



# Neo-classical sociology: The prospects of social theory today

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## Abstract

This article calls for a new theoretical synthesis that overcomes the fragmentation, specialization and professionalization within the social sciences. As an alternative to utilitarianism and the colonization of the social sciences by rational choice models, it proposes a new articulation of social theory, the Studies and moral, social and political philosophy. Based on a positive anthropology that finds its inspiration in Marcel Mauss's classic essay on the gift, it recommends a return to classical social theory and explores articulations between theories of reciprocity, care and recognition.

## Keywords

anti-utilitarianism, care, French theory, general social theory, the gift, Mauss, postcolonial studies, recognition

*Il n'y a pas des sciences sociales, mais une science des sociétés.*

Marcel Mauss (1969: 51)

Sociology is entering its Second Century. It is a young discipline, but it is growing old. Our question is whether it was merely, like anthropology, a discipline of the twentieth century or whether it can continue for another two centuries. The numbers of sociologists, sociology teachers and sociology students are increasing around the world, but for

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several reasons, it is not clear that this seemingly favourable situation will last, nor that the discipline will survive for a long time in its current form. Not that sociology is in crisis. It is not. All things considered, that is what we find most worrying. With its increasing professionalism, it courts the risk of becoming irrelevant. There are numerous investigations of local social problems, from drunken driving in Alabama to bullying on the Internet and discrimination of Brazilian transsexuals in Paris. About the global economic crisis, however, sociology has hardly anything special to say. When its contributions are not couched in obscure jargon or impenetrable maths that give them a scientific semblance, its observations remain so close to common sense and everyday life that one wonders what distinguishes sociology from sociography or even from (realist) literature. Both in its expert and common-sense versions one finds a lot of moral posturing and ideological positioning. As if denunciations of global capitalism and sympathy with the downtrodden could possibly change the system!

In a money-driven world that admits only the measure of immediate profitability, the usefulness of sociology is indeed challenged. The discipline may not be in crisis, it nevertheless displays increasing uncertainty about its identity, its project and its legitimacy. The ritual invocation of Marx, Weber and Durkheim as 'founding fathers' of sociology does not restrain the disorientation and fragmentation of the discipline. While it constructs an illusionary continuity between the past and the present, it precludes an exploration of continuities with the older traditions (natural law, philosophy of history, the humanities, moral and political philosophy, political economy). The canonization of the classics checks disciplinary drift, but it only does so by relegating other authors to the periphery of the discipline. Who still reads Comte, Spencer or even Parsons?

In this article, we propose a series of integrated reflections on the current state of the social sciences. Our aim is to contribute to the development of a general social theory along anti-utilitarian lines. The article contains four sections. In the first section, it opens with a brief analysis of a quadruple fragmentation within the social sciences: the autonomization of theory and research; the fragmentation among theories; the separation of sociology and the Studies; as well as between the social sciences and moral, social and political philosophy. As an alternative to the rational choice models of neo-classical economics, in the second section, it develops the contours of neo-classical sociology and calls for a new synthesis of social theory, the Studies and moral and political philosophy. Through an articulation of metatheory, social theory and sociological theory, in the third section, it advances a loose integration of theories of social action, order and social change and spells out the minimal requirements of a pluralist position. Finally, in the fourth section, in dialogue with theories of care and recognition, it presents and proposes the gift paradigm as a general social theory that, with a little help from our friends, is able to translate the other theories. Tentatively, we suggest that it offers the best platform for a new synthesis within the social sciences.

## Four fragmentations

When we look at the current situation of sociology, we see four fragmentations: two internal ones and two external ones.

The *first fragmentation* within sociology is that between teaching and research, theory and methodology, concepts and techniques, abstractions and operationalizations. On the one hand, we have the teaching of classical and contemporary sociological theory (SOC 101: Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel; SOC 201: Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, sometimes also Luhmann, though, granted, his work is definitely more difficult to teach). The introductory courses are given at the beginning of the curriculum to students who are generally too young to grasp its significance. The result is rather predictable: Sociology is identified with a positivist, objectivist and determinist account of society (culled from the first chapter of Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*), an iron-cage-vision of modernity (extracted from the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*) and a trenchant, yet stereotyped critique of neo-liberal capitalism (inspired by the *Communist Manifesto*). On the other hand, there is hands-on training for empirical research, both qualitative (participant observation, interviews, life histories, etc.) and quantitative (multiple regression, correspondence analysis, geodata, etc.), which is required from both researchers and research apprentices alike. Increasingly, the access to data defines the identity of its practitioners. In many countries, but above all in France, the USA, less so in the UK, Germany and Brazil, empirical research has become a *conditio sine qua non* to be even recognized as a sociologist.

The question, therefore, arises: What or who is a sociologist? He or she is a professional who practises a cult of commemoration of the 'founding fathers', quotes Marx, Durkheim and Bourdieu, does specialized work in one of the many 'fields' of sociology (sociology of health, education, sports, social movements, etc.), applies research methods and techniques (participant observation, discourse analysis, factor analysis) to gather and analyse the empirical data and does not eschew moral and political evaluation of the social situation that is investigated.

Those who define themselves primarily as empirical researchers (ethnographers and stats people) are not really bothered by theoretical and conceptual issues anyway. All too often, theories have a merely decorative use and conceptual issues are quickly resolved and dissolved through a series of obligatory references to a few contemporary schools of thought that are far from reaching unanimity within the discipline: critical realism, neo-Marxism, actor-network theory, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, etc. – all these scholarly references function more as 'badges of identification' (Berthelot, 2000: 72) than as genuine pointers of conceptual elaboration.

