could scale up the phenomenological cogito via social and cultural anthropology and plug it in a refurbished philosophy of history. Although I do not totally question the possibility of such an endeavour, I am not convinced that Lefort or Caillé have worked out the sociological mediations that allow for the transposition of concepts that may be appropriate for close-knit local communities to modern plural societies at the national, let alone the global level. To transform the fiction of a collective subject that is able to “decide” without consciousness into a collective political actor that is able to do so more or less consciously, symbolic representations are not enough. One also needs to parse the technological mediations and political institutions that make collective decisions possible at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society (Vandenberghe, 2014: ch. 2).

Between the self-representation of society and its empirical existence, there is and always has to remain a gap, as Lefort has argued with force in his philosophical vindication of democracy. A fundamental social division also splits societies into rival classes, status groups and parties. The conjunction of an exteriority (external division) and class conflict (internal division) means that no particular class, group or fraction can claim to represent the totality. Societies can try to conjure (tribal society against the state), eradicate (the totalitarian state against society) or acknowledge (modern democracies) their divisions.

With the “invention of democracy” (Lefort, 1981) or, rather, as Castoriadis (1996: 221-241) would have it, its “reinvention”, modern societies have become conscious of their political and symbolical nature. Democracy is a form of society that is aware of its historicity, conflicts and contingency. As it does no longer try to close the gap between the symbolical and the real, the place of power remains intentionally “empty”, as Lefort (1986: 27) famously phrases it. It knows that in the absence of a transcendent foundation, it has no other choice but to constantly produce itself by itself. Reconciled with its social division, it is open to constant contestation and accepts the radical indeterminacy of the future. It is a society in which not one, but all decide, not once, but continuously on how they want to “live together with their differences without massacring each other”, to borrow a phrase from the Convivialist Manifesto (Caillé et al., 2013).

Bereft of a stable foundation, confronted with radical indeterminacy, modern societies have to find an unstable equilibrium between unity and division, consensus and conflict. On the one hand, the tensions and contradictions between the groups have to express themselves freely; on the other hand, the conflicts should not be allowed to rupture the common space that unites the conflicting parties – lest the conflict degenerates into a war of all against all.

**II: The Reinvention of Marcel Mauss**

**Mauss/MAUSS**

We’ve seen that the critique of utilitarian reason is part of a larger critique of the modern imaginary. Based on an anthropological conception of the constitution of the social that foregrounds the symbolic function of worldmaking, it critically analyses the transformations of mythopoetic creation, from archaic societies to the present. From this encompassing perspective, the modern fascination with formal reason, science and control appears as another “mythology”; paradoxically, one that conceives of itself as objective knowledge of the real. To the extent that it dissimulates its constitutive function to itself and claims to ground its knowledge in reality itself, modern reason can also be characterised with Lefort (1978: ch. 13) as an “invisible ideology”.

With Caillé, we have followed the symbolic and political constitution of economics and politics, both as sciences and as separate social domains. In good company of Karl Polanyi, we have seen that states and markets are anything but natural. Their “disembedding” from society is a world-historical event that finds its meaning, if it has any, in the larger context of the emergence of modern capitalism. In capitalism, the scientific abstractions of values, prices and currencies have become “real abstractions”. The commodification of land, labour and money is “ficticious” and “imaginary”, but real in its consequences. The generalisation and universalisation of the utilitarian calculus has pro-duced the *homo oeconomicus* as a new type of “human animal”, to quote a well known passage from Marcel Mauss (1950: 271-272): “Our Western societies have only recently turned the human being into an ‘economic animal’. The *homo* *oeconomicus* is not behind us. He’s right in front of us. Only recently the human being has become a machine, augmented with a calculator.”

Like the members of the Frankfurt School, Caillé criticises the dialectics of the Enlightenment. As a disciple of Claude Lefort, he jettisons the dialectics, though, and narrows down the critique of the Enlightenment to a *Critique of Utilitarian Reason* (Caillé, 1989). The invitation to “radically unthink the economy and economics” (*dé-penser l’économique*) was meant as an attempt “to complete the critique of political economy” (Caillé, 2005: 229) by exposing the “incompleteness” of the market. Caillé enrols the classics of sociology to argue that political economy is an ideology that naturalises capitalism (Marx), that capitalism finds its religious roots in the ethics of entrepreneurs and merchants (Weber) and that the contract presupposes non-contractual elements (Durkheim).

Classical sociology can only be understood as a systematic, yet ambivalent response to political economy – as a form of “anti-utilitarian utilitarianism” (Caillé, 2015: chs. 4-6, see also Laval, 2002). On the hand, it completes its scientific project with a demonstration of the autonomy of the social and a historicisation of the axiomatics of interest; on the other hand, it contests its utilitarian premises and affirms that the social order is only possible because of shared symbols, norms and values. While all classical figures of sociology (from Saint-Simon to Durkheim, from Hegel to Marx and from Toqueville to Weber) were centrally concerned with the excavation of the religious, normative and political principles of human co-existence that make society possible, they did not, however, develop of full fledged theory of the symbolic constitution of society. According to Caillé, only Marcel Mauss did so. It is therefore necessary to return to his seminal work.

Initially, the MAUSS found its unity in the critique of utility. Like the Frankfurt School, its critique of science (positivism), the economy (economicism) and the state (technocratism) was totalising and negative. The reference to the life-worlds of archaic communities served as a foil for a radical critique of the myth of reason. The inclusion of the symbolical into the analysis of action, order and social change configured anti-utilitarianism, but without clearly defining its positions. The opposition to the axiomatics of interests offered a minimal platform – “rational action vs. non-rational action” (Alexander, 1982: ch. 3)-, but left the alternative open. The MAUSS was a broad tent that offered shelter to post-Marxists, post-structuralists, institutionalists, pragmatists and other heterodox strands within the social sciences. It is only at a later stage, from the 1990’s onwards, that the critique of anti-utilitarianism would be relayed by a reconstructive theory of the gift that seeks and finds its inspiration in the work of the eponymous master-thinker.

With the primacy of the symbolical over the instrumental, the “anti” of anti-utilitarianism had already silently shifted into an “ante” that announced another world. The passage from a negative to a positive anti-utilitarianism is accomplished with the development of the “gift paradigm” (Caillé, 2000), which insists on the structure of interdependence and the dynamics of reciprocity as the font and origin of all social life. With this decision, the theoretical options were narrowed down. The anthropology of the gift became the obligatory passage point for every alternative. This enriched the discussion of the gift, but it also reduced the openness to other counter currents within the social sciences and made the MAUSS appear as one of the warring schools within a competitive field.

Before we expose the lineaments of the donological paradigm, we need, however, first to ask three questions: One about the promotion of Marcel Mauss to the rank of founding father, a second one about the place of the *Essay on the Gift* in his work, and a third one about the position of the MAUSS within the field of Maussology.

The promotion of Marcel Mauss as the towering figure of the French School of Sociology is somewhat puzzling. The history of sociology does usually not record Mauss as one of its founding fathers – on a par with Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead or Karl Mannheim, to mention one of the most important of his contemporaries for whom one could perhaps claim a similar status. Is Mauss really that significant? Is he not the equivalent of Friedrich Engels for the Durkheimian School? Does it make sense to argue that Mauss is more important than Durkheim, his “second father”? Is the displacement of the uncle by the nephew justified? Is Mauss really so much more significant than Paul Fauconnet, Henri Hubert, Francois Simiand, Robert Herz, Maurice Halbwachs or any of the other of Durkheim’s disciples?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to indicate at least some of his contributions to the Durkheimian School and to show how he softened some of Durkheim’s positions (Caillé, 2000: ch. 1, see also Karsenti, 1997 and Tarot, 1999). Without ever openly challenging the patriarch, Mauss is a most heterodox and sympathetic Durkheimian who has eliminated a good part of the dogmatism, scientism, positivism, functionalism and lingering conservatism of his uncle. Moreover, being of a later generation, he could incorporate the American pragmatism of John Dewey and the philosophy of symbolic forms of Ernst Cassirer into his social anthropology.

I will signal his major advances by means of a stenographic indication of four major displacements that undercut some of Durkheim’s binarisms. First of all, he has transformed Durkheim’s “social representations” into “symbolic representations”. Durkheim’s sociology of religion did not ignore the power of symbols, of course (see Durkheim, 1990: 293-242), but with Mauss, every sign becomes a flag as it were. Moreover, the symbol is no longer conceived of as a reflection of the social group, but as a sign that actively performs and transforms the group. The symbols that represent the group also contribute to make it real.

Secondly, and related to the first displacement, Mauss has resignified Durkheim’s “social facts” as “total social facts”. The anti-pychologism, which Durkheim inherited from August Comte, disappears. The explanation of social facts gives way to the interpretation of meaning and the reconstruction of lived experience. The anthropologist favours an integration of biology, psychology and sociology in a cultural anthropology that connects external facts via symbols to intentional social acts. His recommendation is not to treat social facts as things, but always as complex compounds of bodies, symbols and acts, some of which have the capacity to move the whole of society (all societies, all its members and all its institutions).

Thirdly, as a scholar with universal ethnographic knowledge, Mauss relaxes the evolutionism of the French School. The early emphasis on the “elementary forms” of society does not disappear completely - as can be gathered from the persistence of the colonial language of “primitive”, “savage” and “archaic” societies. As a comparativist, Mauss is at once a universalist and a relativist. For him, there are no uncivilised people. There are only different civilisations.

Finally, he radicalises the political positions of Durkheim. Like his uncle, he’s clearly on the Left, but he’s also an activist in the cooperative movement and a radical democrat who was prescient about the totalitarian tendencies of Bolshevism. His political beliefs shine through most clearly in the conclusion of his ‘Essay’ where he explores possible actualisations of “baseline communism” (Graeber, 2001: ch. 6) for contemporary societies. This political message is at the core of the MAUSS and explains part of its attraction.

**General, Concrete and Applied Sociology**

The *Essay on the Gift* is a gem. There is no doubt that it is Mauss’s masterwork. If Caillé’s project is to reorganise and retotalise the social sciences into a general sociology, I wonder, however if the piece on “The Divisions and the Proportions of the Divisions of Sociology” (Mauss, 1969: 178-245) might not be more suitable. Notwithstanding its horrendous title, it is the most programmatic, systematic and synthetic text in Mauss’s whole oeuvre. It outlines the general principles of analysis of the total social fact of which the ‘Essay’ would represent the most exemplary application. The text was published in the second series of the *Année Sociologique* in 1927 to reorganise Durkheim’s original plan that defines the relations between the different sections (“divisions”) of the journal and their relative importance (“proportions”). Alternating between analysis and synthesis, the general and the concrete, the pure and the applied, Mauss advances his argument in four steps.

