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Gifts of Cooperation, Mauss and Pragmatism

Frank Adloff



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This book focuses on the contribution of Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) to social theory and a theory of cooperation. It shows that Mauss's essay 'The Gift' (1925) can be seen as a classic of a pragmatist, interactionist and anti-utilitarian sociology. It critiques the dichotomy of self-interest and normatively orientated action that forms the basis of sociology. This conceptual dichotomization has caused forms of social interaction (that cannot be localized either on the side of self-interest or on that of morality) to be overlooked or taken little notice of. The book argues that it is the logic of the gift that underlies and structures all forms of interaction, from the social micro to the macro level. It demonstrates that in modern societies agonistic and non-agonistic gifts form their own orders of interaction.

This book uniquely establishes the paradigm of the gift as the basis for a theory of interaction as well as a normative democratic theory. It will be of great interest to researchers and postgraduates in social theory, cultural theory, political sociology and global cooperation, anthropology, philosophy and politics.

Frank Adloff is Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Sociology, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, and Alumni Senior Fellow of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research, Duisburg, Germany.

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'Frank Adloff's book comes as a reminder as well as an eye-opener. It reminds us not to neglect accomplishments of sociological theory of the 19th and 20th century sometimes forgotten under the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist theories. [...] Let us hope that this book will not only impress the academic community but also readers in the "real world" of politics on a national and global scale.' – *Claus Leggewie, Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen (KWI), Germany*

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'This book goes far beyond what its title indicates. By bringing together the Maussian legacy and the pragmatist tradition it paves the way to a long expected and a decisive breakthrough in social theory. Enfin!' – *Alain Caillé, University Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, France*

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Foreword

Frank Adloff's book comes as a reminder as well as an eye-opener. It reminds us not to neglect accomplishments of sociological theory of the nineteenth and twentieth century sometimes forgotten under the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist theories. Adloff's work refers brilliantly to one of the most outstanding thinkers, the French ethnographer and sociologist Marcel Mauss, and to the theorem of the gift. Gift exchange addresses non-utilitarian social relationships, interaction, and reciprocity between groups and communities of individuals. The insight was formulated in the 1920s, that is in the aftermath of World War I when nationalistic orgies of violence had destroyed the relations between European nation-states and had intoxicated international cooperation. Mauss argued on the basis of ethnological field studies of people whose living conditions have since radically changed in the course of economic and cultural globalization. But still, Adloff reminds us, 'the gift' can be employed effectively to describe and explain current cooperation relationships, too, and it could even be used to overcome barriers to cooperation nowadays.

At the same time this reference to classical sociological literature builds the bridge to the problems of our times – the reconstruction of cooperation under the auspices of globalization and planetary problems like climate change, uncontrolled financial markets and the imminent spread of global risks. What we need then is a genuine sociological theory of cooperation. In today's knowledge systems and disciplines, opportunities for cooperation are generally determined by economic factors (as an expression of individual utility maximization) or psychological factors (with regard to positive or negative emotional disposition). On the one hand, they revolve around 'interests', which, in the best-case scenario, can be pooled to generate shared benefits and the moods that contribute thereto or detract therefrom. On the other hand, from a natural sciences perspective predispositions come into play that give varying impressions of how suited to cooperation individuals are.

Adloff offers a genuine social-sciences and cultural-studies approach within an interdisciplinary cooperation research. He provides a plausible explanation of social interaction from a sociological angle, that is, from the perspective of a person's '*social* nature'. Cooperative relationships are, after all, based not only on matching interests, tit for tat, shared expectations of benefits, and rigid mutual

obligations of *homo economicus*. Adloff can empirically and normatively demonstrate the *intrinsic* value of cooperation as such, a value that is based on empathy and emerges from itself in the process of current interaction, often unintentionally or occasionally counter-intentionally.

Adloff's work started at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research, a Käte Hamburger Kolleg whose destination is to create free space for new, innovative thoughts. Adloff spent some months at our Kolleg and used it in an exemplary way to contribute to our common goal – to demonstrate that in the near breakdown (again!) of international relations there is a normative and practical basis for renewed global cooperation. Let us hope that this book will not only impress the academic community but also readers in the 'real world' of politics on a national and global scale.

Professor Dr Claus Leggewie is Director of the
Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI Essen)
and Co-Director of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for
Global Cooperation Research (Duisburg)

Preface

This book is guided by a simple thought: people give each other a wide variety of things. They help each other, listen to each other; they give each other objects, attention, recognition, and encouragement. Beyond these everyday actions, there are also greater gifts: people forgive each other, or perhaps they give something unusual and unexpected in the form of extraordinary help. Both forms of giving are constitutive of society, for without gifts no society can exist. Yet almost all social theories have woefully neglected this dimension of human action. Gifts are either ignored or explained away. Typically, gifts are accounted for in two ways: either they are reduced to the fact that people do what norms expect of them; or they are attributed to motives of self-interest. This book is directed at both perspectives. It aims to offer an alternative at the level of social and action theory, which puts our inclination to give at the centre of social activity. There is a human tendency to the gift that cannot be explained in a normativistic and utilitarian manner – gifts embody moments of surplus and unconditionality, which are constitutive for the creation of sociality. Thus, at the base of the social are non-equivalences and asymmetries, because giving is not reducible to the exchange of equivalent values. On the contrary: even exchange is based on the fact that we are able to give without directly receiving or taking something for it. There is a gap between giving and responding, which is in part barely visible, but nonetheless very central.

