

Marcel Mauss, MAUSS and Maussology: The productive reception of the *Essay on the Gift* in France

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Abstract

Alain Caillé, the founder of the *Mouvement du MAUSS*, presents an influential interpretation of Marcel Mauss's classic *Essay on the Gift* as a foundational text of and for an anti-utilitarian theory of action. This article returns to Mauss's seminal essay and presents the paradigm of the gift by resituating the MAUSSian reading within the French field of Maussology. While the article is largely sympathetic to the anti-utilitarian project, it also develops critiques and theoretical suggestions of its own.

Keywords

Alain Caillé, Marcel Mauss, MAUSS, The gift paradigm

In 1982, Alain Caillé founded the Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences in Paris. In French, the movement is known as the *Mouvement du MAUSS*. The name functions both as a reference to Marcel Mauss and as a clever acronym for the Movement of Anti-Utilitarianism in the Social Sciences.¹ Unlike other schools of thought within French academia, the MAUSS is at the same time an intellectual and a social movement. It is carried by the ideas of Alain Caillé and his fellow travellers in France (Serge Latouche, Edgar Morin, Christian Laval and Chantal Mouffé among others) or abroad (Marshall Sahlins, David Graeber, Keith Hart, Frank Adloff, Peter Wagner, Viviana Zelizer) and carries their ideas to universities, civic associations and social movements. Narrowly, it focuses on producing the *Revue du MAUSS*; more broadly on building a general sociology as a comprehensive alternative to utilitarianism and a bulwark against neoliberalism. Although the MAUSS is an open, plural and friendly society that welcomes critical debates and wide-ranging discussions of all things that are possibly

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related to the gift, it nevertheless has a party line that is set by its founder and an evangelic mission that generalises, extends and actualises the scientific, moral and political conclusions of Mauss's famous *Essay on the Gift* (Mauss, 1950: 143–279). Given its proselytist proclivities, it's no wonder some have considered this self-proclaimed 'school of thought', which continues in its own way the tradition of Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, as a church or a sect; in any case, as an apostolate of generosity to the world. Considering that the French academic field is highly competitive and conflict-ridden, it must be said, however, that as time goes by the anti-utilitarian movement is increasingly perceived as a sympathetic club that keeps the space of communication open for dissident voices. Compared to other 'chapels' and 'schools', the MAUSS is indeed more open and welcoming than its competitors and rivals.

The *Revue du MAUSS*, its organ, is simultaneously a general and specialised journal. Like *Esprit* or *Le Débat* (now defunct), it is a journal that addresses itself to a general public interested in political discussion and intellectual debates. Without institutional backing, to survive it depends on subscriptions and sales of individual issues (in bookstores) or articles (on the Cairn portal). It is also a specialised, scientific journal that publishes articles, essays and opinion pieces that relate, one way or another, to the gift (Magnelli, 2022). Since 2021, it also publishes *MAUSS International. Anti-Utilitarian Interventions in the Social Sciences* as its anglophone extension. All of its issues are thematic and open with a lengthy presentation of the articles by Alain Caillé and Philippe Chanial, his successor. Often, they also contain at least one article and various short book reviews written by Caillé himself. As a result, the journal functions as a powerful echo chamber of the intellectual agenda of the editors. Over the last 40 years, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, heterodox economists and psychoanalysts have published 2000 articles, amounting to more than 16.000 pages, on the most variegated topics (from sacrifice to violence, prisons to schools, sympathy to care, basic income to solidarity economics, symbolism to associative socialism). Together, the 25 issues of the *Bulletin du MAUSS* (1982–1987), which were followed by 15 issues of the *Revue du MAUSS trimestrielle* (1988–1992) and another 64 issues of the *Revue du MAUSS semestrielle* (1993–2024), with an annual supplement in English (since 2021), constitute a unique archive of all things that one can associate with the productive reception (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Marcel Mauss in France.