Hence, the *second fragmentation*. It results from the conflicts and tussles between anathematizing sociological schools (cultural sociology vs. structural sociology, critical theory vs. systems theory, rational choice vs. neo-institutionalism) that are unable to come to a minimum consensus about the very essence of sociology. What we would call 'multiple paradigmatisis' has now become so acute that it is hard to see what the nano-approach of discourse analysis has in common with the mega-approach of world systems theory. Apart from a nominal adherence to sociology, within the discipline, there is not even a minimum consensus about the unit of analysis, basic ontology or elementary concepts. At best, there is mutual indifference and tolerance; at worst, confrontation and agonistics.

To those two divisions within the discipline itself, we should add two others that emerge at the boundaries of sociology and its environment. The *third fragmentation*

comes about when empirical work is conducted in response to theoretical perspectives that are unrelated to sociology as such and have no truck with the discipline, even if they investigate social life. Sociologists' work is, indeed, increasingly carried out with implicit or explicit reference to what we will call 'the Studies'. By this, we mean to refer to the congeries of anti-disciplinary investigations, such as Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Governmentality Studies, etc. that specialize in the systematic investigation of the power/discourse connection. The pervasive and perverse influence at the intersection of class, racial and sexual domination on scientific, philosophical and common-sense discourses is, supposedly, demonstrated when absences in the texts are decoded as signs of the presence of power. One of the conspicuous features of the Studies is that they are largely anti-, inter- or trans-disciplinary. Historians, philosophers, literary critics, political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists practise them with or without reference to the sociological tradition. Most of their work derives from so-called 'French Theory' (Cusset, 2005), which was taught on American campuses in the 1970s and 1980s by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard & Co. but on American terms and with a tone curiously unfamiliar in France, where, until yesteryear, social scientists were hardly aware of the Studies.

The Studies are not only more transdisciplinary, they are also more transnational than sociology, which, until very recently, practised 'methodological nationalism' without acknowledging it did. With very few exceptions (most notably Wallerstein and Luhmann), it identified society with the container of the nation-state and conceived of the world society as an extension of their own country. Wary of boundaries, be they national or disciplinary, the Studies deconstruct them and have less difficulty in scaling up and taking a global turn. But up to now, their endeavours have been largely negative and critical. In their search for 'ex-centric' positions from the Global South, they behave like academic backpackers, hopping from one intellectual tradition to another to find an undiscovered critical thinker, say, in Iran (Shariati?), Indonesia (Alatas?) or Peru (Quijano?) who has contested the coloniality of metropolitan knowledge. The time has now come to join intellectual forces to develop a historically sensitive, anthropologically informed comparative history of civilizations from a cosmopolitan standpoint – corresponding to Weber's 'universal history', but without its provincialism.

To these three fragmentations – the double internal fragmentation between theory and empiricism and between rival schools, and the external fragmentation between sociology, history, literary criticism and philosophy – one might add a *fourth division*, which overlaps and strengthens the dissipative tendencies: between the social sciences, on the one hand, and moral, social and political philosophy, on the other. While moral and political philosophy has become more social, dealing with issues such as democracy, justice, equality and identity, sociology has increasingly turned its back on philosophy. The result is what Alexander and Seidman (2001) call a 'downwards shift' in theorizing, a turn away from generalizing and normative reasoning and a shift towards more pragmatic and problem-oriented investigations. As the synthetic movement in social theory started waning and the structure-agency debate became stale and repetitive toward the mid-1990s, moral and political philosophy became not only more inspiring, but also more attuned to developments within society.

To clear the way for investigations that are at the intersection of sociology, the Studies and philosophy, we will quickly review some developments in contemporary moral, social and political philosophy. Following the debate between liberalism and communitarianism of the 1990s, itself a result of the massive international reception of John Rawls's landmark publication in 1971 of *A Theory of Justice*, moral philosophy has sought to move beyond the narrow, formal and procedural framework in which John Rawls's concept of justice as fairness and Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics have locked the normative and ethical thinking for almost fifty years. Be it through a return to Aristotle, Augustine, Spinoza, Hume, Hegel, Nietzsche or Heidegger, philosophers have increasingly explored the ethical questions that Kantian deontology and utilitarian consequentialism had neglected and pushed to the margins: solicitude (Levinas), care (Gilligan), trust (Baier), empathy (Irigaray), hospitality (Derrida), authenticity (Taylor) and recognition (Honneth).<sup>1</sup> The rehabilitation of practical philosophy, the rediscovery of virtues and moral sentiments, the ethical turn within post-structuralism and feminist theory have dislocated the normative emphasis from the basic structure of well-ordered societies to intersubjectivity, alterity and primary sociability (Sayer, 2011).

If moral philosophy encounters micro-sociology, macro-sociology encounters critical theory and social philosophy. Complementing classical theories of modernity with an investigation of the normative foundations of social critique, *social philosophy* critically investigates developmental tendencies of society. It does not hesitate to characterize them as 'social pathologies' when they threaten social integration and jeopardize the social conditions of the personal realization of the 'good life' (Honneth, 2000: 11–69; Fischbach, 2009). Understood as a systematization of the diagnoses of the present (*Zeitdiagnose*) that one finds in the work of Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche or, closer to us, of Arendt, Castoriadis and Habermas, social philosophy not only analyses social developments, but it also evaluates and judges them. Joining thus analysis to diagnosis, social philosophy stands at the intersection of moral and political philosophy.