In the first step, he delineates the central concepts of a general sociology. Every social science must necessarily take into account three aspects of group life: the material substrate, symbolic representations and social practices. Starting with the observation of people and things that are visible, the analyst must systematically integrate the collective practices that make up societies and the symbolic representations that structure them from within by linking them to the whole. He must “look for the acts under the representations and the representations under the acts, and under both, the groups” (Mauss, 1969: 224). Mauss insists that social practices must never be separated from collective representations, for just as there are no practices without symbolic representations that integrate them into a whole, there are no representations without practices that realise and actualise them in a common project.

In a second step, he argues that it is necessary to articulate the principles of a general sociology to the special sociologies (sociology of religion, economy, law, art, technology, etc.), and to recompose the totality. The divisions between the specialised sociologies should be respected, but as there’s no social institution that is not related to the whole, social facts should be conceived of as total facts that bring all the members of society and all of its institutions into movement. Gift-giving, for instance, is at once economic, religious, legal, moral and political. Similarly, money, minted by a nation, is at the same time economic, political and aesthetic. If it is necessary to divide in order to distinguish, it is also necessary to shuffle the divisions in order to understand the phenomenon in all its complexity. By intersecting the two approaches, the general and the special approach to social life, one can analyse both the relationships that exist between the various orders of society, considering not only each of them separately, but also considering them all together. To clarify the method of total social analysis, Mauss imagines a graph with the special institutions in the columns and the general principles in the rows: “The specialities cut up the great classes of facts as it were in vertical piles; conversely, one can also divide those sections in horizontal slices and order them by degree in layers of increasing or decreasing ideation or materialisation as one moves closer to pure representation or moves away to the material structure itself” (1969: 224).

This abstract conceptual framework that specifies the relations between the parts and the whole of society only becomes concrete in a third moment when it is used and applied to analyse the specific modality in which a given community, society or even a whole civilisation, realises and instantiates a particular version among many variations of the possible. It is only then and there that one will realise how all the elements of a given collective (its architecture, its arts, its gestures, its myths, its vocabulary, etc.) cohere in a cultural matrix that distinguishes it from other collectives. The particular ways of being in the world, or, as Durkheim would say, “ways of thinking, feeling and acting” are interrelated in a form of life that defines the identity of the group, as well its differences from other groups.

The passage from theoretical to practical sociology occurs in the final pages of the text. If general sociology becomes concrete when its concepts are applied to a given collective to reveal its “body and soul”, it becomes applied when it seeks to actively inform the choices a collective can make to improve its lot and change society. A concrete analysis of the constraints on action and opportunities for change in a given situation amplifies the spectre of political possibilities. Thus, the critical diagnosis of the present finds its practical extension in action research that aims to raise the level of consciousness of the collective and boost its capacity of intervention in society. Like Durkheim, Mauss does not separate speculation from application, analysis from critique, diagnosis from therapeutics, or politics from pedagogy. Explicitly, he connects sociology to social movements and the art of social change. With sociology as a basis, politics as a means and morality as an end, the social sciences turn practical when the scientific analysis of the real is conjoined to a political exploration that extends the realm of the possible. Mauss concludes his programmatic and militant text with a reassurance. When the solidity of the scientific analysis will be conjoined to “firmness in the diagnosis, confidence in the therapeutics, in the propaedeutic, but above all in the pedagogy”, sociology will be fully “justified, both in fact and in reason” (Mauss, 1969: 243).

**The Field of Maussology**

The *Essay on the Gift* is a major text of the twentieth century. No anthropologist can ignore it; many have made their marks in its wake (Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Annette Weiner, Marshall Sahlins, Maurice Godelier, Marilyn Strathern, Jonathan Parry, Stanley Tambiah, David Graeber). Philosophers, sociologists, historians and psychoanalysts have also interpreted it. Its influence is such that some of its illustrious commentators (Bataille, Lacan, Baudrillard, Girard, Derrida, Ricoeur) are more famous than Marcel himself. At least three generations of interpreters have followed each other. Not without polemics, many have claimed his mantle to advance their own intellectual projects. Depending on how one organises one’s system of interpretation, various lineages of reception can be discerned (Frow, 1997: ch. 3, Adloff and Mau, 2005, Moebius, 2006, Chanial, 2008, Hénaff, 2012): the symbolic-structuralist (Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Godelier), the orgiastic-creative (Bataille, Gurvitch, Balandier) and the anti-utilitarian lineages (Caillé/MAUSS). Within the lineages and its heritages, one could further distinguish and oppose a structuralist pole (Lévi-Strauss, Karsenti, Hénaff) to a phenomenological one (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort, Derrida), an agapic pole (Ricoeur, Marion, Derrida) to an agonistic one (Bataille, Lefort, Mouffe), and a utilitarian (Bourdieu, Lordon, F. Weber) to an anti-utilitarian pole (Caillé, Latouche, Godbout).

Instead of opposing one possible reading to another, I’ll see if I can take them all together into some kind of a system of the gift. Without pre-empting future readings that may disclose other dimensions of the text, I will go through some of the literature on the assumption that eventually the gift will appear as a condensate of the various polarities/extremities. With Caillé, I’ll consider the gift as a magic operator that interweaves persons and things, symbols and interests, conflict and consensus in a dynamic web of interpersonal relations that constitutes society as a whole.

Within the MAUSS itself, the divisions between lineages and poles are refracted, but in different proportions. As the hub and the spoke of the movement, Caillé himself refuses to choose between the various interpretations of the ‘Essay’, though at times he has difficulties hiding his aversion for structuralist (Lévi-Strauss), neo-Marxist (Bourdieu) and post-structuralist (Derrida) versions that dare to contest the existence of the gift.

From the beginning, the MAUSS, which often functions as an extension of its director’s positions, has poised its interpretation of Marcel Mauss as a continuation of Lefort’s critique of structuralism and an attempt to reclaim the French anthropologist from Lévi-Strauss: “[The gift paradigm] is nothing else but an attempt to develop the implications of the critique of Lévi-Strauss by Lefort by means of a return to the real Mauss” (Caillé, 2000: 32, n. 3). I would like to suggest that this struggle of interpretation is best understood as a strategic move within the French field of Maussology. From a hermeneutic point of view, the suggestion that one can reclaim the “‘real’ Mauss” (Lefort, 1978: 23) is problematic – as if one could own an author, have privileged access to the meaning of his oeuvre and claim him for oneself against rival interpretations. Instead of assuming that the text is given, should one not rather accept with hermeneuticians that every interpretation uncovers a layer of the text and that its full meaning will only appear at the end? If it ever appears, because like Being itself, there’s always something that remains shrouded in mystery.

Lefort’s attempt to reclaim the founder of French ethnology as a conflict anthropologist extends Merleau-Ponty’s (1960: ch. 4) dialogical critique of Lévi-Strauss in a polemic that attacks the strong structuralist reading the latter presented in his programmatic introduction to *Sociologie et anthropologie*, a collection of classical texts by Mauss that contains the ‘Essay’. Lefort’s text is called “Exchange and the Struggle of Men” (Lefort, 1978: ch. 1). It owes as much to Merleau Ponty’s existential phenomenology as to Kojève’s reading of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In a replay of the old opposition between Kant and Hegel, it opposes Levi-Strauss’s structuralism to Husserl’s phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Lefort charges that Lévi-Strauss has replaced the “lived experience” of the actors – the experience of love, but also of rivalry and conflict- with a “thought experience” to which the actors have no access. Later, we’ll see how Caillé will divest Lefort’s reading of its phenomenology, while strengthening the Hegelian emphasis on the struggle of recognition that marks the agonistic gift.

In open opposition to Bourdieu’s contentious reading of the gift as a hypocritical act by which the actors give themselves a good conscience, he accuses the French sociologist of bad faith (Caillé, 2005: ch. 3, 2019: ch. 2). Instead of a critique of utilitarianism, Bourdieu has allegedly mounted a critique of generosity that uncovers the interests behind the façade of disinterest. By pointing to the interest in appearing disinterested, he has transmuted altruism into egoism, following a classic trope of utilitarian thought that denies the very principles of the gift. Symmetrically, when Derrida deconstructs Mauss’s whole theory of the gift and argues that the only real gift is one without possible return, because if there’s a possible return, then there’s also debt, calculation and, therefore, also interest, Caillé (2005: ch. 3) takes his distances from the pure gift and pleads for a more modest conception of the gift without theology, ontology or phenomenology.

While Caillé’s critiques of the rival readings of the ‘Essay’ are not completely devoid of occasional antagonism, his opposition to each of them suggests that one should take them together to see how they complement each other in a subtle understanding of the gift as a complex, multi-faceted total social act that drives the symbolic constitution of society. Countering Lévi-Strauss’s formalist reading of the gift as exchange, he advances the importance of symbols over and against signs and codes. He also interprets the symbolical from the point of view of the gift as a representation of the alliances between groups (in traditional societies) and individuals (in modern societies). When Bourdieu reintroduces the position of the actor within Lévi-Strauss’ mechanics of exchange and uncovers interests behind generosity, he accuses him of relapsing into utilitarianism, not to say vulgar Marxism, while passing over his most sophisticated critiques of rational choice as an ahistorical, mechanical, economicist, intellectualist and ideological theory of rational action that wilfully ignores its own social, cultural, economic and political conditions of possibility (Bourdieu, 2000: 11-26 and Bourdieu, 2017; see also Wacquant and Calhoun, 1989 for a solid critique of the ‘Rat’s’). When Derrida purifies gift-giving of the axiomatic of interests and presents the gift of life and death as the highest spiritual accomplishment that every ordinary gift aspires to without ever realising its concept, Caillé brings back symmetry, reciprocity and interests into the game and sets up a typology that includes the excluded on its own terms in a system of the gift.

From his positioning against Bourdieu’s utilitarianism and Derrida’s an-utilitarianism, we can infer that if he’s opposed to anything, it is to the idea that the giving might be without return. The “norm of reciprocity” (Gouldner, 1975: ch. 8) is constitutive of the gift itself. If one denies it, either by arguing with Bourdieu that one party systematically gives more than the other (the asymmetry of exploitation: the “taking of something for nothing”) or, inversely, by claiming with Derrida that one should give like the saints to whom cannot give anything in return (the asymmetry of goodness: the “giving of something for nothing”), one denies the very idea of the gift, be it through profanation or sacralisation. The insistence against Bourdieu and Derrida on reciprocity and symmetry points, I think, to a repressed liberal element in the MAUSSian ideology. If we construct with Alvin Gouldner (1975: chs. 7-9) an imaginary ideological continuum that goes from exploitation via justice to saintliness, we can situate Caillé right in the middle and understand his theory of the gift as a theory of justice as fairness. One should always give a bit more than one receives, but in the long run, the asymmetries should eventually balance each other out and every one should receive in all fairness their part (*suum cuique*). Recently, Caillé (2021) has pleaded for a “radical moderationism” that avoids the extremes that cancel each other out, but without acknowledging its connection to political liberalism.

