



# Sociology as political philosophy: Alain Caillé's anti-utilitarian sociology

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## Abstract

The article presents an overview 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, Karl Polanyi and Pierre Clastres, it shows the centrality of the symbolic constitution of the economy in the development of an intellectual front against rational choice. It also considers how Marcel Mauss's 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, Alain Caillé, Marcel Mauss, the gift, the political, symbolism

Alain Caillé, sociologist, economist and convivialist, 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 (Magnelli, 2022).<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.

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 PhD in economics, but his radical critique of the discipline writes off most of what economists do as mythology, tautology and ideology. He has another PhD in sociology, but it is 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 has 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 will soon discover, and can count on the support of a great many sympathizers.

In this article, I want to present the political sociology of Alain Caillé.<sup>2</sup> It has many affinities with the symbolic approach to the political that *Thesis Eleven* has been promoting. As a historian of ideas, I will reconstruct his trajectory and show 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, Claude Lefort developed a political theory of the symbolic constitution of society. Caillé was his assistant at the University of Caen in 1967–8. 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 and Philippe Chaniel, the current editor of the *Revue du MAUSS*) who dedicated their life to the study and promotion of the gift, recognition, and democracy. While Lefort would subsequently turn away from the social sciences, the MAUSS extended his early reflections on the symbolical (*le symbolique*) and the political (*le politique*) without opposing political philosophy to sociology (Caillé, 2022). Caillé's endeavour can therefore be considered a continuation of Lefort's early project to develop a 'sociology worthy of its name' (Lanza, 2021).

The article proposes an overview of the early work of Alain Caillé's 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 organized around four central ideas that will be deployed in six sections— sociology as the continuation of political philosophy by other means

(Section I), the critique of utilitarian reason (Section II), the symbolic constitution of the economy (Section III), society (Section IV) and politics (Section V) as an alternative approach to utilitarianism (Sections IV and V) and, last but not least, the gift as the symbolic operator of the social synthesis (Section VI). As we proceed, we will discover how Caillé has wedded Marcel Mauss's anthropology of the gift, Claude Lefort's political philosophy and Karl Polanyi's moral economy into a political socio-anthropology of the gift that forms the basis of a powerful critique of utilitarianism as the dominant ideology of our times.

## **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 Chaniel, 2011). The phrase is suggestive, but to understand the full scope of this ambitious project of a 'retotalization' 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 civilizations. It would be animated by a desire to revitalize 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 realize 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' (*Gesellschaftstheorie*) 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 reorganize 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, criticize 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 into 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 historicize 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 until the end, it offers a continuous elaboration of Mauss’s celebrated *Essay on the Gift*. Since its publication in 1923–4 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 modern imaginary: Scientism, utilitarianism, and evolutionism

Alain Caillé has two doctorates, one in economics (1974) and another 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 symbolic from the real. What characterizes 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 symbolic constitution of reality continues to haunt it. The circularity between the constituting and the constituted, the symbolic and the real, the project and its object is inescapable. Access to Being is always mediated, and deferred. Underneath the dualisms, there is 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 that 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 technocracy; 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 generalized desymbolization of the universe is looming, if we may believe Caillé.

Utilitarianism is the philosophy that works with an ‘axiomatization 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 et al., 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 18th 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 formalized by the neo-marginalists (Jevons, Marshall and Walras) and operationalized as a political program by the neoliberals of the Chicago School (Hayek, Mises, and 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 neoliberal economists related to the Mont Pèlerin Society (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009) shows that the analytics of rational choice not only transpose the axiomatics of interest to all the social sciences, universalizing 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, centred on 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 realized). The triumph of economic reason is almost complete in the various domains of theoretical thought and, because of neoliberalism, 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 1980s (Caillé, 1986: 99–116). It is explicit in the methodological individualism of Raymond Boudon (the French

J. Elster) and the strategic theory of organizations of Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (the French equivalent of J. March and H. Simon). In the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, it is euphemized, but all the more insidious. In the name of a sophisticated critique that remains indebted to Marx, it generalizes the axiomatic of interest to all symbolic goods and forms of capital (Caillé, 2004: 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 individualization and commodification, utilitarianism becomes militant in neoliberalism. It produces a market society that transforms the social bond and moulds 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, 2020).

### III 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; 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 13th century onwards and to the development of a self-regulated market from the 17th and 18th 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 subsidize 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 ‘dis-embedding’ 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 organize the livelihoods of their members, not all organize 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 is no free let alone 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 generalized 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 civilizations, territorial chiefdoms and traditional economies, with a state, but without a 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 come 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 economizing 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 organize 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, 2005) 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 globalization of the capitalist economy and digital technology are said to have brought into the world a ‘tertiary sociality’ (Caillé, 2005: 262; 2014: 73–5) 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 universalizes 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 civilization 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 neoliberalism 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.