While contemporary social philosophy remains indebted to the German tradition of critical theory, contemporary *political philosophy* has visibly been much more influenced by French post-structuralism and deconstruction. More radical than critical theory, it weaves post-structuralism and post-Marxism into a heady contentious brew of radical anti-liberalism. Inspired by a leftist interpretation of Heidegger's 'ontological difference', the political was introduced as a foundational moment of politics and society (Marchart, 2007). With the rise of the Global Justice Movement around the turn of the century and the recent return of radical anti-systemic social movements onto the scene of world history, late- and post-Marxist philosophers of the cultural left, like Antonio Negri, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau or Jacques Rancière have seen in the 'newest' social movements in the Middle East (the 'Arab Spring'), Western Europe ('los indignados') and the United States ('Occupy') a rejuvenation of non-representative forms of democracy. Their revolutionary interpretations of the ontology of the present are not only in tune with the *Zeitgeist*; to the extent that their analyses are both relevant and influential, they have also put sociology in the shadow and recast it as an 'old European discipline' that harks back to foundational texts of the nineteenth century to understand the challenges of the twenty-first century.

## Neo-classical social theory

The question is now if all that theoretical effervescence in the social sciences that is largely happening outside of the discipline of sociology – in the Studies as well as in moral, social and political philosophy – though having important repercussions on it, could somehow be considered part of sociology? Is it possible to work towards a new synthesis of social theory, the Studies as well as moral and political philosophy? And, if so, could sociology be at the forefront of the new synthesis? One could say that, from an intellectual point of view, it does not really matter.<sup>2</sup> As long as thought and society move forward, labels are not important. But, for better or for worse, the organized and institutional transmission of knowledge needs labels that allow one to define the curriculum, to monitor pedagogical progress and to formulate criteria of validation. All the official talk about the importance of inter- and transdisciplinary talk should not hide, however, that the sciences, universities and teaching are still largely organized around the same disciplinary lines that were institutionalized along national lines in the nineteenth century (Stichweh, 2000: 103–45).

Another important consideration, of a more strategic and metapolitical nature, is that if the social sciences do not find a unified riposte to the colonization of their territories by economics and rational choice theories, they are bound to lose the ‘science wars’ and are poised to become irrelevant. If economics is so powerful, it is not only because it has been able to combine parsimony (simplicity of its fundamental concepts) with sophistication (the complexity of its mathematical models,), but also because it has succeeded in imposing a standard curriculum universally. From Chicago to Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai to Shanghai, Paris to Dakar, economics is taught in the same way, with the same canonical texts and the same econometric techniques. Among economists one finds a large variety of ethical and political positions. Within the discipline, there is also a rather strong schism between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. But in all universities over the world, the ‘dismal science’ is basically taught and transmitted in uniform fashion. The existence of a strong disciplinary identity explains, at least partly, why its worldwide influence on people’s minds continues almost unabated. The strength of its hegemony can be gauged by the fact that even the economic crisis has not succeeded in denting the dominance of neo-classical theory within economics and of economics within the social sciences. It should be granted, however, that rational choice has made fewer inroads in sociology than in political science and even less in anthropology and history.

From the very beginning, the sociological project has been shaped by its opposition to utilitarianism (Parsons, 1937; Caillé, 1986, 1988, *Revue du MAUSS* since 1982).<sup>3</sup> Unlike economics, which analyses the social order as a spontaneous order – a ‘catalaxy’ (Hayek, 1979: II: 107–32) – that emerges out of the uncoordinated pursuit of private interests, sociology has always foregrounded the normative and ideational elements that make social life possible and that allow the actors to coordinate their actions on the basis of a shared vision of the world. Although sociology does not ignore self-interest and fully acknowledges the role of power (see Weber) and property (see Marx) in social life, it has always emphasized the constitutive role of ideas, values and norms in social life, even when the latter are considered ideological reflexes of antagonistic social relations in society at large or its fields and subfields. To the extent that sociology self-

consciously continues moral philosophy by different means, it does not separate social and moral life (Chaniel, 2011; Vandenberghe, forthcoming). It rather seeks to investigate their relation not only conceptually, but also empirically. Given its differentiation from economics, it stands and falls with its opposition to utilitarianism. For a long time, sociology was able to think of itself as the other of economics, and simultaneously also as its extension, its critique and its *Aufhebung*. If sociology were to fall apart, an entire field of thought – that which refuses the transformation of the world into a vast market – would likewise disappear, condemning us to theoretical, ethical and political powerlessness.

Hence, in order to organize a rationalized transmission of the achievements of modern reflexivity, and to counter the imperialism of economics and its tendency to ‘colonize’ the social and political sciences (Archer and Tritter, 2000), there is a pressing need to find a common denominator among all of the above-mentioned schools and streams of thought. At this point, we would like to advance our main argument and suggest two things (we cannot do more than suggest).

First, as an alternative to neo-classical economics, we plead for the development of ‘neo-classical sociology’ as a common platform for the dialogical synthesis of sociology, the Studies, as well as social, moral and political philosophy. We call it neo-classical sociology, because we believe that the contemporary understanding of sociology is much narrower than what the founders of sociology had in mind.<sup>4</sup> They knew that foundational work borders on the philosophical. Their foundation of a new science and their principled rejection of utilitarianism were inseparable from their appeal for a renewal of society. As Durkheim famously said in his second Preface to *De la division du travail social*: ‘Sociology would not be not worth a single hour’s effort if it had no more than speculative interest’ (Durkheim, 1986: xxxix). We sincerely believe that if we go back to the initial inspiration of sociology, we can perhaps ‘re-found’ the social sciences and reformulate its remit so as to make it more cosmopolitan, ecumenical and inclusive, so inclusive that it can integrate sociology and anthropology, the Studies, and moral, social and political philosophy into a common project. That, we submit, is the task of social theory, which we understand in the broad and inclusive sense as the general theory of the social sciences or, to say the same thing in slightly different words, the theory of societies in general.<sup>5</sup>