***Explication de texte***

Marcel Mauss is an armchair anthropologist. In the *Essay on the Gift*, he compiles the anthropological knowledge on gift-processes, contracts, exchange, reciprocity and solidarity from the five continents and through the ages to uncover, as indicated in the subtitle, the “form and reason of exchange in archaic societies”. The text of 134 pages and some 500 footnotes contains an introduction, three chapters, and three conclusions. In the introduction, he states his research question with clarity (though, in the rest of the text he meanders and drifts away to other questions): What is it that obliges one to return a present? Why is it that gifts have to be repaid? In the first two chapters, he presents the ethnographic materials, in the third, he analyses legal issues, and in the conclusion, he returns to the present and draws moral, political and theoretical conclusions from his theorem of the triple obligation.

Before we analyse the text with the intent to extract a system of sorts from it, let’s quickly present the two canonical cases that form the basis of his empirical genesis of the norm of reciprocity: the *kula* of the Trobriand islands in Papua New Guinea and the *potlatch* of the Kwakiutl in Northern America. Both are instances of ritual or ceremonial exchange of “total prestations” or “total contracts” in which groups give all kinds of goods (foods, shells, heirlooms), rituals (ceremonies, feasts, dances), persons (women, children and personnel) and services (favours, assistance, military services) to each other in cycles of generalised reciprocity. Gifts provoke counter-gifts and lead to mutual indebtedness that cannot be immediately settled (if it ever can). To explain the obligation to give, Mauss also invokes the case of the *hau* of the Maori in New Zealand. Together, the three cases form a kind of riddle that answers the question of why people feel obliged to give, accept and return the gift: The *kula* ring brings in reciprocity, the *potlatch* rivalry, and the *hau* the spirit of the gift. It should be noted that the ‘Essay’ mainly deals with “ceremonial gifts” of archaic societies and does not really cover the “charitable gift” of traditional societies or the “solidarity gift” of modern societies (Hénaff, 2002; Silber, 2007), though they crop up in the (first and second) conclusions of his text. One might even go further, perhaps, and say that, through “Maorisation”, Mauss has lifted some aspects of the charitable gift and projected them onto societies that don’t have this concept.

Mauss makes extensive use of Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1984) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* in his analysis of the *kula*, the intertribal exchange of arm-shells and necklaces that ties together the archipelagos in a circle of ceremonial exchange that is renewed every year when the islanders go on friendly expeditions to visit each other. The necklaces and bracelets that are exchanged are precious and prestigious. They do not have utilitarian value (goods with use value are exchanged as well (*gimwali*), but not in the *kula*) and do not primarily serve accumulation; their value is largely symbolic.

The second case is the *potlatch*, a festival of competitive giving, analysed by Franz Boas, in which chiefs of different tribes throw a party to honour and challenge each other. The giving is conspicuous (display of the magnificence of the giver), excessive (distribution of furs and other valued property) and agonistic (competitive and antagonistic). The *potlatch* has to be understood in the context of a rivalry between the chiefs who provoke each other to out-give each other in a struggle for recognition that will raise the status of the eventual winner and humiliate the looser. The frenzy may lead to the destruction of goods and proves that economic accumulation is not the end. Paroxistic giving is an eminently political phenomenon. It has everything to do with power, competition and prestige that mark struggles for recognition. Although Mauss explicitly acknowledges non-agonistic giving, it should be said that in the ‘Essay’, he only analyses agonistic gift-processes. Even the *kula*, which is apparently more cooperative, does not involve free and pure giving, which is a typically modern phenomenon.

The third case, of the *hau* of the gift, is another, much discussed and disputed, classic example of anthropology. Mauss brings it in to explain the obligation to return a gift. In a letter to Elsdon Best, an anthropologist, Tamati Ranaipiri, a Maori sage, refers to the *hau*, the spirit of the gift, and suggests that the gift has to be returned because it contains something of the giver, a part of his soul. “The thing received is not inert. Even abandoned by the giver, it still is still something that belongs to him” (Mauss, 1950: 160). Without referring to Marx’s theory of the fetishism of commodities, which asserts that in capitalism the relations between people appear as relations between things that are mediated by the market, Mauss inverts *Das Kapital* to re-join Comte’s mystical theory of fetishism. Unlike Marx, he does not give an economic explanation of a spiritual fact, but uses the indigenous mystique to explain economic and political facts. He relates the exchange between things to a communication between the soul of the donor, the spirits of the forest, and the retribution by the receiver, who becomes in turn a donor. In pre-capitalist, pre-colonial societies, relations between things are mediated by relations between symbols that represent and perform the relations between people as relations between their souls. “In Maori law, the bond by law, the bond by things, is a bond of souls, because the thing itself has a soul, is a soul. From which follows that presenting something to someone is presenting something of one’s self” (Mauss, 1950: 161).

Thanks to the triad of reciprocity, agonistics and spirituality, the gift appears as dynamic system of symbolic exchange of personnel, goods and services between groups and their representatives that is based on three interlocking obligations – to give, to accept and to reciprocate. It is, as Mauss (1950: 184) phrases it, “one of the human bedrocks on which our societies are built”.

The interpretations of the ‘Essay’ are many and various. Interprets often diverge and latch on to different aspects of the text. In a synoptic overview of the field of Maussology, which is itself driven by tensions and struggles among epistemic communities, I have suggested that the rival interpretations have to be taken together and can be gathered in a system of action. (To indicate the productivity of the reception of the ‘Essay’, I will put the name of interprets in square brackets in the text). With Alain Caillé (2005: ch. 7, Caillé, 2009: Part 1), I will now introduce three complementary polarities that structure the ‘Essay’: obligation vs. freedom; egoism vs. altruism; and peace vs. war. Like in a generative grammar, these polar complementarities constitute the gift as a system of paradoxical implications. Following a long epigraph, Mauss opens his research programme with a series of paradoxes, which I will quote at length because they reveal the axes of the donological system we’re after:

[Obligation-Freedom] “Exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (p. 147).

[Egoism-Altruism] […] apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested. Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest (p. 148).

[War-Peace] [...] these total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare” (p. 151).

The opposition between obligation and freedom, which structured Durkheim’s (1974: ch. 2) reflections on morality and ethics, indicates that the triple obligation that one finds in universal religions and morality systems has to be interiorised by the individuals to become a system of triple freedoms. The gift is only a real one if it is spontaneous and free. Otherwise, it is an imposition, an extortion, or, perhaps, part of a contractual exchange that annuls the debt of the receiver and closes the cycle of indebtedness. Without the interior impulse and the desire to realise the good, the moral fact is an obligation that is forced on the individuals from without, not an act of individual will.

The introduction of freedom into a system of constraints resolves the tension between the causal explanations of structuralism [Lévi-Strauss] and the phenomenological interpretations of subjective meaning [Merleau-Ponty, Lefort]. It is only because the individuals are free that the exchange can be kept going and the system reproduced. It also removes once and for all the impression that the human beings studied by anthropologists are mere “cultural dopes”, devoid of freedom, individuality or personality. And yes, of course, *a fortiori*, it is more in line with our modern conceptions of giving, which, unlike the ceremonial gift, is gracious, unilateral and personal (Godbout, 2004). The giver willingly relinquishes the right of return and does not expect a return. The intentionality of a gift without return is what defines it as a free, generous and moral act.

In any case, modern or pre-modern, the gift is free in theory; in reality, as Mauss observes, it is always obligatory - and three times so. First, one has to be generous and spontaneous (obligation to give freely); second, one cannot refuse a gift without refusing the relation and cause offence (obligation to accept a gift); and, finally, one cannot refuse to reciprocate the gift without giving the other the chance to give freely in turn, not immediately [Bourdieu], not necessarily something equivalent and ideally with a little surplus (obligation to return the gift). The return of the gift is not only an answer to the gift; as one is always already inserted in cycles of generalised reciprocity [Sahlins], it also precedes it.

The opposition between obligation and freedom is redolent of the one between holism and individualism [Dumont]. In the second quote, the first axis of freedom (Durkheim’s opposition between freedom and obligation) is reformulated and transformed into an axis of solidarity (Durkheim’s opposition between egoism and altruism). As individualism is associated with economic self-interest, calculation and hypocrisy, the opposition between social obligation and individual freedom morphs into that between egoism and altruism (a term coined by Comte in 1851). Far from denying the utilitarian motive, Mauss suggests that generosity all too often involves “social deceit”, if not outright self-deception. The denegation of interest is strategic [Bourdieu]. As everybody likes to present oneself as virtuous and to show generosity of character, barter is disguised behind the gift. Underneath of the gift-giving, behind the appearances, there’s calculation and interest: *do ut des* - one gives to get a return. Mauss is not a cynic, however. The opposition between the altruism of the pure gift [Derrida] and the egoism of self-interest is ours. Archaic societies do not know it. They ignore both the “gracious gift” without return (notably to strangers [Tittmus]), which is a later development, as they ignore the “icy water of egotistic calculation” (Marx) that comes with profit-oriented market production.

The opposition of war and peace is as important as the other two. It reconfigures the gift-process as a political operator of peace within a conflict anthropology that foregrounds the struggle between human beings [Lefort, Sahlins]. Like Hobbes, Mauss assumes that conflict and war are always possible. Instead of submission to the State, he introduces the gift to solve the Hobbesian problem of social order. The ‘Essay’ is indeed, as Marshall Sahlins (1972: 169) has observed with perspicacity, “a kind of social contract for the primitives”. In the state of nature, gift-giving is a proposition of peace. It is a first move that unarms the enemies and transforms them into friends, or at least, to move away from Carl Schmitt’s deadly concept of the political, into allies. Through the exchange of presents, the parties indicate that they are willing to trust each other and to recognise each other as partners and allies in social life. As a continuation of war by other means, the gift is the great treaty that makes society possible. But if the present is not accepted or if it is not properly returned, it is also a reason, as Mauss says, “for private or public warfare”.

In the conclusion of his ‘Essay’, Mauss draws some moral and political lessons for our contemporary societies, which I will summarise in five points. First, he argues that the gift-giving is not a survival of the past. The three obligations and freedoms of the gift are universal. “This morality is eternal” – and he exclaims: “We touch the rock” (id., 203-204). The idea that it is honourable to give, good to receive and right to reciprocate is, remains and will always remain, according to Mauss, a valid moral principle. If one follows the precepts of generosity, one can do no wrong. This perennial wisdom is ensconced in the beautiful Maori proverb: “Give as much as you take, all shall be very well” (id., 265).

Second, the archaic principles of mutuality and reciprocity are institutionalised in the social rights of the welfare state. It is only proper that society, through the State, guarantees that workers who have given their life and their labour get some social security (unemployment benefits, health care, retirement plans) in return. Thanks to the intervention of the State, gifts are thereby transformed into rights, anonymised, and redistributed as entitlements.

Third, the symbolic economy shows that the utilitarian calculus of bourgeois capitalism that is dominant today is not the only option. In archaic societies, the Big Man hoards wealth, not to accumulate, but to redistribute it and give it away. Notwithstanding his socialist leanings, Mauss does not hide his admiration for the conspicuous expenditures of the aristocrats [Bataille] and the philanthropy of the plutocrats. At one point, he even refers to the rich as “sort of treasurers of the fellow citizens” (id., 262).