#### **IV The symbolic 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 compartmentalize 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 1940s 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’ (1978: 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 organizes its human coexistence ('How can we live together?') in a form of life.

At its deepest level, the question of how to organize 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 reconstitution 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 articulate and formulate the principles of its organization, 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 thematize 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 indeterminacy of history is constitutive of democracy.

Unfortunately, Caillé will not retain the phenomenological language of his mentor. Like Lefort, he is, however, still 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 actualized.

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 will see, gift-giving is the continuation of the struggle for recognition by other means, but also a proposition to transform enemies into allies.

## **V Society against the state and the market**

In tribal societies where political power is absent and not concentrated in the hands 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 organization of Amerindian communities in the Amazon, recognized – 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: 303–36; Gauchet, 2005: chs 1, 2). Similarly, if they have no market and no exchange, it is because they 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 practise agriculture and produce a surplus that could be appropriated by a chief, it is because they have organized 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 symbolic 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, 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 contingency, 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 crystallize 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 autopoietic 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 autonomization 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 organize 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 into 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 (Vandenbergh, 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: 221–41) would have it, its ‘reinvention’, modern societies have become conscious of their political and symbolic nature. Democracy is a form of society that is aware of its historicity, conflicts and contingency. As it no longer tries to close the gap between the symbolic 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.

## VI Symbols and gifts

We have 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. Symbolism 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 it represents' (Durkheim, 1960: 315). By giving a material embodiment to the people, it not only represents the people; occasionally, it also energizes the individuals, stirs them up and makes them act in unison. The symbol is not just a sign of the collective; it is 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 symbolic-structuralist revolution of the 1940s in France (Dosse, 1992). Scholars like Bruno Karsenti (1997) and Camille Tarot (1999) have confirmed that symbolism 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 is able to integrate people and things, representations and materialities, structures and agencies into a dynamic totality of signification. Thanks to symbolism, every person and every thing are inserted into 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, ritualize and realize the collective in thoughts, in acts and in concert.

In order to accomplish his paradigmatic turn, Caillé (2000: chs 1, 8) returns once again to the 'Essay' to anchor the symbolical and the political in the gift. His thesis is that symbolism 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 materialization 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 symbolizes the bond and the unity between donors and recipients and contributes to their re-actualization. The relation between people is mediated by material culture that symbolizes 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 will 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 until now, we have tacitly assumed that gift-giving occurs between persons: 'someone gives something to someone else' is the basic formula of the gift (Descombes, 1996: ch. 18; see also Pyyhtinen, 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) recognize 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 generalized cycle of reciprocity that interconnects the generations in a great chain of life.

Caillé (2009: ch. 6; 2019: ch. 14) formalizes the great chain of life and death in a three-dimensional theory of social relations. The relations between ancestors and descendants (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, symbolic and spiritual relations that make society (Caillé and Godbout, 2002: ch. 9). Through generalization 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 general theory of the gift is not a functionalist theory, however, but a dialectical theory of social action. Unlike functionalism, it does not focus in the first place on the stable reproduction of society through socialization, 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 harmonize 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.

## Conclusion: Opening perspectives

In this article, we have investigated the theoretical foundations of the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences. We have 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 characterized 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 'fictitious' and 'imaginary', but real in its consequences. The generalization and universalization of the utilitarian calculus has produced the *homo oeconomicus* as a new type of 'human animal', to quote a well-known passage from Marcel Mauss (1950: 271–2): 'Our Western societies have only recently turned the human being into an "economic animal". The *homo oeconomicus* is not behind us. He is right in front of us. Only recently the human being has become a machine, augmented with a calculator.'

In the good company of Alain Caillé, thanks to him and with him, we have been able to circulate freely 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 the functional differentiation of society into various subsystems there is 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 relativized 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 realize 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 given freely and generously in order to strengthen the interpersonal relations, the symbolic economy of the gift is actualized 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 it seems – it can involve obligation, calculation and competition – the cycle of reciprocity is the unmoved mover that brings people together into a friendly society.

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 symbolize 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 social conflicts always traverse society 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 recognize 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 institutionalized in a social and solidarity economy. It defends a plural economy in which the three organizational principles of hierarchy (states), markets (firms) and networks (associations) can work together to re-embed the economy into society, domesticate neoliberalism 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.

## Notes

1. Since 2021, the *Revue du MAUSS* has had an English extension: *MAUSS International. Anti-Utilitarian Interventions in the Social Sciences* (of which I happen to be one of the editors). It is a digital journal, published by Le bord de l'eau, with one issue per year.
2. This article is the first part of a larger manuscript in which I propose a critical reconstruction of Caillé's whole oeuvre. Here I focus on the influence of Lefort, Polanyi and Clastres on his early work. In the second part, I look at the reception of Marcel Mauss in France, from Lévi-Strauss to Caillé. In the third and last part, I consider some of the extensions of the gift, like recognition and play. Fragments have been published in Vandenberghé (2022).

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