More over, and though we realize that the following affirmation may be slightly less consensual, we also would like to suggest that the missing common denominator of the social sciences is to be found in what we and our friends from the MAUSS (*Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales*) call the ‘gift-paradigm’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, thirty years of collective, interdisciplinary reflection on the phenomenon of the gift as a total social fact have convinced us that the concept of social relations one can deduce and extract from Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* (Mauss, 1950) can and should be extended beyond the immediate field of ethnology to all social sciences. From this foundational perspective, Mauss’s discovery of the triple obligation of the gift – ‘to give, to accept and to return the gift’ (Mauss, 1950: 205–14) – appears to be the basis of social life in general. The mechanism of reciprocity, which is the motor of sociability, produces, and continues to produce, society. Without reciprocity, no society; without generosity, neither economics, nor politics or sociology are possible. The focus on the individual and collective capacity to initiate, create and sustain social relations allows us also to move beyond the

impasses of individualism and collectivism, liberalism and socialism, market and state. When the dynamics of reciprocity are fully worked out into a relational, associational and interactionist theory of society, the anthropology of the gift emerges as a fully-fledged 'third paradigm' (Caillé, 2000, 2014) between individualism and holism. We think that it not only offers an alternative to the social sciences, but also to society. As the crucible of society, the political is the continuation of the gift by other means. It is carried forward by non-governmental organizations, civil associations and social movements that seek to uphold the moral economy against both the market and the state. Such associations do not aim to abolish the state or the market; rather, moving beyond the lib/lab formations of social democracy, they contribute to the realization of Mauss's dream of a cooperative or associative socialism.

We have not sufficiently recognized that through its professionalization and specialization, sociology has gradually become very different from what its founders had originally envisaged it. With the exception of Georg Simmel, who developed his formal sociology along narrow lines, all of the founders conceived of sociology as a general science. They did not think of sociology in a narrow sense, but developed it as a general science of society and its subsystems. From the beginning, sociology was thus more than sociology. It was both a specialized discipline (sociology) and a generalizing discourse (social theory); it was, as Habermas (1991: 184) says in a remarkable reflection on Weimar sociology, 'at once discipline and superdiscipline, sociology and theory of society'. The founders envisioned their sociology as a kind of federative metadiscipline that would unify the various social sciences (history, anthropology, sociology, political science, political economy) under a single heading. None of them thought of it as a mere accumulation of field surveys; rather, they devised it as an empirical social, moral and political philosophy that would integrate social and historical research into a systematic presentation and interpretation of the evolution of societies. The ambitions of the inventor of the name, Auguste Comte, were clearly aimed at a 'positive' (scientific and Romantic) philosophy of history that would investigate the empirical conditions of moral order and progress. Was Marx an economist, a sociologist, a historian, an anthropologist or a philosopher? Let us not forget that Max Weber, a lawyer by training, whose first research was in history, had long regarded himself as an economist. Simmel conceived of himself as a philosopher and considered sociology a pastime. For Durkheim, as for his friends and collaborators of *L'Année sociologique*, sociology was clearly intended to unite all the specialized disciplines of the social sciences: ethnology, science of religion, science of education, history, economy, etc. And that, with the clear ambition of giving better answers to the questions raised by moral and political philosophers.

With Comte, we think that it is high time to overcome fragmentation and specialization through further specialization and differentiation. We need to 'transform the study of scientific generalities into one more grand specialty' (Comte, 1949: 57). We need to train and form a new class of social scientists who are interdisciplinary and not narrowly attached to their own discipline, who study the different branches of the social sciences and explore connections and relations between them, in order to find out what they have in common.

Let us assume, then, that within all the disciplines that make up the humanities and the social sciences, there are two slants: a specialized slant, centred on itself and its own



disciplinary problems, and a general slant, open to interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange with the other sciences, disciplines and discourses in its environment. If we represent the divisions in spatial terms of centre and periphery, we would find sociological sociology, anthropological anthropology, political politicalology, etc. at the outer limit and a philosophical sociology, a philosophical anthropology and a philosophical political science at its core. Our suggestion is that general social theory is at the very heart of the social sciences and that it represents a synthesis of anthropological, sociological and political theory.

Contemporary sociology has failed to compensate for its tendency to specialize with a countervailing tendency to generalize. To move forward, we need to go backwards and seek inspiration once again from the classics, real or putative, who identified sociology with a general social science. Not to become Marxologists, Durkheimologists or Weberologists, but to rejuvenate sociology and thereby guarantee its relevance and its future, we need to develop a neo-classical sociology. With Marcel Mauss, but we find similar positions in Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons or Bourdieu, we assume that ‘there are no [separate] social sciences, but [only] one science of societies’ (Mauss, 1969: 51) and we propose to name the general theory of the science of societies ‘social theory’ – a denomination which, ironically, does not exist as such in France.