Fourth, agonistic gifts are not of an economic, but of a political nature. They serve to accumulate prestige, not wealth. They are part of a general struggle for recognition of “social, one could even say, brutal superiority” (id., 270).

Last but not least, this struggle for recognition is in itself already a victory of civility over the brutality of violence and war. By transforming enemies into adversaries and adversaries into allies, the gift signifies and seals a pact of peace [Ricoeur].

**III. The Gift Paradigm**

**A General Sociology of Generous Action**

In order not get lost in a forest of interpretations, let’s return to Caillé’s proposition to systematise and axiomatise the gift and to show the general importance of the ‘Essay’. *The Spirit of the Gift*, written in collaboration with Jacques Godbout (Godbout and Caillé, 1992: chs. 7-9), gives a good preview of the lineaments of a gift paradigm that will be developed in numerous articles over the span of three decades (Caillé, 2000, 2009, 2015 and 2019). We have seen that the radicalisation of the critique of political economy of the first phase of his work pointed beyond the economy to the constitution of society as a whole. From now onwards, the gift will be promoted as a general theory of social action.

The full significance of giving only becomes evident when it is no longer considered as an archaic form of the economy, but as the font and origin of all social, moral and political life. Properly conceived, gift-giving is a dynamic process of symbolic interactions that weaves the groups and individuals of society together, though, occasionally, it also drives them apart. The gift is not a survival of the past in the present. It is more than folklore – the round in the pub, dinner parties and tipping, Christmas presents and Easter eggs. The triple obligation and freedom of the gift - to give, to accept and to return the gift - is a fundamental of all societies.

The anthropology of donation is intended as a reconstructive archaeology of modern societies. It returns to archaic or segmental societies because it is there that the essence of society appears with phenomenological evidence as a continuous process of association by which social relations are initiated, maintained or discontinued. The anthropology of the gift is the very basis – the *arché* - of society. The archaic substrate is not a relic of a past, but a foundation that is continuously reactivated, a past that is permanently actualised. Even in modern societies, the gift continues its work of weaving, only now it is individuals rather than groups that are networking. In certain cases, like blood and organ donation, the connection between individuals who don’t know each other can be mediated and facilitated by organisations (Naulin and Steiner, 2016: 9-18).

The gift does not ignore interest, but complements it with generosity and gratuity (Donati, 2003). “Any provision of goods or services, without a guarantee of return, in order to create, strengthen or recreate the social bond between persons, can be qualified as a gift” (Godbout and Caillé, 1992: 32). Beneath exchange, there lies a donation. The pre-contractual element is a condition of possibility of exchange and redistribution. Underneath the market and the State, in primary society, the “spirit of the gift” that animates social relations brings individuals and groups into communication, association and community with each other.

Gifts are “relational goods” (Donati, 2015: ch. 6). They are oriented primarily towards producing and enjoying together, in a shared manner, social relations that are valued for themselves and that could not be produced in another way by the market (lib) or the state (lab). What matters in the gift are neither the things that are exchanged (use value) nor the price they can fetch (exchange value). “The good (*le bien*) circulates at the service of the relation (*le lien*)”, write Godbout and Caillé (1992: 36). Its value is a “bond value” (*valeur de lien*). Whether it is words, goods or services that are exchanged, presents also have a symbolical value. Inserted in a network of symbols, things and persons, every gift points to a totality of social relations that it helps to recreate and regenerate.

In *The Anthropology of the Gift. The Third Paradigm*, Caillé (2000) positions the gift paradigm as a systematic alternative to individualist and holistic theories of society (Caillé, 2000, see also Caillé, 2014: ch. 2 and 2015: ch. 14). Over and against the double reduction of atomistic theories (like Spencer’s and Weber’s) that analyse society as an aggregate of individual actions and of holistic theories (like Marx’s and Durkheim’s) that consider individual actions as emanations of a totality, the gift paradigm insists on the structure of interdependence and considers the dynamics of reciprocity as the motor of all social life. Whereas the other paradigms posit the individual and society respectively as first and last instance, the paradigm of the gift opts once again for the middle. Relations come first, both ontologically and epistemologically. Neither individuals nor societies can exist by themselves. Societies only persist in their being if they are continuously regenerated by transactions between individuals who are always already socialised. In the perspective of relational sociology, individuals and societies are seen as co-constituted by the relations that bind individuals into a community, communities into societies, societies into civilisations, and civilisations into a common humanity.

The “third paradigm” maintains that “secondary sociality” finds its foundation in “primary sociability”. Whether one thinks the spontaneity and cosiness of primary sociability with Aristotle as a sphere of enlarged friendship (*philia/koinonia*), with the Christians as a sphere of love or brother- and sisterhood (*agapè, caritas, fraternitas*), with the Scottish Enlightenment as a sphere of benevolence and sympathy, with Hegel as a sphere of concrete morality (*Sittlichkeit*) or with Comte, Durkheim and Mauss as a sphere of altruism and solidarity, in all cases one finds the idea of a primordial, pre-contractual community of interpersonal relations between persons as a living substrate of society. From this point of view, the personal bonds that characterise intimate relations (family), friendly relations (peers) and civic relations (associations) appear as the “infrastructure” of indirect, contractual relations between anonymous members of society that are mediated by the “superstructures” of markets and administrations.

To avoid the problematic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (with all the dangers of romanticism, vitalism and even reactionary anti-modernism that Helmut Plessner (2003) pinpointed a century ago), one can better think of the gift-process with Georg Simmel (1992) as an active form of *Vergesellschaftung*, i.e. socialisation or, even better, to use Durkheim’s literal translation of Simmel, of association that is transversal to the opposition between tradition and modernity. *Vergesellschaftung* is the continuous process of association between individuals and groups that makes and unmakes societies. It is society, not as substantive, but as gerund and process. Like in other forms of association, the members who are connected through presents are aware that they are in interaction “with, for or against each other” (Simmel, 1992: 57). This mutual awareness of what unites or divides them is what constitutes society. The relations may be harmonious or conflictual, but in all cases, it is the actors themselves who produce the social synthesis.

The redefinition of society as a form of association has one advantage. It shows with all necessary clarity that the gift is a form of “social integration” by which persons are actively related to one other in society. It has, however, also three inconveniences. The first one is that the gift is only one social form among many others. How can one justify that the gift is the form of excellence, the form of forms, and that all others (exchange, competition, subordination, conflict, representation, communication, imitation, etc.) are only variations of it? After all, even among students and scholars of Mauss, there’s no consensus that the gift is actually more fundamental than exchange (Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu), sacrifice (Bataille, Girard) or debt (Godelier). Is it plausible to argue that communication, care, sympathy, forgiveness, etc. can be translated in the language of donation without remainder? I do not doubt that some concepts can be translated in gift-theoretical language and that such mutual translation can lead to conceptual advances through mutual illumination and synergic interarticulation. However, if everything can be translated and assimilated, how can one avoid that the gift becomes a “floating signifier” that empties itself of meaning as it is filled up with more heterogeneous contents? In the end, through conceptual drifting, the gift becomes so indefinite and vacuous (e.g. “the gift constitutes the general form of interaction between social persons”) that it is no longer clear what distinguishes it from action, interaction or social relation generically conceived or what is to be gained by its generalised use as an “operator of translations” (Caillé, 2019: 20).

The second inconvenience of tying gift-giving to moral sentiments like benevolence, sympathy and love is that its shadow side remains in the dark. The ambivalence of the gift is well known. Pandora’s box was a present. Like Plato’s *pharmakon*, the gift (gift/*Gift*) is both remedy and poison. We’ll soon discover that the gift is not all peace and love. There’s also an agonistic and competitive side to the gift. What I am more concerned about here is not so much the vicious cycle of mimetic violence in which an offence or a punch have to be returned, but the fact that there’s nothing more suffocating than being trapped in a system of interpersonal interdependence. When the joys of interdependence give way to the torments of co-dependency, gift relations become poisonous and oppressive. As reciprocity generates oppression, relational goods turn into relational evils.

One should also consider that, more often than not, the gift is gendered (Joy, 2013). Women are supposed to give themselves, their time, their affection, etc. generously to their husbands, children, family and patrons. Often they are also obliged to receive some goods, services and practices without flinching or protest. Not only do they have to give and receive graciously, in some societies, they themselves are given by the men to other men or shared with them. Traditional forms of domination, like patriarchy and patrimonialism, are forms of oppression that are based on the exchange of personal favours.

The third inconvenience is that by offering itself as the solution to the problems of “social integration”, the anthropology of the gift slights the problems of “systemic integration” (Lockwood, 1964). It assumes that the intentionality of the agents can be institutionalised in such a way that the coordination between the actors is not transferred to systemic media. Consequently, it has difficulties to capture the “systemness” of society and the structural contradictions that exist not between “people or groups”, but between the “parts” of the system. The injunction to reconnect the system to the life-world through re-embedding of tertiary and secondary sociality within primary sociability makes sense. Without people, one would not have a system. One can even follow Mauss and think of the extension of fraternity and sympathy beyond the spheres of primary sociability in modern welfare systems as a legal transformation of the gift among neighbours into solidarity between strangers. From this perspective, the welfare state and its system of taxation appears as Sloterdijk, 2014: 10) says, as “the continuation of the gift by other means”. This extension implies nonetheless the systemic transmutation of the warm glow of solidarity in the cold language of social rights. Let’s take the example of the “organisational gift” to show how the distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary sociality breaks down: the gift of organs and gametes is mediated by organisations that use logarithms to “match” anonymous givers and beneficiaries with each other (Naulin and Steiner, 2016: chapter 6). Can one understand the complexity of modern societies with a conceptual apparatus of a theory of action, interaction and social relations? Can one really extend the language of giving, symbols and associations to situations where the mediation occurs automatically without the actors’ awareness and consent? Can one retranslate the systemic interdependencies and contradictions within the system or between the subsystems in terms of tensions between persons and groups? Should one not rather introduce a conceptual rupture, an “epistemological break” if one wants, between action and system, and distinguish more carefully the interdependence between “people” and the one between “parts”? Instead of assuming that society is a collective subject that can be scaled up, should we not rather assume that collective subjects intervene in society and try to think society both as life-world and as system? That may well be more productive for a critique of autonomous systems that are spinning out of control (technological systems, financial markets, war games) as they follow their own autopoetic logic till the very end.

**Symbols and Gifts**

We’ve seen in the first part of this article that for the members of the Normandic School of political anthropology (Lefort, Gauchet, Caillé) the symbolical, the religious and the political form an ontological complex in which it is difficult to separate out one dimension from the other. Together, they are supposed to conduct to a foundational moment of constitution of society as a collective subject with a particular identity that differentiates it from neighbouring societies. Whereas the religious refers to the relation a living community establishes with gods, spirits and other invisibles, the political refers to the distinction it makes between friends and enemies. The symbolical intervenes in this politico-religious complex to signify the totality of social relations the collective establishes with itself via the others.