Initially, the MAUSS found its unity in a critique of utilitarian reason (Caillé, 1988). It was as much indebted to the political philosophy of Claude Lefort, the political economy of Karl Polanyi and the economic anthropology of Marshall Sahlins as to the anthropology of Marcel Mauss. Foregrounding the constitutive force of the symbolic and the primacy of the political, underneath of the functional differentiation of society into various subsystems, Caillé analysed the symbolic constitution of society as a meaningful totality. Before and below the market and the state, but also somehow against them, he uncovered a symbolic economy that is grounded in the gift and weaves persons, things and signs into a living unity. The reference to the life-worlds of archaic communities served as a foil for a critique of the Western myth of reason. Like the Frankfurt School, Caillé's critique of science (positivism), the economy (economicism) and the state (technocratism) directly questioned the ideological foundations of modern civilisation. The inclusion of the symbolical and the political into the constitution of society configured

anti-utilitarianism, but without clearly defining its positions. The opposition to the axiomatics of interests that undergirds rational choice offered a minimal platform – ‘rational action vs. non-rational action’ (Alexander, 1982: ch. 3)–, but left the alternative open. The MAUSS was a broad tent that offered shelter to post-Marxists, post-structuralists, institutionalists, pragmatists and other heterodox strands within the social sciences. It is only at a later stage, from the 1990s onwards, that the critique of anti-utilitarianism would be relayed by a reconstructive theory of the gift that seeks and finds its inspiration in the work of the eponymous master-thinker.

With the primacy of the symbolical over the instrumental, the ‘anti’ of anti-utilitarianism had already silently shifted into an ‘ante’ that announced another world. The passage from a negative to a positive anti-utilitarianism was accomplished with the development of the ‘gift paradigm’ (Caillé, 2000), which insists on the structure of interdependence and the dynamics of reciprocity as the font and origin of all social life. With this decision, the theoretical options were narrowed down. The anthropology of the gift became the obligatory passage point for every alternative. This enriched the discussion of the gift, but it also reduced the openness to other counter currents within the social sciences and made the MAUSS appear as one of the warring schools within a competitive field. This funnelling of critical theory may be explained sociologically as the result of struggles for recognition within French academia. With the recent launch of *MAUSS International* (of which I happen to be one of the co-editors) the movement now goes in the other direction again, opening up its pages to anglophone authors who are attracted to its anti-utilitarian message.

In this article, I will resituate the work of the MAUSS within the French field of Maussology and show how Caillé’s interpretation of the gift constitutes a particular interpretation of the work of Marcel Mauss. While I identify with the anti-utilitarian movement and am sympathetic to Caillé’s approach, my position is not entirely uncritical, however. The article basically moves from Mauss to MAUSS, from Mauss’s essay on the gift and the counter-gift, to Caillé’s paradigm of the gift. First, I will return to the anthropology of Marcel Mauss and present a reconstruction of his *Essay of the Gift*. This reconstruction of the seminal essay is also discussion of its reception in French sociology, anthropology and philosophy. Next, I will replace Caillé’s interpretation of this classic text within the field of French sociology and show how it makes Mauss’s reflections on the gift in archaic society relevant to complex societies. In the conclusion I will evaluate Caillé’s proposal to transform the anthropology of the gift into a general sociology.

Marcel Mauss: The Essay on the Gift

The nephew

Caillé understands and presents his work on the gift as a general sociology with political intent. Against the colonisation of social sciences by rational choice models and the hegemony of neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism in society, he wants to redeploy classical sociology as an anti-utilitarian endeavour. In his reading, classical sociology appears as a systematic, yet ambivalent response to political economy – a form of ‘anti-utilitarian utilitarianism’ (Caillé, 2015: chs. 4–6, see also Laval, 2002). On the one hand,

it completes its scientific project with a demonstration of the autonomy of the social and a historicisation of the axiomatics of interest; on the other hand, it contests its utilitarian premises and affirms that the social order is only possible because of shared symbols, norms and values. While all classical figures of sociology (from Saint-Simon to Durkheim, from Hegel to Marx and from Toqueville to Weber) were centrally concerned with the excavation of the religious, normative and political principles of human co-existence that make society possible, they did not, however, develop of full-fledged theory of the symbolic constitution of society. According to Caillé, only Marcel Mauss did so. It is therefore necessary to return to his seminal work and reconstruct it as a general sociology that provides solid grounding for an anti-utilitarian alternative in the social sciences and society at large.