## Metatheory, social theory, sociological theory

To depict with more precision what we understand by social theory, we will bring in a supplementary distinction between metatheory and sociological theory and position social theory in between both (Vandenberghe, 2009: 290–303). As always, the distinctions are fluid, but what matters here are not the distinctions themselves, but the way they are articulated, integrated and overcome in a general theory of societies that cross-cuts the disciplinary cleavages within the social sciences, as well as between the social sciences, the Studies and philosophy. As in the Indian story of the turtles, theory goes down (and up) all the way. Explicit philosophical visions become metatheoretical presuppositions of social theory, which, in turn, become presuppositions of sociological theory, which, in turn, inform empirical research.<sup>7</sup>

First, *metatheory* is theory about social and sociological theory and, as such, it usually proceeds through commentary and critique of the classics. At its most basic, metatheory consists in a mapping exercise of the general presuppositions and assumptions (*Weltanschauungen*, world hypotheses, paradigms, knowledge interests, pre-judgements, etc.) of social and sociological theory (Alexander, 1982–1983). For teaching purposes, sociologists distinguish different principles of vision and division within the history of sociology and classify them in terms of polarities: individualism vs. holism, action vs. structure, micro vs. macro, idealism vs. materialism, functionalism vs. dialectics, consensus vs. conflict, *Erklären* vs. *Verstehen*, etc. The mapping exercise is not an end in itself, however, but a prolegomenon to theory construction. The aim is to develop a general, synthetic and encompassing social theory that is in continuous dialogue with the sociological tradition, covers all its angles and incorporates its fundamental insights in a coherent framework of interrelated concepts.

Second, while metatheory explores the philosophical (transcendental) presuppositions of the social sciences, *social theory* actually tries to elaborate a systematic view of the social world based on certain metatheoretical positions. As a preamble to the analysis of social life, social theories work out coherent systems of interrelated concepts (such as communicative action, life-world and system; field, habitus and practices or power/knowledge, discourses and practices) that purport to give a single answer to three fundamental questions that any social science has to raise: What is the nature of social action? How is the social order possible? What determines social change? (Joas and Knöbl, 2004: 37–8). The point of social theory consists not only in giving an answer to each of these questions separately, but to answer them all in such a way that the answers are internally consistent and cumulative. When the concepts are well ordered and systematically integrated, they add up and form a general theory of society.

As regards the nature of action, our position is clear: while we distinguish various motives of action, most notably interests and sympathy (along the utilitarianism–anti-utilitarianism axis), creativity and tradition (along the individualism–holism axis), which are irreducible to one another and have to be thought about together to make sense (Caillé, 2009), we strongly reject the interest paradigm that reduces all types of action to one: instrumental-strategic action (i.e. Weber’s *zweckrationale Handlung*). Our position regarding the concept of action entails a definite conception of order. Our defence of the non-rational (symbolic, normative, expressive) dimension of human behaviour necessarily implies a reference to the symbolic order. And as the symbolic order always precedes, predates and conditions agency, our position is necessarily a holistic one. With an important proviso: the emphasis on the political and performative aspects of the gift implies that the symbolic order that precedes action has to be continuously regenerated and reproduced through action. Even more, what distinguishes sociology *qua* sociology and differentiates it from both economics and politics, is precisely its holism and its symbolism. This holism expresses itself paradoxically in the defence of moral individualism. Sociology is anti-utilitarian in principle. It represents a definite choice against Mandeville and Hobbes – a ‘counter-Hobbes’ (*Revue du Mauss*, 2008a) – though via the Marxist and Weberian legacies that stress the material constraints on action, the strategic side of social life is brought back to the fore.

Finally, if social theory is concerned with the systematics of the social sciences, *sociological theory* bears on the historical dynamics of society. Sociology emerges when the social order becomes problematic, both for individuals and collectives, and the automatic reproduction of traditions is no longer guaranteed. At the same time as society becomes conscious of its own existence, it captures the political moment that is constitutive of the social and disrupts its reproduction. As an expression of crisis and transition, sociology comes into being as a critical reflection on the contingency of the social order. Its central theme, from Spencer and Durkheim to Marx and Weber, is and remains modernity – its genesis, structure, development and diffusion as well as its promises, challenges and global transformations. As a kind of reflexive analysis on the historical conditions of emergence (and disappearance?) and of application of the social sciences, sociological theory is more historical and more comparative than social theory. If social theory is synthetic and tries to overcome inherited antinomies (agency, structure and social change; meta, micro and macro) in a systematic fashion, sociological theory is

more resolutely macro and also more diagnostic in its basic approach. Given that it tries to 'capture its own time in concepts' (Hegel), it comes as no surprise that it bears the imprint of its time and is, consequently, more dated. Think about modernization theory of the 1960s, dependency theory of the 1970s, postmodernism of the 1980s, globalization theories of the 1990s and post-colonialism of today.

We consider that it will be easier to reach a consensus on a metatheoretical basis than on a theoretical one. The 'heterodox consensus' will most probably be a normative one. The intellectual alliances between theoretical positions will be of an ethical and political nature. Assuming we can agree on the metatheoretical foundations of the social sciences, we can then try to elaborate a general social theory that offers a coherent framework for the analysis of social action, order and change. On this basis, we can then proceed, in collaboration with the Studies, to the formulation of a historical grand narrative about the emergence, development and global diffusion of modernity that does not remain tied to the nation-state, but takes the world as a single unit of analysis. This analysis of the global present will not only be descriptive, but also normative. It will be cosmopolitan and critical, analytic and diagnostic, propaedeutic and reconstructive.

## Constellations of intersubjectivity and interdependence

To develop a general theory of social change that is no longer indebted to the interest paradigm, we need to ground the social sciences in a normative theory of symbolic action and interaction. Although we recognize that a general social theory also needs to give a macro-sociological account of the systemic and structural dimensions of society (capitalism, the state, the crisis, etc.) and that this presupposes an engagement with the legacy of Marxism, we will focus in the remainder of the article on 'social integration' (as opposed to 'systemic integration') and social change. We have suggested that the social sciences find their common ground in their opposition to utilitarianism, instrumental rationalism and rational choice. Unlike economics, which finds its rationale in the calculus of interests, the social sciences bet, as it were, on symbols and expressions, ideas and ideals, norms and moral sentiments that motivate action, make interaction possible and trigger social change. With its insistence on the sources of sociability and the logics of reciprocity, sociology honours its etymology: it privileges the interactions with the *socius* and investigates the *logos* that animates these interactions, coordinates them and integrates them in society. If we generalize the insights of sociology beyond sociology to all the social sciences, we can circumscribe their common ground and locate it in their opposition to utilitarianism.