The symbol, as is well known, always connects a concrete, visible element to an abstract, invisible element (Cassirer, 1956). Representing the absent element, the symbol re-presents and signifies it. Thus, to take up Durkheim’s example once again, a flag is a symbol in which a piece of cloth re-presents the land of the fathers. “The soldier who dies for his flag dies for his fatherland. The flag is only a sign; it doesn’t have any value in itself, but only recalls the reality its represents” (Durkheim: 1960: 315). By giving a material embodiment to the people, it not only represents the people; occasionally, it also energises the individuals, stirs them up and makes them act in unison. The symbol is not just a sign of the collective; it also a performative act that brings into existence and into movement the people it re-presents.

Marcel Mauss happens to be one of the main seeds of the symbolical-structuralist revolution of the 1940’s in France (Dosse, 1992). Scholars like Bruno Karsenti (1997) and Camille Tarot (1999) have confirmed that the symbolical is the centrepiece of his oeuvre. Without reference to it, one cannot understand the significance of the total social fact/act. Mauss’s suggestion that one should treat social facts as “symbols” does not necessarily contradict the other injunctions to treat them as “things” (Durkheim), “signs” (Merleau-Ponty), “structures” (Lévi-Strauss) or “acts” (Monnerot). To the contrary, with its suggestion that everything is interconnected in a system of symbolic relations, he’s able to integrate people and things, representations and materialities, structures and agencies into a dynamic totality of signification. Thanks to the symbolic, every person and every thing is inserted in a system of signs that relates the parts among themselves by relating the parts to whole, and the whole to the parts, in a vast cosmology. It is because the individuals are able to represent the whole (in their minds) that they are able to enact it (with their bodies) and act together in unison (in rituals). The social relations between persons are mediated by a system of relations between symbols that represent, perform, ritualise and realise the collective in thoughts, in acts and in concert.

In order to accomplish his paradigmatic turn, Caillé (2000: chs. 1 and 8) returns once again to the ‘Essay’ to anchor the symbolical and the political in the gift. His thesis is that the symbolical and the gift are “co-extensive” to each other. They are, as Habermas would say, “co-originary”. They represent two aspects of the same thing, now considered as system and structure (*ergon/opus*), then as process and practice (*energeia/modus*). That presents are symbols of social relations is easy to understand. Whatever it is (women, goods, services) that is given, the present is always a materialisation that expresses and seals the alliance between persons. Like in a contract, the seal serves as a material proof that closes the deal.

As such, the gift is both a “transitional object” and a “tie-sign” that symbolises the bond and the unity between donors and recipients and contributes to their re-actualisation. The relation between people is mediated by material culture that symbolises the bond. Unlike Marx’s fetish, which alienates, Mauss’s symbol animates the relation between people. The etymology of *symbolon* (from *sum-ballein*, putting together) confirms this gift-theoretic interpretation of material culture. Originally, the symbol is a piece of pottery that is broken in two with a part kept by each of the partners as memory and testimony of their alliance. When they’ll meet again, the two parts will be joined to prove, renew and strengthen their bond. The gifts are, thus, literally, means or media of communication that have meaning to the extent that they re-member, re-store and re-generate the communion between the partners of the exchange.

Up till now we have tacitly assumed that gift-giving occurs between persons: “Some one gives something to some one else” is the basic formula of the gift (Descombes, 1996: ch. 18, see also Pyhhtinen, 2014: chs. 2-4). The thing in the middle acts as medium and mediator of the relations that unite the persons. In clan-based societies, the ceremonial exchange of gifts did not so much occur between persons, however, as between groups (though the latter may, of course, be represented by individuals). The gifts served in the first place as operators of peace that transform potential enemies into allies. It is, as we will see in the next section on the agonistic gift, a political act. By affirming their alliance in a public exchange of gifts, the groups (tribes, clans, families) recognise each other and show that they are at peace with each other or, at least, that they are not, no longer or not yet, at war. “Ritual exchange is not in the first place about the gift of goods. The point is to recognise each other publicly through the given goods as partners of an alliance” (Hénaff, 2012: 81).

In primitive societies, the relations between the groups are sealed with the exchange of women. The incest taboo, which prohibits intercourse within the lineage, forces the group to open itself to other groups through marriage. The rule of exogamy positively enforces reciprocal exchange of women between groups, as Lévi-Strauss (1949) has shown in *The Elementary Forms of Kinship*. The women who are given by the men of one lineage give birth and give children to the other lineage who, in the next round, will become spouses in a generalised cycle of reciprocity that interconnects the generations in a great chain of life.

Caillé (2009: ch. 6 and 2019: ch. 14) formalises the great chain of life and death in a three dimensional theory of social relations. The relations between ancestors and descendents (diagonal relations between the dead and those who are not yet born) serve as intermediaries between the political (horizontal relations between friends and enemies who are potential allies) and the religious (the vertical relations between gods, spirits and other invisibles). Like all social relations, the connections human societies establish through rituals and symbols with the society of invisibles also have to be regenerated by offerings, magic and sacrifices. By signalling its connection to nature (animism), animals (totemism), things (fetishism), gods (polytheism) or the cosmos (analogism), the gift extends the symbols to eternity and infinity.

In Caillé’s *Weltanschauung*, the gift appears as a magic operator that continuously animates and regenerates the totality of social, political, symbolical and spiritual relations that make society (Caillé and Godbout, 2002: ch. 9). Through generalisation and extension of its reach, society in its widest sense can now be defined as the integral of all donative relations that interconnect symbols and things, groups and individuals, the dead and the living, the humans and the non-humans into a shared universe (*koinos kosmos*).

**The System of the Gift**

Like Mauss and Lefort, Caillé is a systematic thinker who hates systems of thought. The gift paradigm he promotes as a general theory of society is “anti-systematic” and as he says, tongue in cheek, “anti-paradigmatic” (Caillé, 2000: 71). Neither inductive nor deductive, Caillé’s thinking is abductive (with flights of imagination), typological (replete with classifications and subtle distinction) and topological (with graphic representations in 3D). The axiomatics of the gift is an attempt to organise the essence and the forms of offering into a system of sorts that is encyclopaedic, complex and dynamic. It functions as a compendium or, perhaps, more apposite, a companion that displays the knowledge about donation in synoptic fashion, without reduction, while also defending theoretical positions and dispensing political orientations. It serves as a compass for the readers of the *Revue du MAUSS* and the fellow travellers of the MAUSS. So they know where they stand and where they go.

The underlying idea of the axiomatics of the gift is that the coordinates configure a complex, contradictory, yet coherent system that is irreducible to any other (exchange, sacrifice, contract, loan). The gift is unique. It is an *unitas multiplex*, to invoke one of Edgard Morin’s (1977: 105-106) more felicitous concepts, with multiple vectors, dimensions and tensions. In the first part of his *Anti-Utilitarian Theory of Action*, significantly subtitled *Fragments of a General Sociology,* Caillé, (2009) draws some strands of his reflections on Mauss’s economic and political anthropology of the gift together in a multidimensional theory of social action. He rearranges the two oppositions of the axis of freedom (obligation x freedom) and the axis of solidarity (egoism x altruism) in a “grammar of action” (Caillé, 2009: 15). The anti-utilitarian theory of action distinguishes four mobiles of action: ritual obligation, personal freedom, self-interest and other-directedness. Obligation, freedom, altruism and interest are analytical dimensions that are always intertwined in concrete situations.

The system of the gift is not only an analytical device, however; it is also a normative apparatus with a moral and political vector that orders the mobiles of action in a system of “hierarchical sub- and superordinations” (Dumont, 1983: ch. 7). In real life, material interests of economic life dominate over anything else; they remain nevertheless embedded in a symbolical and political order that precedes it and defines the articulation between the religious, economic, political and personal spheres of life.

Like in the fourfold topology of the proper goals of human existence of Hindu philosophy, the four motives of action (*artha, dharma, kama, mokscha*), which Caillé (1986: Part 1, ch. 3) already analysed in his doctoral thesis, are perfectly legitimate. In case of conflict, however, there’s a “hierarchical order of nested entanglements” (Dumont) that must be followed: *artha* (economic prosperity) is more important and should precede *kama* (pleasure of the senses), while *dharma* (moral and social duties) is more important and should precede both *kama* and *artha*, which are all hierarchically subordinated to *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of reincarnation), the ultimate end of life.

While the MAUSS does not deny the importance of material interests, it hierarchically subordinates self-interest to other-directedness, egoism to altruism, and war to peace. As moral sentiments of “lovence” (like gratitude, benevolence, sympathy, love, etc., which Caillé regroups under the Derridean concept of *aimance* or lovence) are more important than gain or greed, the interest in others (*Inter-esse)* precedes and has precedence over self-interest. Similarly, as an expression of modern values, it hierarchically subordinates obligations to freedom, and duties to rights. The social obligations are confirmed at the same time as they are tempered by freedoms that transform the old systems of morality in a personal ethics that is community-oriented. The struggle of life is transcended, sublimated and incorporated in a struggle for recognition, which is itself, thanks to the moral sentiments, directed towards more civilised and pacified modes of human coexistence.

If one introduces the question of the coordination of action into the system, the theory of social action can be extended into a theory of social order and collective action. The question of social order does not necessarily imply consensus (Parsons notwithstanding). It is compatible with conflict theories. The question of social order arises at all levels of society and needs therefore an integrated response: How can the individuals coordinate their actions into a common project (action level)? How can social interactions be stabilised in social relations (interaction level)? How can various institutions be integrated in a single system of action (institutional level)? Unfortunately, Caillé does not really work out a coherent answer that would systematically rephrase and reframe the normative, functionalist and systemic theories of Parsons, Habermas and Luhmann in gift-theoretical language. Instead, he refers to Elie Halévy’s (1972) classic work on the British utilitarian tradition to suggest that the typology of individual action could be developed in a theory of collective action through various mechanisms of coordination (the state, the market, sympathy, passion).

To articulate the individual to the general interest and move from action to order, utilitarians from Bentham and Mill to John Rawls have pursued three different “logics of harmonisation” (Halévy, 1972: ch. 1) that are not necessarily compatible with each other. Like Plato and Hobbes, they have either invoked the state as a supra-individual organism that “artificially harmonises” the interests from without by binding the individual in a sovereign contract. Or, alternatively, like Locke and Adam Smith, with reference to the market, they have defended that the various egoisms “naturally harmonise” of their own accord and automatically bring about the public good. In the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, from Hume to A. Smith, utilitarians have also appealed to moral sense and moral sentiments for harmonisation of interests through “sympathetic fusion”. To guarantee the symmetry with his typology of action, Caillé brings in the “passionate harmonisation” as a fourth type of coordination of actions that fuses the individual interests in the effervescence of collective passions, as happens for instance in organised games and sports tournaments. More recently, he has explored the logic of the passions and emotional energy in a theory of liberty, creativity and generativity to which I will return in the next section on the extensions of the gift.