The promotion of Marcel Mauss as the towering figure of the French School of Sociology is somewhat puzzling. The history of sociology does usually not record Mauss as one of its founding fathers – on a par with Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead or Karl Mannheim, he may be at best ‘a living inspiration’, as the special issue of the *Journal of Classic Sociology* (Hart and James, 2014), dedicated to the man, his works and his politics, suggests. Is Mauss really that significant? Is he not the equivalent of Friedrich Engels for the Durkheimian School? Does it make sense to argue that Mauss is more important than Durkheim, his ‘second father’? Is the displacement of the uncle by the nephew justified? Is Mauss really so much more significant than Paul Fauconnet, Henri Hubert, Francois Simiand, Robert Herz, Maurice Halbwachs or any of the other of Durkheim’s disciples?

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

I will signal his major advances by means of a stenographic indication of four major displacements that undercut some of Durkheim’s binarisms. First of all, he has transformed Durkheim’s ‘social representations’ into ‘symbolic representations’. Durkheim’s sociology of religion did not ignore the power of symbols, of course (see Durkheim, 1960: 293–342), but with Mauss, every sign becomes a flag as it were. Moreover, the symbol is no longer conceived of as a reflection of the social group, but as a sign that actively performs and transforms the group. The symbols that represent the group also contribute to make it real.

Secondly, and related to the first displacement, Mauss has resignified Durkheim’s ‘social facts’ as ‘total social facts’. The anti-psychologism, which Durkheim inherited from August Comte, disappears. The explanation of social facts gives way to the interpretation of meaning and the reconstruction of lived experience. The anthropologist favours an integration of biology, psychology and sociology in a cultural anthropology that connects external facts via symbols to intentional social acts. His recommendation is not to treat social facts as things, but always as complex

compounds of bodies, symbols and acts, some of which have the capacity to move the whole of society (all societies, all its institutions and all its members).

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

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

The ‘Essay’

Marcel Mauss is an armchair anthropologist with encyclopaedic knowledge of peoples and civilisations. In the *Essay on the Gift* (henceforth the ‘Essay’), he compiles the anthropological knowledge on gift-processes, contracts, exchange, reciprocity and solidarity from the five continents and through the ages to uncover, as indicated in the subtitle, the ‘form and reason of exchange in archaic societies’. The ‘Essay’ was published in the first post-World War I volume of *L’Année sociologique*, dated 1923/24, the journal founded by Émile Durkheim (Guyer, 2016). Preceded by an *In memoriam* for the colleagues (12 in all) who had died during the war and followed by a large section of reviews, the text of 157 pages and some 500 footnotes contains an introduction, three chapters, and, oddly, also three conclusions. In the introduction, he states his research question with clarity (though, in the rest of the text he meanders and drifts away to other questions): What is it that obliges one to return a present? Why is it that gifts have to be repaid? In the first two chapters, he presents the ethnographic materials, in the third, he analyses legal issues, and in the conclusion, he returns to the present and draws moral, political and theoretical conclusions from his theorem of the triple obligation.

Before we analyse the text with the intent to extract a system of sorts from it, let us quickly present the two canonical cases that form the basis of his empirical genesis of the norm of reciprocity: the *kula* of the Trobriand islands in Papua New Guinea and the *potlatch* of the Kwakiutl in Northern America. Both are instances of ritual or ceremonial exchange of ‘total prestations’ or ‘total contracts’ in which groups give all kinds of goods (foods, shells, heirlooms), rituals (ceremonies, feasts, dances), persons (women, children and personnel) and services (favours, assistance, military services) to each other in cycles of generalised reciprocity. Gifts provoke counter-gifts and lead to mutual indebtedness that cannot be immediately settled (if it ever can). To explain the obligation to give, Mauss also invokes the *hau*, the force that ties the giver to the receiver, according to the Maori of New Zealand. Together, the three cases form a kind of riddle that answers the question of why people feel obliged to give, accept and return the gift: The *kula* ring

brings in reciprocity, the *potlatch* rivalry and the *hau* the spirit of the gift. It should be noted that the 'Essay' mainly deals with 'ceremonial gifts' of archaic societies and does not really cover the 'charitable gift' of traditional societies or the 'solidarity gift' of modern societies (Hénaff, 2002; Silber, 2007), though they crop up in the (first and second) conclusions of his text. One might even go further, perhaps and say that, through 'Maorisation', by adding a whiff of mysticism to explain reciprocity, Mauss has lifted some aspects of the charitable gift and projected them onto societies that don't have this concept.