Anti-utilitarianism is not a negative doctrine, however, but an eminently positive one. As an explicit alternative and counter to the desolate visions of Man that one finds in Machiavelli, Hobbes and Bourdieu, it is grounded in a philosophical anthropology that underscores the principles of common humanity, sociability and reciprocity. Our positive anthropology, which is based on Marcel Mauss's (1950) classic essay on the gift and considers the human actor as *homo donator reciprocans*, is compatible with different approaches to alterity, intersubjectivity and sociability. We are thinking here in the first place about the whole gamut of theories of dialogue, care and recognition. Like the theory of the gift, which is multiple and contains many strands, those theories refer, in fact,

to complete, loosely articulated and overlapping paradigms. To underscore their inner plurality, we will describe them as constellations within the firmament. While the image of constellations evokes a scattering around a given asterism (dialogue, care, gift and recognition) and a clustering around a major star that catches the eye (Habermas, Tronto, Mauss, Honneth), we would also like to suggest that the constellations can be interconnected and interarticulated. Due to lack of space, we will not explore all the interconnections here, but through a reformulation of Hegelian theories of recognition in terms of Mauss's gift paradigm, we will try to develop a platform that will allow us to integrate sociology and anthropology, moral and political philosophy and the diaspora of the Studies, into a coherent framework for the analysis of contemporary struggles.

Let us start, however, with a quick glance at the sky and compare the constellations. What they all share is an insistence on intersubjectivity, interaction and sociability, or, in short: interdependence. What matters is the in-between, the inter-human, the inter-connection, the relation that is ontologically prior to the elements it interconnects and constitutes as distinctive elements that are what they are in and because of the relation. Moreover, they all bask in a certain atmosphere of benevolence and have a sympathetic aura. None of the constellations contains theories that are monadic (though phenomenological theories of intersubjectivity do not always avoid solipsism). They are all intersubjective and presuppose an opening towards the other and an other-directedness that is directly at odds with egotistical models of the self that consider the other as an immediate threat to the self. It should also be noted that they all concentrate on primary sociability and consider the encounter with the concrete other as the primary scene of ethics. The transitions between the normative and the empirical, the philosophical and the social, are quite fluid. Through an application of ethical principles to concrete practices in social situations that cry for repair and redress, the social and the normative, the descriptive and the diagnostic, are naturally imbricated. As a form of applied ethics, the critical descriptions of concrete situations of injustice (exploitation, humiliation, disrespect) find an easy extension in calls for social politics and public policies at the societal level. Finally, it may be of interest to observe that the constellations come in two versions, a secular (symbolic) one and an epiphanic (hyperbolic) one. The latter is usually indebted to the 'theological turn' within post-Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (Janicaud, 1991) and focuses on something primordial, fused, beyond duality that precedes, founds and transcends ordinary intersubjectivity. Think about the reversal between conversation (Gadamer) and conversion (MacIntyre), communication (Habermas) and communion (Derrida), giving (Mauss) and donation (Marion), care (Tronto) and solicitude (Levinas), recognition (Honneth) and rebirth.<sup>8</sup>

Now that we have considered some 'family resemblances' between the constellations of intersubjectivity, let us look at the inner plurality of each of our four constellations: communication and care, gift and recognition (with the former two privileging consensus, the latter two conflict). The *dialogical constellation* contains a multiplicity of theories of symbolically mediated encounters with the other (Theunissen, 1965). Buber's philosophy of the interhuman, Gadamer's hermeneutics, Jaspers's existential communication, Arendt's concepts of action as *praxis* and *lexis*, Mead's symbolic interactionism, all these dialogical approaches have faded somewhat with the publication of Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981. Yet, the different approaches that have since

seen the light and tried to correct some of Habermas's Enlightenment rationalism with an insistence on the concrete other (Benhabib), recognition (Honneth), solidarity (Brunnhorst), reflexivity (Ferrara), dialogue (Kögler), etc. belong to the dialogical constellation, even if they drift off towards the neighbouring constellations.

Within the *constellation of care*, we do find at least three strands (Van Sevenant, 2001): Theories of 'care of the self' (Foucault, Hadot, W. Schmidt), existential philosophies of 'care in itself' (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida) and the 'care for the other', associated with feminism and the ethics of care (Tronto, Gilligan, Held, Kittay).<sup>9</sup> What all these theories and philosophies of care, solicitude and compassion have in common is a junction between a moral disposition to overcome indifference (care for oneself), to decentre oneself and depersonalize one's relation to the world (care in itself) and to assume responsibility for the suffering of the other (care for the other). Unlike liberal-masculine visions of the self that underscore autonomy, feminist ethics of care value and cultivate relations of interdependence between people.