For Caillé, the gift is the symbolical operator of the fundamental structure of action. In his reconstruction of Caillé’s theory of action, André Magnelli (2015: 354-356) makes good use of Edgard Morin’s principle of “dialogics” to underscore the complexity of the gift and formalise Caillé’s considerations on the irreducibility, ambivalence and reversibility of the poles of attraction that galvanise the gift. In the dual (non-dichotomous) logic of dialogics the poles are “simultaneously antagonistic to, in competition with, and complementary to each other”. Interest and disintinterest, obligation and freedom, war and peace are entangled with each other and cannot be separated from each other. They can neither be reduced to each other without remainder nor can they be deduced from each other.

As there’s no absolute transcendence that controls the system from without, the order of priority cannot be determined *a priori* once and for all (for all individuals, communities and societies). The poles are antagonistic to, and in tension with, each other, but the contradictions cannot be overcome in the *Aufhebung* of a dialectical synthesis either. As contradictory logics clash with each other, they become complementary like yin and yang without ever loosing their antagonism. “Not every binary opposition is dichotomous”, Caillé (1986: 233) wrote in his Ph.D., to which he added, “Yin and yang are constantly interpenetrating, engaging and complementing each other in an interrupted cyclical movement”.

Utilitarianism and symbolism, ritualism and creativity, war and peace, life and death slide over into each other and become reversible and, hence, *undécidable*. The polarities represent extremes that oppose, touch, complement, and feed on each other in a dynamic process of symbolical constitution that interweaves persons and things, structures and acts, conflict and consensus in a comprehensive system of social relations. In their opposition, the poles sustain each other and keep the process going. Mutually implicated, they balance each other out. If one absolutises one pole, one is bound to encounter the opposite pole as complement or, as Derrida would have it, as supplement. If one thinks through the logic of self-interest till the limit, one discovers the emptiness of the self and the necessity to open up to the other; if one thinks through love till the limit, one will detect the danger of self-sacrifice to the other, etc. If one goes over the limit, like Bataille, the *agôn* of the offering will turn into the agony of war, the quest for *agapè* into communion, the pursuit of interests into pleonexy, and of freedom into anarchy.

To make things worse, it should be noted at this point that the logic of the gift can also trigger waves of mimetic violence and destruction (Girard, 1982). One does not only return goods, but also “bads” (“an eye for an eye”), and even worse (Caillé, 2020). Lynching, gang rapes, slave raids, shootouts, police brutality, torture sessions, razzias and pogroms, mass murders and, perhaps, also some genocides can be explained in part by diabolic cycles of negative reciprocity. The positive reinforcement of negativity that feeds cycles of violence, retribution and vengeance can turn the agonistic gift into a war machine.

The general theory of the gift is not a functionalist theory, but a dialectical theory of social action. Unlike functionalism, it does not focus in the first place on the stable reproduction of society through socialisation, but on the generation of action and transformation of society. As an alternative to normative theories of society that presuppose consensus, it conceives of conflict as the mother of invention and the father of destruction. It provides a starting mechanism for acts of love as well as for acts of war. The point is not to harmonise the elements, but rather to equilibrate them, so that the tensions do not get out of hand and society does not become a theatre of unending wars and civil strife.

**IV. Extensions and Translations of the Gift**

**Caring, Giving and Gaming**

If one could explore all the possible interpretations of the gift and all the combinations of the polarities in a matrix, one could perhaps transform the set of axioms of the gift into a universal “system of transformations” (Caillé, 2000: 82) that would represent the equivalent of “Mendeleev’s periodic table” (Caillé, 2005: 168) for the social sciences. It is through the structuralist logic of combination and articulation that the French sociologist explores the ins and the outs of the gift as a complex, comprehensive and totalising theory of symbolic interactions with universalist pretensions. While I am willing to grant that it does not exclude any of the permutations within the matrix that structures the gift, I don’t think, however, it can encompass social life in its totality. It is not because everything can enter the matrix of donation that everything is a gift. I am therefore tempted to consider the gift not as a universal operator of translation of all theories, but as a particular one. Like the sociology of labour, the sociology of war or the sociology of power, to mention respectively another special sociology, another total social fact or another dual concept with interesting polarities, it can capture a general dimension of society, but that does not make it a general sociology.

It works best in my opinion when it enters into dialogue not with the totality of social theories, but with the adjacent theories of intersubjectivity and interdependence (Caillé and Vandenberghe, 2021, ch. 5). As a general theory of a special domain, the theory of the gift is most productive when it throws its light on other phenomena, like communication, recognition, sympathy, care, play or resonance, that are at the centre of kindred theories of symbolically mediated interaction. By approaching them from a specific angle, it is able to translate their concepts in its own language and promote real advances in the fields of social theory, cultural studies, and moral and political philosophy.

In his most recent writings, the French theorist (Caillé, 2015 and 2019) has proposed a gift-theoretical reading of the theories of care (in dialogue with Joan Tronto’s ethics of care), the theories of play, games and contests (in dialogue with Johan Huizinga’s *homo ludens*) and the theories of recognition (in dialogue with Axel Honneth’s critical theory). These three internal dialogues have led to three “extensions” of the gift paradigm and two “applications”, a first one to the field of management (Caillé and Grésy, 2014) and a second one to the field of psychology (Caillé and Grésy, 2018).

The first extension amplifies the cycle of the gift with a fourth element and a possible inversion of its sense. The exploration of the synergies between caring and giving to those, like the sick, the disabled and the mentally ill who can hardly retribute, has led Caillé (2019: ch. 6) to introduce demands and needs into the triad: To give, to accept, and to return the gift is now preceded by a request. Like in Levinas and Derrida, the other comes before the self. Even before she speaks, I am attuned to her and her needs. Once again, Caillé reverts to Marcel Mauss, this time to the fragments of his unfinished doctoral dissertation on the prayer, to introduce the request as an initial act that initiates and specifies the imperative of largeness. Without request, even unspoken, one does not know what or to whom one has to give. Ideally, in response to a request, the partners move through the cycle with grace “like in a waltz” (Caillé and Grésy, 2014: 64). Occasionally, though, they can get stuck at any point in the cycle, because one of the partners does not know how to demand or to give, for instance, or the other has problems to receive or to return the present. As a result of these “small pathologies of the ordinary gift” (Caillé and Grésy, 2018), the coordination of the movements gets hampered and the flow is interrupted, while the orchestra keeps on playing.

The extended cycle of the gift can also be inverted into its opposite: To ignore, to take, to refuse, and to keep. Unlike the virtuous circle, which connects persons and groups, the vicious circle separates and disconnects them from each other through indifference. Life goes on, but interests take over. Passions are dimmed. Against the background of a general suspicion, actions become strategic with a little tinge of aversion. The vicious circle of exchange should be distinguished from the diabolical cycle of the gift, which does not break the flow of interactions, but, as we have seen, fuels it by injecting the negativity of hatred, vengeance and violence into the cycle of reciprocity. In both cases, anomie looms and society may disintegrate with a whisper (the vicious circle of generalised indifference) or with a bang (the diabolical cycle of generalised negativity).

The second extension bears upon the freedom pole of the donative system and requires a good deal of semantic stretching (from *don* via *donation* to *adonnement* and *donativité*). Following a double fusion of liberty with creativity and self-expression with self-transcendence, it broadens the gift to include practices in which one devotes or gives oneself over with joy, passion and enthusiasm. By giving oneself over to religious, artistic, sportive or even consumptive activities, alone or together with others, one’s capacity to generate, innovate and create is enhanced. Thanks to the gift, the existential “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) or “givenness” (*Gegebenheit*) becomes generative and productive. We are not here to die; life is given so that a new start can be made. The passivity of Heidegger’s lonely *Dasein* turns into Arendt’s common activity and worldly creativity. Arendt follows the etymology of the verb “to act” (*archein*) and connects agency to novelty and creativity. With agency, something new comes into the world; in creativity, the actor produces “works and deeds and words” (Arendt, 1958: 19) that express and reveal one’s personality (*persona*) in public and that can be seen, heard and appreciated by all. “In acting and speaking, men (sic) show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (Arendt, 1958:179).

Like Arendt, Caillé gives great importance to the phenomenon of appearance. The presentation and manifestation of the self (*Selbstdarstellung*) occupies a central place in his aesthetics (Dewitte, 2010). He distinguishes “having, being and appearing” as three different “keys” (or “registers”) in which the score of the gift can be played (Caillé, 2009: 23, n. 8). He leaves no doubt that “appearing” has priority over “having”. The symbolic interests of glory, renown, prestige and appearance (the “interests of form”) dominate hierarchically, positively and normatively, the instrumental interests of property, possession and having (the “interests of posse”). While the relation between being (essences) and appearing (appearances) is not explicitly theorised, one has the impression that that the essence of being is to appear so as to be seen. The first obligation, therefore, is to show off one’s largesse so as to appear generous. “The obligation to give is the obligation to show oneself as generous. Whether one really is generous is another question […] The obligation to give is, first and foremost, the obligation to affirm one’s splendour” (Caillé, 2005: 32). At this point, the distinction between Bourdieu and Caillé becomes immaterial and the paradigm of the gift starts to fuse with the paradigm of prestige. Whether the “interest in appearing disinterested” is, ultimately, of an economic nature (property), as Bourdieu would argue, or of a political nature (power), as Caillé would argue, does not make that much of a difference.

Perhaps, the difference between both can be elaborated more clearly by reverting to Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1991) well-known model of the “orders of worth” (*Cités*). Bourdieu directs his critique of the vulgar utilitarianism of the commercial and industrial orders of worth not by counter posing them to the traditional hierarchies of the orders of worth of religion (inspiration and grace), kinship (family and kin), prestige (renown and reputation). It is from the vantage point of the modern civic and republican order that he assails injustice. Symmetrically, if he unmasks the utilitarianism of anti-utilitarianism, it may well be because he suspects that the order of appearance is not all that democratic. From the point of view of modern justice, which, in principle, redistributes the rights of each and everyone in accordance with their necessities, the obligation to appear generous may well represent an aristocratic avatar: “Noblesse oblige”. With great power comes great responsibility. For critical sociology, the unwritten code of honour and responsibility of the nobility provides an apparent legitimation for an old order of worth and privilege.

Notwithstanding its association with free giving, the gift of the MAUSS is and remains a noble gift. It is not a charitable one, but a well-tempered agonistic gift. It does not ignore the gracious gift, but its essence is political and esthetical rather than theological and moral. It challenges status differentials and provokes, in return, a demonstration of the will to power. Like games and contests, gift-giving fuses contest and competition into a public performance or play of superiority. Caillé approximates Mauss’s *homo donator* to Huizinga’s *homo ludens*, but he might as well have connected the agonistic gift to Thornstein Veblen’s “instinct of sportsmanship” (Veblen, 1973: ch.10), an aristocratic atavism of primitive hunters and feudal warriors that expresses itself in the predatory emulation of the leisure class at the turn of the twentieth century with their celebration of the “principles of waste, futility, and ferocity” (id. 228).