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

The second case is the *potlatch*, a festival of competitive giving, analysed by Franz Boas, in which chiefs of different tribes throw a party to honour and challenge each other. The giving is conspicuous (display of the magnificence of the giver), excessive (distribution of furs and other valued property) and agonistic (competitive and antagonistic). The *potlatch* has to be understood in the context of a rivalry between the chiefs who provoke each other to out-give each other in a struggle for recognition that will raise the status of the eventual winner and humiliate the loser. The frenzy may lead to the destruction of goods and proves that economic accumulation is not the end. Paroxysmic giving is an eminently political phenomenon. It has everything to do with power, competition and prestige that mark struggles for recognition. Although Mauss explicitly acknowledges non-agonistic giving, it should be said that in the 'Essay', he only analyses agonistic gift-processes. Even the *kula*, which is apparently more cooperative, does not involve free and pure giving, which is most probably a modern phenomenon (Godbout, 2005), though this is a contentious issue.

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

follows that presenting something to someone is presenting something of one's self' (Mauss, 1950: 161).

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

The text

The interpretations of the 'Essay' are many and various. Interprets often diverge and latch on to different aspects of the text. I work on the hermeneutic assumption that each interpretation of the text reveals a complementary layer of the text and that to fully understand a text one must incorporate the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text in the reading of the text. To indicate the productivity of the reception of the 'Essay', I will put the name of the interprets in square brackets in the text. My reconstruction is indebted to Caillé's (2009: ch. 7, Caillé, 2009: Part 1) interpretation, but is more generous in that it acknowledges that other interprets, most notably Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu and Derrida, have uncovered important dimensions of the gift complex. It is only when the full productivity of the reception is accepted that the interpretations of the text can form a system that discloses the real structure of the gift. In the wake of Caillé, I distinguish three complementary polarities that structure the 'Essay': obligation versus freedom; egoism versus altruism; and peace versus war. Like in a generative grammar, these polar complementarities constitute the gift as a system of paradoxical implications. Following a long epigraph, Mauss opens his research programme with a series of paradoxes, which I will quote at length because they reveal the axes of a donological system:

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

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

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

The opposition between obligation and freedom, which structured Durkheim's (1974: ch. 2) reflections on morality and ethics, indicates that the triple obligation that one finds in universal religions and morality systems needs to be interiorised by the individuals to become a system of triple freedoms. The gift is only a real one if it is spontaneous and free. Otherwise, it is an imposition, an extortion, or, perhaps, part of a contractual exchange that annuls the debt of the receiver and closes the cycle of indebtedness.

Without the interior impulse and the desire to realise the good, the moral fact is an obligation that is forced on the individuals from without, not an act of individual will.

The introduction of freedom into a system of constraints resolves the tension between the causal explanations of structuralism [Lévi-Strauss] and the phenomenological interpretations of subjective meaning [Merleau-Ponty, Lefort]. It is only because the individuals are free that the exchange can be kept going and the system can be reproduced. It also removes once and for all the impression that the human beings studied by anthropologists are mere 'cultural dopes', devoid of freedom, individuality or personality. And yes, of course, *a fortiori*, it is more in line with our modern conceptions of giving, which, unlike the ceremonial gift, is gracious, unilateral and personal (Godbout, 2005). The giver willingly relinquishes the right of return and does not expect a return. The intentionality of a gift without return is what defines it as a free, generous and moral act.