The emphasis on interconnection and reciprocity is also at the centre of the various theories that make up the *constellation of the gift*, all of which find their inspiration in Marcel Mauss's fabulous essay on the gift.<sup>10</sup> Readers of Mauss will remember that the gift is in no way a simple thing. First, it is not a thing, but a triple process of obligations (to initiate, accept and return the gift) that ties persons and collectives in communities of exchange. Second, it is not simple, but complex. It fuses contradictory motives (obligation and spontaneity, interest and generosity, peace and conflict) into a system of actions and interactions that are at the root of sociability and community (Caillé, 2000, 2009). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the reception of Mauss has been complicated as well, with various interpretations, from Lévi-Strauss to Bourdieu, Bataille to Baudrillard, Derrida to Marion, Sahlins to Strathern, Lefort to Caillé, that are at odds with each other. Where some (like Bourdieu) would only see hypocrisy that masks the tit-for-tat of exchange, others (like Derrida) would go to the other extreme and consider the asymmetric, unilateral, hyperbolic gift with no return possible as the only real gift. Similarly, while some (like Lévi-Strauss) see the gift as a system, others (like Lefort) see it as action. Some (like Ricoeur) identify it as peace, others (like Bataille) as agonism, etc.

The *theory of recognition* has by now sprawled into an academic cottage industry (Guéguen and Malochet, 2012). Philosophers have offered new interpretations of the role of *Anerkennung* in Hegel's writings (from the early *Realphilosophie* to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*), though Fichte, Adam Smith and Rousseau have also been hailed as predecessors. Without going back to the notion of *anagnôrisis* in Aristotle and Sophocles, it is remarkable how various currents in contemporary moral and political philosophy (critical theory with Honneth and Fraser, hermeneutics with Taylor and Ricoeur, deconstruction with J. Butler and J. Tully, psychoanalysis and social psychology with J. Benjamin and Todorov), have been able to latch onto the concept of recognition and make it into a major asterism. The repercussions of Axel Honneth's (1992) work and his debate with Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth, 2003) suggest that the category of recognition (and its negation: invisibility, humiliation, alienation) taps into an unnamed reservoir of diffuse suffering among the population that deserves attention and repair if solidarity is to be maintained.

Although we have framed the theoretical galaxy of constellations with reference to primary sociability, the theories in question do not remain at the level of family, friends and peer groups. They are easily extendable from the circles of 'primary sociability' (*socialité*) that one finds in all societies to the 'secondary sociability' of institutions in modern societies and even to 'tertiary sociability' of the world society (Caillé, 2000). The theories of action and interaction they propose are pitched from the very beginning as theories of social change. Their impetus comes from the idea that societies always find their moral sources in the relations between persons and that institutions of the nation-state and the world society need to be 're-embedded' in the life-world. This idea of a living dialectics between life-world and system, state and societal community, market and civil society is nothing new. One finds it in all classical sociologists and modern political philosophers. It is what animates Durkheim's corporatist interpretation of the state and Marx's appeal to a *Gemeinwesen*. But beyond the appeals to primordial unity, there is also a recognition of the necessity of social struggle, which brings us back to Marx, Weber and Bourdieu.

At the root of social conflict lies a struggle of or for recognition. Post-Marxists like Bourdieu and Honneth understand the strictly economic conflict as a modality and a particular case of a more general struggle for symbolic representation. The class struggle, the struggle for material interests and redistribution of material goods, is a modality and a particular case of considerable importance, and increasingly so today, but a modality and a particular case nonetheless of a struggle to have one's gifts recognized and valued as contributions. We have tried to suggest elsewhere (Caillé, 2007: 185–208) that it is on these grounds that the convergence between the authors of the sociological tradition (Marx, Weber, Durkheim, but also Tocqueville, Parsons and Bourdieu), takes place. What they analyse, each in their own way, even if not expressed in the same terms, is the struggle of the social subjects, individual or collective, to have their value recognized.<sup>11</sup> This question of valuation and valorization is at the heart of the discourses that structure social struggles and contemporary debates, and, of course, of theories of recognition. But it is at the core of all the other theories as well. What theories of care problematize is the non-recognition of the gift of caring *as* a gift. Somehow, care, which aims at abetting human frailty, is made invisible when the subaltern, the women or migrant workers from the Global South give it. Similarly, against elite-centred, official, modernist histories of the anti-colonial struggles, Subaltern Studies want to exhume the history of unrecognized contributions and invisible gifts of the dominated, illiterate masses. Postcolonial Studies seek to bring to light not only what has been extorted from the periphery by the colonial powers by force. It also wants the gifts and contributions of the former colonies to be recognized and valued by the metropolitan centres.

However, these convergences between sociology, moral and political philosophy and the Studies should incite us to go further and ask a question: What do the diverse social groups want to have recognized through their struggles? The answer is not unexpected: they want their human and social value to be recognized. Love, respect, self-esteem (to use the categories proposed by Axel Honneth (1992), following Hegel's suit) are only different aspects of the value attributed to the subject who benefits from recognition. As a result, we see that within the social and human sciences the great dividing line runs between economics, on the one side, and sociology (broadly understood), on the other.

Economics investigates what determines the value of goods and, correlatively, also the value of subjects as either owners or producers of goods endowed with a certain value. Sociology asks – though often without knowing it – what determines the relative value of various social groups, independent of their ability to produce or own goods.

When asked what determines the economic value of goods or merchandise, the economic tradition has provided two main answers: their utility (i.e. their relative scarcity), or the average working time necessary for their production. What determines the value of social groups and individuals? The very language we have used to describe the core issues of the major schools of contemporary thought sufficiently indicates the direction in which we must seek the answer. What social groups in conflict (women, former colonies, subalterns, care providers, etc.) want to have recognized is the value of the gifts they have given (or of what has been taken from them). Let us generalize: the value of individuals and social groups comes from the recognition of the gifts they have actually given or they could potentially give and/or from the relation they maintain to something more primordial and sacred (donation (*Ergebnis/Gegebenheit*), grace (*charisma*) and gratuity that explain why there is something rather than nothing).