What Johan Huizinga (1997: 29) says about the game also holds for the gift: “The game is a contest for something or a representation of something. These two functions can also be joined so that it ‘represents’ a contest or is a contest for who can best render something”. The mutual illumination of the logics of the gift and those of the game reveals interesting similarities and complementarities. Both are ceremonial performances that presuppose freedom, a semblance of disinterestedness and competition (*agôn*). To enter into the game or into the gift-process, one has to enter into the spirit of the practice. “The spirit of the game is nothing else”, according to Caillé (2019: 129), “but the spirit of the gift played out in a ludic register; symmetrically, no doubt, the spirit of the gift is nothing else but the spirit of the game played out in the register of oblation”. To win, one must give oneself (*se donner*) and give oneself over (*s’adonner*) to the game; symmetrically, to give oneself, one must accept to enter the contest as a warrior and play it out. Through *mise en scène,* both the gift and the game try to canalise rough and wild passions of rivalry into a more civilised play of chivalry.

Following Mauss, whom he cites at length, Huizinga (1997: 16) conceives of play as a “primary category of social life” and describes it as “a totality” that temporarily suspends ordinary life and binds the players through struggle in a form of association that is bound by the rules of the game. It is a totality, because it traverses various realms of action (religion, arts, law, science, etc.); it is also a modality of action, one could add, because its playfulness and make-believe transform the world into a stage and action into a performance. The central thesis of *Homo ludens* is that culture and contest are “co-originary” - like the gift and society - and form a “uni-duality” (Huizinga, 1997: 68). The Dutch historian does not mean to say that at a certain stage of civilisation, play is somehow transformed into culture. But rather that the ludic, agonal and theatrical aspects of life that one encounters in all archaic societies is also at work underneath in all forms of higher culture – in cults, feasts, rituals, arts, sciences, wisdom and jurisdiction. “Culture in its originary phases is play. It does not sprout from culture as a living fruit that liberates itself from the maternal body, but it develops itself *in* and *as* play” (Huizinga, 1997: 224).

The interpretation of the gift *sub specie ludi* allows for a better understanding of the institutionalisation and formalisation of the rules of engagement. Unlike the gift, which does not presuppose a judge, games count with an arbiter who is authorised to apply the rules of fair play. In public contests of strength, dexterity and luck, the parties have to prove their mettle and show that they are the best – *hoi aristoi*. The victory releases the tension and establishes the rank of honour (for the winners) and indignity (of the losers).

Caillé does not deny the aristocratic nature of agonistic practices. He subscribes to it and quotes Mauss (1950: 270) on the potlatch approvingly: “To be the first, the most beautiful, the luckiest, the strongest, the richest, this is what one searches and how one obtains it”. He knows that the desire to appear in Hannah Arendt, the will to compete in Huizinga, the potlatch in Mauss, the conspicuous consumption in Veblen and the struggle for recognition in Hegel, are driven by a will to power of the nobility. As expressions of a masculine warrior ethos, they are hardly noble sentiments. Like the *thumos*, the wrath of the ancients, these motives of action are motors of resentment, retribution and revenge that have to be canalised, sublimated and civilised if they are not to get out of control and unleash violence. His bet is that gift-giving is capable of directing the *agôn* towards more noble ends of creativity, alterity and relative stability.

In the *Second Convivialist Manifesto*, the conscious control of *hubris*, the desire of omnipotence and outrageous arrogance of the powerful who don’t respect any limits, has been enshrined as the “absolute imperative” of humanity and the “principle of principles”. Controlling excess is an absolute imperative, because it formulates “the central problem that humanity must now face” (Caillé et al., 2020: 24). And it is a metaprinciple, because if it is not respected, the other principles of common nature, common humanity, common sociality and individual expression cannot be honoured. In other words, if the greed of the rich and the power of the powerful are not checked, humanity will not survive.

**The Struggle for Recognition**

After all that has been said about the gift, it comes as no surprise that Caillé welcomes Axel Honneth’s (1992) critical theory of recognition to reactivate the connection, which Lefort had established already in 1951, between Mauss’s ‘Essay’ and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In many articles (Caillé, 2009: Annexe 1; Caillé, 2016: ch. 16 and Caillé, 2019: chs. 3-5) and two edited books (Caillé, 2007, Caillé and Lazzeri, 2009), he does some initial reconnoitring (or reconnaissance, in the military sense of the term) of the possible synergies between the paradigm of the gift and the paradigm of recognition. Interestingly, the Franco-German encounter of the neo-Maussian theory of the gift and the left-Hegelian theory of recognition was mediated by Marcel Hénaff’s (1992) beautiful book on the gift, money and philosophy. Paul Ricoeur picked it up from him and concluded his study of mutual recognition in Hegel, Honneth and Mauss with the reminder that in French *reconnaissance* is also related to gratitude.

To recognise means “to show by gratitude that one is indebted to someone for something” (Ricoeur, 2004: 27). The application of the triad of meanings of recognition to the gift opens a sequence of reciprocity in which the gift is recognised as a gift (recognition as cognitive identification), the giver and the recipient mutually recognise each other as allies (recognition as political association) and the recipient thanks the donor (recognition as gratitude), closing the sequence at the same time as it reopens it, giving the other the chance to return the offering.

By choosing the slave plantations of the New World as his setting for the struggle for recognition, Hegel has transformed the virtuous sequence of reciprocal recognition in a dramatic combat in which life and death are at stake. In order to hegelianise Mauss, Caillé returns to Alexandre Kojève’s masterful rendering of the central passage on the “dialectics of the Master and the Slave” in the *Phenomenologie des Geistes*. Kojève’s reading has influenced a whole generation of French philosophers, notably Sartre, Aron, Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, Lacan and Althusser who attended his Hegel Seminar at the École pratique in Paris between 1933 and 1939. Like Kojève, Caillé reads the phenomenology as a philosophical anthropology. The struggle for recognition between the master and the slave is “anthropogenic”. The human animal that is the slave only becomes self-conscious as a human being when he’s willing to risk his life to be recognised by the master: “It is only by being ‘recognised’ by another, by the others and – at the limit - by all the others that a human being is really human: for himself as much as for the others” (Kojève, 1968: 16). By challenging the master to death, the slave forces the master to recognise him. The master who recognises the slave realises that that he’s dependent on the work of the slave for his survival. If he kills the slave, he will be deprived of his work. If the slave kills the master, he will be deprived of the recognition he craves for. It is only if both stay alive that they will mutually recognise each other and that the dialectic of the spirit will be able to continue its ascension till it becomes conscious in, as and for itself in the stately figure of the monarch.

The reference to one of the darkest chapters in the history of humanity is not without irony. In his recognition-theoretical reconstruction of the struggle for recognition, Honneth never refers to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but always to Hegel’s earlier texts from the Jena period or to his later *Philosophy of Right*. By bringing back Mauss into the discussion, Caillé (2009: 149-164) has willingly and knowingly introduced an aristocratic element in Honneth’s intersubjective theory of recognition. In the agonistic gift, the masters struggle with each other to have their superiority recognised; in democratic struggles for justice, however, it’s not the dominant, but the dominated, the exploited and the subaltern who struggle to be recognised as equal citizens. The difference between honour and dignity expresses the passage from hierarchy to equality and from aristocracy to democracy (Berger, 1970). The dominated no longer accept to be treated as second-class citizens. They refuse the symbolic violence and other humiliations the dominant classes, genders, races, etc. inflict on them. Considering themselves “equal, but different”, they want to be respected, rewarded and recognised for what they are and for what they do. If they struggle for their rights, denouncing the discriminations they suffer as forms of injustice, it is because they think that they deserve to be recognised for their contribution to the common good of the community.

Unlike the theory of the gift, the theory of recognition fully acknowledges the importance of systemic integration and the secondary mediations of the state and the law (Honneth, 2010). The struggles for recognition are collective struggles for justice – for equal recognition of identities and differences in all spheres of life (family, education, work, but also science, the market and the state). At the end of the day, the politics of identity are more about equality than identity. Social movements struggle to enlarge the circle of recognition beyond the spheres of the first society. While they come from society and want to change it, it is important to acknowledge that they demand systemic change. To change the primary society, nowadays, one often has to pass through law and the media to transform the institutions of secondary and tertiary societies. The law acts as a transmission belt of the demands of society to its political, economic, educational and other subsystems that respond to society by transforming the institutional parameters of action and interaction.

Once these corrections are made, the theory of recognition can easily be retranslated into the language of the gift paradigm. A simple modification of the basic sentence – “Some one gives some thing to some one else” – is enough to raise interesting questions: Who gives recognition to whom? And what is recognised when one gives? Let’s return to Mauss and Hegel via Kojève to see how Caillé answers the “who question” by introducing a distinction between recognisers who grant and recognisees who receive endorsement of their claims. We have seen that the human being (the slave) who is recognised as a human being is also the one who recognises the other (the master) as a human being. “Man (sic) is necessarily recognised, says Hegel, and he’s necessarily recogniser” (Hegel, *apud* Kojève, 1968: 506). To realise himself, the human being needs the other. The one who grants recognition is in need of being granted recognition. To be able to lead a valuable life, the recognisee needs self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 1992). He can only get it as an individual if the group he belongs to is valued as well. The good life is therefore only possible if the subject is recognised as a personal subject in the sphere of love (first society – family, friends and peers), as a legal subject with rights in the sphere of citizenship (second society – the state and law) and as a moral subject with self-esteem in the sphere of solidarity (second society – civil society, industrial society, public sphere). Caillé insists that not all demands for recognition can be granted. The demands of the recognisee have to be validated by the recognisers. If the recognisers themselves are not legitimate, the struggle for recognition will sooner or later be transformed into a “struggle over recognition” (Caillé, 2015: 316), i.e. over the principles of valuation used by the recognisers.

In modernity, the principles have to minimally respect the right to freedom (Honneth, 2011). This abstract right to freedom becomes concrete and real when the principle of autonomy is guaranteed by the state and the markets, institutionalised in civil society and incorporated in the practices of everyday life. According to Honneth’s actualisation of Hegel, it is only when freedom has become a principle in all spheres of action that the equal and mutual recognition of each by all and of all by each is real and realised.

Now that we have answered the “who question”, we can tackle the “what question”. Caillé introduces the value of the person and the groups who give as a third and final element of the political anthropology of the gift. He posits that persons and groups want to be recognised in their value. They want to be recognised either for what they have given (generosity) or, in case of their talents, for what they have received (creativity). The gratitude that is bestowed upon them is a symbolic return that rewards them for their generosity or creativity with the glow of prestige and esteem.