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

The opposition between obligation and freedom is redolent of the one between holism and individualism [Dumont]. In the second quote, the first axis of freedom (Durkheim's opposition between freedom and obligation) is reformulated and transformed into an axis of solidarity (Durkheim's opposition between egoism and altruism). As individualism is associated with economic self-interest, calculation and hypocrisy, the opposition between social obligation and individual freedom morphs into that between egoism and altruism (a term coined by Comte in 1851). Far from denying the utilitarian motive, Mauss suggests that generosity all too often involves 'social deceit', if not outright self-deception. The denegation of interest is strategic [Bourdieu]. As everybody likes to present oneself as virtuous and to show generosity of character, barter is disguised behind the gift. Underneath of the gift-giving, behind the appearances, there's calculation and interest: *do ut des* – one gives to get a return. Mauss is not a cynic, however. The opposition between the altruism of the pure gift [Derrida] and the egoism of self-interest is ours. Archaic societies do not know it. They ignore both the 'gracious gift' without return (notably to strangers (Titmuss, 1970), which is a later development, as they ignore the 'icy water of egotistic calculation' (Marx) that comes with profit-oriented market production.

The opposition of war and peace is as important as the other two. It reconfigures the gift-process as a political operator of peace within a conflict anthropology that foregrounds the struggle between human beings [Lefort, Sahlins]. Like Hobbes, Mauss assumes that conflict and war are always possible. Instead of submission to the State, he introduces the gift to solve the Hobbesian problem of social order. The 'Essay' is indeed, as Sahlins (1972: 169) has observed with perspicacity, 'a kind of social contract for the primitives'. In the state of nature, gift-giving is a proposition of peace. It is a first move

that unarms the enemies and transforms them into friends, or at least, to move away from Carl Schmitt's deadly concept of the political, into allies. Through the exchange of presents, the parties indicate that they are willing to trust each other and to recognise each other as partners and allies in social life. As a continuation of war by other means, the gift is the great treaty that makes society possible. But if the present is not accepted or if it is not properly returned, it is also a reason, as Mauss says, 'for private or public warfare' [Girard].

In the conclusion of his 'Essay', Mauss draws some moral and political lessons for our contemporary societies, which I will summarise in five points. First, he argues that the gift-giving is not a survival of the past. The three obligations and freedoms of the gift are universal. 'This morality is eternal' – and he exclaims: 'We touch the rock' (Mauss, 1950: 203–204). The idea that it is honourable to give, good to receive and right to reciprocate is, remains and will always remain, according to Mauss, a valid moral principle. If one follows the precepts of generosity, one can do no wrong. This perennial wisdom is enshrined in the beautiful Maori proverb: 'Give as much as you take, all shall be very well' (Mauss, 1950: 265).

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

Third, the symbolic economy shows that the utilitarian calculus of bourgeois capitalism that is dominant today is not the only option. In archaic societies, the Big Man hoards wealth, not to accumulate, but to redistribute it and give it away. Notwithstanding his socialist leanings, Mauss does not hide his admiration for the conspicuous expenditures of the aristocrats [Bataille] and the philanthropy of the plutocrats. At one point, he even refers to the rich as 'sort of treasurers of the fellow citizens' (Mauss, 1950: 262).

Fourth, agonistic gifts are not of an economic, but of a political nature. They serve to accumulate prestige, not wealth. They are part of a general struggle for recognition of 'social, one could even say, brutal superiority' (Mauss, 1950: 270).

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

MAUSS and the Real Mauss

Reception of the 'Essay'

The Essay on the Gift is a major text of the twentieth century (Sigaud, 2002). No anthropologist can ignore it; many have made their marks in its wake (Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Annette Weiner, Marshall Sahlins, Maurice Godelier, Marilyn Strathern, Jonathan Parry, Stanley Tambiah, David Graeber). Philosophers, sociologists, historians and psychoanalysts have also interpreted it. Its influence is such that some of its illustrious commentators (Bataille, Baudrillard, Derrida, Girard, Lacan, Ricoeur) are more

famous than Marcel himself. At least three generations of interpreters have followed each other. Not without polemics, many have claimed his mantle to advance their own intellectual projects. Depending on how one organises one's system of interpretation, various lineages of reception can be discerned (Frow, 1997: ch. 3, Adloff and Mau, 2005; Chaniel, 2008; Hénaff, 2012; Moebius, 2006; Papilloud, 2023): the symbolic-structuralist (Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Godelier), the orgiastic-creative (Bataille, Gurvitch, Balandier) and the anti-utilitarian lineages (Caillé/MAUSS). Within the lineages and its heritages, one could further distinguish and oppose a structuralist pole (Lévi-Strauss, Karsenti, Hénaff) to a phenomenological one (Merleau-Ponty, Lefort, Derrida), an agapic pole (Ricoeur, Marion, Derrida) to an agonistic one (Bataille, Lefort, Mouffe) and a utilitarian (Bourdieu, Lordon, F. Weber) to an anti-utilitarian pole (Caillé, Latouche, Godbout).