## Conclusion

We understand, therefore, that *mutatis mutandis* modern struggles for recognition are contemporary manifestations of the struggles to give – the ‘agonistic’ gift for recognition – as properly exhumed by Marcel Mauss (1950) in his study of archaic societies. We also understand that history, sociology, and anthropology are closely related, because the past informs the present, and the centre informs the periphery. And vice versa. The lesson for sociology is that it must not only develop sociology experts, but also seek to become, as quickly as possible, a cosmopolitan public sociology. Sociology has to become once again a general social science, but this time without provincial blinders. To be faithful to its heritage, it must reconnect organically with philosophy, history, ethnology and economics and draw from it all the institutional consequences for the organization of education and research.

To conclude, we can now characterize the contours of neo-classical sociology as we have sought to develop it in this article. Like its illustrious forebears from Weimar and Paris, neo-classical social theory fuses theory construction and diagnosis of the present (Habermas, 1991). This fusion explains the continuity with other traditions of thought (natural law, political economy, philosophy of history, moral and political philosophy), for whom modernity itself has become a question; its interest in paradoxes, crises and pathologies of social development, as well as in social movements and social change; the unity of sociology and social theory in a general theory of society that gives a coherent answer to the question of social action, order and change; the attempt to develop sociology as a science of society that systematizes reflections on politics and economics, law and culture, ethics and psychology and seeks a dialogue with moral, social and political philosophy, as well as with the Studies; the attempt to outline a sociological theory that is both systematic and historical and that throws light on the ontology of the present; and, finally, the unity of theory and metatheory, not to mention the continuous philosophical, theoretical and methodological self-reflection of all the proposals it puts forward.

## Notes

1. We will return to these issues in the final section of the article where we will propose a rapprochement between neo-Hegelian theories of recognition and a neo-Maussian theory of the gift.
2. Both of the authors are sociologists by training (though Caillé also has a PhD in economics) and social theorists by vocation. Our particular location within the discipline explains, in part, why we privilege neo-classical sociology. Although we call for a transdisciplinary synthesis, we are well aware that our arguments are mainly pitched to sociologists and that our article would probably not be published in journals of anthropology, history, geography or economics, though we hope that it will inspire our colleagues from neighbouring disciplines, and will spur them to take on board our project and write similar articles for slightly different audiences.
3. Technically speaking, we understand by utilitarianism any theory that implicitly or explicitly subscribes to the ‘axiomatic of interest’ (Caillé, 1986: 99–139). For a long view of the utilitarian tradition, from Socrates to Rawls, see Caillé et al. (2001); on the utilitarian tradition, from Bentham to the Mills, see Halévy’s (1995) classical study of philosophical radicalism.
4. We coined the term neo-classical sociology, but we did not invent it (see Eyal et al., 2003). Whereas their neo-classical sociology is post-Marxist and neo-Weberian, ours is post-Marxist and neo-Maussian. Although we welcome the invitation of Eyal and Co. to return to classical sociology to think through the challenge of a ‘world without socialism’ ironically, we fail to see that attractions of irony.
5. For a first exploration of the possibility of a general theory of society, see *Revue du MAUSS* (2004b), partially translated in *European Journal of Social Theory* (2007, 10, 2).
6. The Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences was founded by one of the authors and gathers anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and heterodox economists who have a common interest in reciprocity, who feel inspired by Mauss’s seminal essay on the gift and who publish in the *Revue du MAUSS*. Alain Caillé, the founder of the MAUSS and director of its journal, is also the main theorist of the gift-paradigm. Programmatic and synthetic statements can be found in Caillé, 2000, 2009 and 2015.
7. Let us take an example to make the argument clear: Marxism is unthinkable without Hegel’s objective idealism. In Marx, dialectics (metatheory) undergirds historical materialism (social theory), which informs the theory of the class struggle under capitalism (sociological theory), which orients research on the situation of the working class in Lancashire. In our case, anti-utilitarianism is our philosophical platform (metatheory) on which we build the gift paradigm (social theory), which informs our analysis of the role of associations in contemporary societies (sociological theory). Our argument is that if we can agree on anti-utilitarianism, we can then work towards a loose integration of social theories (the gift, care, recognition, etc.) and propose a theoretically informed analysis and diagnosis of the present. To keep our options open, we develop our position at a higher and therefore more inclusive level of abstraction.
8. Through a Heideggerian spin, which unfortunately only works in French, we can transform recognition (*reconnaissance*) into natality (*co-naissance*), natality into gratitude (*reconnaissance*), gratitude into rebirth (*re-naissance*) with, through and thanks to the other’s love (*re-co-naissance*: being born again with the other).
9. For an exploration of the ethics of care and its relation to the gift paradigm, see *Revue du MAUSS* (2008b).



10. As a specialized journal that attends to a general public, the *Revue du MAUSS* is entirely dedicated to the investigation and discussion of the gift in all its facets and in all disciplines. While each issue focuses on a particular theme or aspect related to the gift, some special issues (1993, no. 1; 1996, no. 8; 2010, no. 36) have been entirely devoted to Mauss's anthropology of the gift.
11. In France, the debate over recognition theory has not been limited to disciples of Honneth (Renault, Voirol, Haber). It has received a major impetus from the MAUSS. See *Revue du MAUSS* (2004a); Caillé (2007); and Caillé and Lazzeri (2009). The contributions in Caillé (2007) deserve a special mention. The debate is not restricted to conceptual issues, but includes empirical research by some of France's major sociologists (Dubet, Thévenot, Dejours, Heinich).

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