To reposition the debate between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser (2004) about the place of redistribution and recognition in a critical theory of society, he associates the analysis of value production to different disciplines. While economics is concerned with the value of things, moral philosophy, the social sciences and cultural studies should strive to conceptualise the social value of persons, not to quantify it, but to properly qualify it and give to each their just return (Caillé and Vandenberghe, 2021: 45-47). Those who have been exploited (the slaves, the workers, the colonised), whose contributions have not been sufficiently valued (the women, the care givers) or even those who have not been able to give (the disabled, the sick) deserve to be recognised and valued for what they have given and compensated for what has been taken from them.

From the perspective of the gift, the struggle for recognition is a struggle to have one’s gifts valued, one’s generosity validated, and one’s generativity elevated. The translation of the struggle for recognition in gift-theoretical language gives the following results: “Both individuals and groups - individuals as representatives of the groups they belong to - recognise by their gifts the donees as valuable. As worthy of being recognised and of recognising in turn those who have given to them. The value of the gifts to others, whether friends or enemies, allies or rivals, is the measure of the value they are acknowledged to have” (Caillé, 2019: 93). So the more one gives, the more one is valued, and the more one can give, which confirms the moral economy of nobility, while putting it on a more egalitarian footing. We encounter here with a small donological variation the moral lesson of the Parable of the Talents [Gifts] of the Gospel: “For to all those who have [given], more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have [given] nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matthew 25: 29).

**Conclusion: Opening Perspectives**

In this article we have investigated the theoretical foundations of the Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences. In the good company of Alain Caillé, thanks to him and with him, we have been able to freely circulate between the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and anthropology without impediment. In the footsteps of Claude Lefort’s political phenomenology, we have discovered another branch of critical theory that complements the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason with a critique of utilitarian reason that is indebted to Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi. We have seen how an economic anthropology of archaic societies and a political philosophy of modern society can be combined in a theory of the symbolic constitution of society. Underneath of the functional differentiation of society into various subsystems, there’s still, supposedly, a political collective at work that, albeit divided with itself, constitutes society as a meaningful totality. The collective social and symbolic act that traverses all the domains of society (religion, the economy, politics, etc.) is a total social fact. Through ethnographic and historical comparison of the symbolic forms of worldmaking, modern rationalism has been relativised and uncovered as one form among others. The comparison of commodity capitalism and the gift economy (Gregory, 1982) has revealed that the utilitarian imaginary of political economy is not the only one. Other articulations between science, politics and economics, as well as between the state, markets and civil society are possible. Before and below the market and the state, but also somehow against and beyond them, there is a symbolic economy that interweaves persons, things and spirits in a living cosmos.

While this cosmic vision of a sacred economy is no longer ours, the symbolic economy is not something of the past, however, of interest only to anthropologists, folklorists and historians. To realise its actuality and its potential relevance for contemporary societies, one should consider the gift economy not as a primitive, but rather with the phenomenologists as a primordial economy in which the relations between persons have precedence over the relations between things. When goods and services are freely and generously given in order to strengthen the interpersonal relations, the symbolic economy of the gift is actualised as a moral economy. In his reconstructive archaeology of the gift, Mauss has unearthed the trinity of obligations as one of the fundamentals of social and political life. Even if the gift is not always what is seems - it can involve obligation, calculation and competition - the cycle of reciprocity is the unmoved mover that brings people together into a friendly society.

Alain Caillé has drawn all the political, moral and theoretical consequences from Mauss’s gift theorem and created the MAUSS as a powerful vector of his positions. Transforming vices into virtues, he has transfigured the ambivalences of the gift and systematised its ambiguities in a complex gift paradigm that can compete with any rival theory and complete all the others. In his hands, the gift has been crafted into a formidable theoretical operator that is presumably able to overcome all the paired oppositions - between holism and individualism, obligation and freedom, identity and alterity, friendship and enmity, altruism and egoism, consensus and conflict, traditionalism and modernism, democracy and aristocracy, distribution and recognition, care and control - into a general sociology with emancipatory intent.

Before we evaluate whether the MAUSS has been able to pull off its generous promises, let’s try to pull the strings together. The anti-utilitarian theory of action that forms the hard core of the gift paradigm has transformed Mauss’s ‘Essay’ into a total social theory. It is total, because it conceives of gift-giving as a multidimensional process that entangles the symbolical, political and economic aspects of society. The theory of the gift is symbolic and relational. It assumes that the symbolic mediations that represent the collective to its members also perform the social relations it entertains with itself and its others (the invisibles, the allies, the enemies). The presents that are exchanged are tie-signs that symbolise the spiritual interconnection between persons, spirits and things. The cultural theory of symbols finds its extension in a political theory of alliances. It acknowledges that society is always traversed by social conflicts, but believes that the antagonism between enemies can be attenuated into an agonistic struggle between adversaries. The gift has the potential to disarm enemies, transforming them into adversaries, allies and friends. Through agonistic exchange, the adversaries mutually recognise each other as allies and partners who can cooperate with each other. The acceptance of the present enmeshes the partners in cycles of reciprocity that strengthen the bonds between the communities and tie them together in solidarity. The theory of the gift believes that the politics of friendship can be institutionalised in a social and solidarity economy. It defends a plural economy in which the three organisational principles of hierarchy (states), markets (firms) and networks (associations) can work together to re-embed the economy into society, domesticate neo-liberalism and strengthen the associations of civil society in an active participatory democracy. Through the systematic articulation of a cultural theory of symbols with a political theory of alliances and a sociological theory of the social economy, Caillé has developed the theory of the gift into a political philosophy that presents itself as a general social science.

To conclude this essay, I want to raise some critical questions about some issues that are at the very core of Caillé’s endeavour: Marcel Mauss, anti-utilitarianism and the gift. We have seen that Caillé considers the *Essay on the Gift* as an *Urtext* of all his reflections. While this text is indeed foundational, I wonder to what extent it can be disconnected from the rest of his work. I have argued that the text on the ‘Divisions and Proportions of Sociology’ is more systematic in its outline of a general sociology and that the ‘Essay’ on the Gift’ constitutes its most spectacular application. The question now is if this reversal is successful and if the anthropology of the gift can qualify as a general sociology that is able to cover all and every aspect of social life.

While I do not question that the gift paradigm touches on central questions of general sociology, I do not think that the gift paradigm in itself constitutes a general sociology. But then I would say the same about similar attempts to transform a specific object – performances, rhythms, games, etc. – into a general project or a specific concept – power, conflict, love, labour, etc. – into a general theory, capable of competing with other general theories. Almost by definition, in spite of its universal ambitions, a paradigm is always more restricted than a general theory of society.

Caillé’s theory of action is ambitious for sure, but in my opinion, it offers an insufficient basis for a grand theory of society. It does not have the reach of a systematic theory of society, like the ones Parsons, Habermas or Luhmann or, in a different tradition, Elias, Bourdieu and Freitag developed in the last century. By and all, it is a theory of social integration that transposes an anthropological model of exchange, derived from tribal and traditional societies, to modern and postmodern societies. No doubt, this is illuminating and constitutes an important contribution in its own right. The generalisation of a model of non-market economies in the Pacific that does not even hold for all tribal and traditional societies – it’s neither valid for the Australian Aborigines nor for the Indian subcontinent (Gregory, 2013) - risks, however, to overstretch its categories. In the absence of a more systematic theory of systemic integration, it is likely to miss the defining marks of modernity (industrialism, technology, bureaucracy). The need to ground the system into the life-world and to always tie back the secondary and tertiary institutions of modernity to face-to-face interactions is of a moral nature. The theory of the gift is insufficiently complex in my opinion to tackle the systemic challenges of contemporary modern and post-modern societies.

Notwithstanding its occasional grand standing, I think it’s better to conceive of it more modestly as a prism (Chanial, 2008) that is able to throw light on certain aspects of society, while leaving others in the dark. We have seen the power of illumination of the gift as a partial translator in the case of care, play and recognition. The self-conscious introduction of gift-giving adds something to (as much as it extracts something from) these theories, but it does not substitute them. There are family resemblances between love, sympathy, care, and recognition, but they are not identical twins of the gift.

The donological perspective opens up an infinite field of research and dialogue. Whatever the topic at hand, one can always be sure that, one way or another, there will be religion, symbols, interactions, reciprocity, generosity, trust, rivalry, conflict, revenge and violence. The history of the *Revue du Mauss*, a specialist journal for a general readership, is a living testimony of the productivity of the gift-perspective, its capacity to illuminate old topics and open up dialogue with kindred spirits.

The understanding of the gift paradigm as a perspective limits its imperial tendencies. The gift cannot occupy the whole space of social theory, annex its territories and plant its flag everywhere. By setting itself up as the only alternative to the axiomatics of interest, the theory of the gift courts the risks of becoming the mirror image of its nemesis. The stylisation of rational choice as a genuine general theory has simplified the recent history of ideas. In the social sciences and cultural studies, utilitarianism is in no way dominant. If anything, critical theory broadly conceived now appears to be hegemonic. Neoliberalism may be spreading through the universities, but that is because the austerity politics are trickling down from the government to the vice-chancellors and the managers (Connell, 2019), not because the curriculum and the syllabi have now been taken over by the Chicago School.

It may seem paradoxical, but to strengthen the anti-utilitarian agenda, the gift paradigm needs to tone down. Within the social sciences, there’s clear need to counter the advance of rational choice, network analysis and Boolean statistics. Within contemporary societies, it is also imperative to organise the resistance to neo-liberalism and the encroachment of its logic of commodification. This is best done by a big tent approach that includes the gift perspective, but does not exclude other theoretical strategies. One should, for instance, not expect Foucaldians to subscribe to the agenda of the MAUSS or to embrace the principles of the gift. Given the importance of governmentality studies of neo-liberal reason, they should nevertheless not be excluded from the anti-utilitarian alliance. The same holds for Habermasians. While the MAUSS positions itself against normative conceptions of social action and considers the search for consensus as a depoliticising move, they should nevertheless be included in the big tent. Similar arguments could be mounted concerning post-structuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, actor-network theory, the Studies, etc.

The return to Mauss and to the gift has been incredibly productive. It has opened new perspectives on the *anthropos* and has led to the development of a new school of thought within French theory. As always, the problem with schools of thought is that while they open new perspectives to recruit new followers, they also have a tendency to string their ideas together in a tight package to close its ranks. If I have allowed myself to open up the system of the gift from within through a critical dialogue with Caillé and the friends of the MAUSS, it’s been in the hope that it may be contribute to the diffusion of its ideas to an Anglophone audience. The fact that I have not merely reproduced the ideas of the MAUSS, but have fully engaged with them and taken them seriously, confirms the complexity of the gift. It’s always a mixture of love and gratitude, obligation and freedom, consensus and strife.

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1. Publishing an article on the gift without mentioning the friends, colleagues and students who generously commented on my text would be tantamount to a performative contradiction. I thank Sara de Andrade, Lucas Faial, Augusto Waga, Thiago Panica and other fellows from the Sociofilo Lab in Rio de Janeiro for the discussion. I am most grateful to Alain Caillé for his comments and suggestions and also acknowledge the input of Ilana Silber, Marc Humbert, Philippe Steiner and Jacques Godbout. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)