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

Within the MAUSS itself, the divisions between lineages and poles are refracted, but in different proportions. Some time ago, the agonism got even out of hand and transformed the politics of the gift into a martial art. As the hub and the spoke of the movement, Caillé himself refuses to choose between the various interpretations of the 'Essay', though at times he has difficulties hiding his aversion for structuralist (Lévi-Strauss), neo-Marxist (Bourdieu) and post-structuralist (Derrida) versions that dare to contest the existence of the gift. Thrown out via the front door, their interpretations return, however, via the back door for the simple reason that the system of the gift does not function without symbolism, power or love.

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

Lefort's attempt to reclaim the founder of French ethnology as a conflict anthropologist extends Merleau-Ponty's (1960: ch. 4) dialogical critique of Lévi-Strauss in a polemic that attacks the strong structuralist reading the latter presented in

his programmatic introduction to *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Lévi-Strauss, 1950), a collection of classical texts by Mauss that contains the 'Essay'. Lefort's text is called 'Exchange and the Struggle of Men' (Lefort, 1978: ch. 1). It owes as much to Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as to Kojève's influential reading of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In a replay of the old opposition between Kant and Hegel, it opposes Lévi-Strauss's structuralism to Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity. Lefort charges that Lévi-Strauss has replaced the 'lived experience' of the actors – the experience of love, but also of rivalry and conflict – with a 'thought experience' to which the actors have no access.

The animosity to the structuralist interpretation of Mauss, which one finds in Lefort, who was once the assistant of Merleau-Ponty, and Caillé, who was once the assistant of Lefort, continues in the strident critique of Bourdieu's readings of Mauss (Bourdieu, 2017: 17–47). As is well known, Bourdieu (1981: 135–166,) has criticised Lévi-Strauss for committing the 'scholastic fallacy' in his analysis of gift exchange. By incorporating a phenomenological conception of time, he argued against the synchronicity of structuralism and stressed the importance of timing in returning the gift. Latching on to a statement of Mauss himself, according to which 'in general, society always pays itself with the false money of its dreams' (Mauss, 1950: 119), Bourdieu tends to understand the gift as a hypocritical act by which the actors give themselves a good conscience. In open opposition to this suspicious reading of Mauss, which unmasks the false consciousness that justifies the reproduction of economic and political privileges, Caillé accuses the French sociologist of bad faith, or, more accurately, of utilitarianism (Caillé, 2004: ch. 3, 2019: ch. 2, see also Chaniel, 2011). Instead of a critique of utilitarianism, Bourdieu has allegedly mounted a critique of generosity that uncovers the interests behind the façade of disinterest. By pointing to the interest in appearing disinterested, he has transmuted altruism into egoism, following a classic trope of utilitarian thought that denies the very principles of the gift. Symmetrically, when Derrida (1991) deconstructs Mauss's whole theory of the gift and argues that the only real gift is one without possible return, he also denies the gift. Paradoxically, a gift is only a gift if both the giver and the receiver ignore that there's a gift, because if they acknowledge the gift – Derrida plays here on the double meaning of *reconnaissance* (recognition) as acknowledgement and gratitude – there's a possible return and therefore also debt, calculation and interest. The gift is thus paradoxical, self-destructive, impossible. Caillé (2005: ch. 3) takes his distances from the pure gift. In opposition to the 'an-utilitarianism' of Derrida, he pleads for a more modest conception of the gift without theology, ontology or phenomenology.

While Caillé's critiques of the rival readings of the 'Essay' are not completely devoid of occasional antagonism, his opposition to each of them suggests that one should take them together to see how they complement each other in a subtle understanding of the gift as a complex, multi-faceted total social act that drives the symbolic constitution of society. Countering Lévi-Strauss's formalist reading of the gift as exchange, he advances the importance of symbols over and against signs and codes. He also interprets the symbolical from the point of view of the gift as a representation of the alliances between groups (in traditional societies) and individuals (in modern societies). When Bourdieu reintroduces the position of the actor within Lévi-Strauss' mechanics of exchange and uncovers interests behind generosity, he accuses him of relapsing into utilitarianism, not

to say vulgar Marxism, while passing over his most sophisticated critiques of rational choice as an ahistorical, mechanical, economicist, intellectualist and ideological theory of rational action that wilfully ignores its own social, cultural, economic and political conditions of possibility (Bourdieu, 2000: 11–26 and Bourdieu, 2017; see also Wacquant and Calhoun, 2021 for a solid critique of the ‘Rat’s’). When Derrida purifies gift-giving of the axiomatic of interests and presents the gift of life and death as the highest spiritual accomplishment that every ordinary gift aspires to without ever realising its concept, Caillé brings back symmetry, reciprocity and interests into the game and sets up a typology that includes the excluded on its own terms in a system of the gift.

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

The gift in complex societies

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

The full significance of giving only becomes evident when it is no longer considered as an archaic form of the economy, but as the font and origin of all social, moral and political life. Properly conceived, gift-giving is a dynamic process of symbolic interactions that weaves the groups and individuals of society together, though, occasionally, it also drives them apart. The gift is not a survival of the past in the present. It is more than

folklore – the round in the pub, dinner parties and tipping, Christmas presents and Easter eggs. The triple obligation and freedom of the gift – to give, to accept and to return the gift – is a fundamental of all societies.

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

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

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

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

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

The grammar of action

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

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

While the MAUSS does not deny the importance of material interests, it hierarchically subordinates self-interest to other-directedness, egoism to altruism and war to peace. As moral sentiments of ‘loveness’ (like gratitude, benevolence, sympathy, love, etc., which Caillé regroups under the Derridean concept of *aimance* or loveness) are more

important than gain or greed, the interest in others (*Inter-esse*) precedes and has precedence over self-interest. Similarly, as an expression of modern values, it hierarchically subordinates obligations to freedom, and duties to rights. The social obligations are confirmed at the same time as they are tempered by freedoms that transform the old systems of morality in a personal ethics that is community-oriented. The struggle of life is transcended, sublimated and incorporated in a struggle for recognition, which is itself, thanks to the moral sentiments, directed towards more civilised and pacified modes of human coexistence.

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

As there's no absolute transcendence that controls the system from without, the order of priority cannot be determined a priori once and for all (for all individuals, communities and societies). The poles are antagonistic to, and in tension with, each other, yet the contradictions cannot be overcome in the *Aufhebung* of a dialectical synthesis either. As contradictory logics clash with each other, they become complementary like yin and yang without ever losing their antagonism. Utilitarianism and symbolism, ritualism and creativity, war and peace, life and death slide over into each other and become reversible and, hence, *indécidable*. The polarities represent extremes that oppose, touch, complement and feed on each other in a dynamic process of symbolical constitution that interweaves persons and things, structures and acts, conflict and consensus in a comprehensive system of social relations. In their opposition, the poles sustain each other and keep the process going. Mutually implicated, they balance each other out. If one absolutises one pole, one is bound to encounter the opposite pole as complement or, as Derrida would have it, as supplement. If one thinks through the logic of self-interest till the limit, one discovers the emptiness of the self and the necessity to open up to the other; if one thinks through love till the limit, one will detect the danger of self-sacrifice to the other, etc. If one goes over the limit, like Bataille, the *agôn* of the offering will turn into the agony of war, the quest for *agapè* into communion, the pursuit of interests into pleonexy and of freedom into anarchy.

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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Note

1. Please note that I use small caps (Mauss/Maussian) to refer to the person Marcel Mauss and big caps (MAUSS/MAUSSian) to refer to the movement. In the text, Caillé and MAUSS can be interchanged without loss of comprehension.

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