While philosophers have tried to make this gap visible, it has been widely misunderstood in sociology. In this regard, the most important contribution to the debate – namely the essay ‘The Gift’ by Marcel Mauss from 1925 – already conceptualizes this gap. However, two strategies have repeatedly overshadowed it. The first is the above-mentioned strategy of interpreting giving and responding in a utilitarian manner. Here, it is not the tendency to give that is made the starting point of the theory (as this book proposes), but the (allegedly natural) inclination to take or to withhold. Moreover, in sociology the focus has been on the phenomenon of reciprocity. Thereby, one also certainly follows Mauss, who speaks of a triad of giving, receiving, and responding. Anyone interested in reciprocity, asks how the response comes into being. Yet, the question that remains hidden is why something is given at all. Simmel speaks here of the problem of the first gift, and this problem (or also the problem of the second first gift, the third first gift,

etc.) is central to my deliberations. Therefore, a double warning here at the beginning: this book offers no dedicated analysis of utilitarian theories. This would have been beyond the scope of this work and it does not fall within my primary interest; I am concerned with the positive construction of a non-utilitarian and pragmatist theory of giving and cooperation – and not a further criticism of utilitarianism. Second, the book does not revolve primarily around the issue of reciprocity. Social forms and functions of reciprocity have already been widely described in sociology, anthropology, and economics. I begin a step earlier and believe that the gift precedes reciprocity and represents the basis for the latter.

Part I presents the state of debates on these issues, whereby the already mentioned normativistic and utilitarian interpretations of gift and reciprocity are differentiated. Mauss's essay is reconstructed in its main points and related to the social theory of his teacher and uncle Émile Durkheim. Then with reference to philosophers such as Derrida, Hénaff, and Ricoeur, and with the gift paradigm of the sociologist Alain Caillé, elements of unconditionality and asymmetry as constituents of the gift are worked out. Thus, a post-classical social theory of the gift is targeted, in which cooperation – under the condition that there are no shared values and norms in situations of foreignness – quasi traces back to itself.

Part II can be regarded as a long intellectual insertion. The focus here is on exploring the anthropological foundations of the gift. Based on the classical pragmatism of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, a model of human action is designed, that a) breaks with utilitarianism, b) targets the conquest of subject–object dualism, c) integrates affects and affective valuations into the action model, and d) addresses the problem of intersubjectivity and empathy in a productive way, and ultimately draws conclusions for normative democratic theory from the human tendency for cooperation. If one brings pragmatism together with current evolutionary research results, a theory of *homo donator* can develop, which also exhibits radically democratic features in the normative sense.

These anthropological and pragmatist considerations are raised again at the sociological level in **Part III**. First and foremost, interactions are in the foreground: what kinds of gift are there? How does the game of the gift come into existence? What motivates giving? Then the question arises about the location of the gift. Gifts are reconstructed as a ubiquitous background mechanism, which enables social order in the rear of language – namely at both the micro- and the macrolevel. Finally, there is a discussion about the extent to which the gift can represent a counterpoint to the exchange of goods, the commodification of social relations, the impersonal and independent use of money, and instrumental action. The non-equivalence of the gift, which also always carries elements of the giver's identity and a strong affective valuation in itself (Mauss speaks of *mana*), can actually be contrasted with these dimensions. The gift is the condition of possibility also of equivalent exchange and instrumentality; but when the logic of gifts is increasingly culturally displaced and denied – the fear articulated here – it is eventually no longer able to provide an antidote.

The last part of the book (**Part IV**) is about making sense of the social theories of the gift represented here more strongly in some fields of application, both

empirically as well as normatively: in the field of (alternative) economy, in civil society and philanthropy, and finally in the normatively orientated project of convivialism as a new social philosophy of interdependence. Convivialism can be regarded as a translation of the gift paradigm into a social and political philosophy of living together.

Both the gift paradigm as well as convivialism have been largely driven by the aforementioned Alain Caillé. This book owes very much to him. My thanks go to Alain Caillé for the intellectual, political, and personal enrichment of my self-conception. His suggestions go so far, that a sense of being an epigone occasionally came over me when writing. Claus Leggewie also deserves special thanks – not only because he invited me to the Centre for Global Cooperation Research in Duisburg and supported convivialism, but also because he suggested from the beginning, that I should write a book about the gift. All of the members of the Centre are to be thanked for their productive cooperation and support – in particular, I would like to recognize my colleagues Volker Heins and Christine Unrau. In addition, thanks to participants of the Essen master class ‘Gifts of Cooperation’ as well as my colleagues and students at the University of Erlangen, with whom I was able to discuss key aspects of the topic. I would especially like to mention the contribution of Inez Templeton to the successful outcome of this book: she translated it almost entirely from German into English with aplomb – my heartfelt thanks. Each work has its price: thus, my wife and my daughter had to put up with many hours in which I was either unavailable, mentally absent, or nervously tense. I hope that the book was worth it – thank you for your patience with me.

This book was completed in November 2015, thus in the days when the attacks by the so-called Islamic State shocked France and the rest of Europe. Nonetheless, the book takes the view that we should find the ways and means to realize conviviality, both within societies and transnationally. The analytical and normative ideal of this book consists in the belief that people want to give something – and we should recognize all people in their ability to give something.

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Part I

Marcel Mauss and the foundations of a theory of gift-giving

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1 A dichotomy in action theory

Since the end of the Cold War, Western societies have been confronted with new social tensions, a furthering of social inequalities, processes of economic globalization, a crisis of financial capitalism, and a crisis of the welfare state. More and more citizens and social scientists fear that the social and moral basis for the functioning of democratic society and community is diminishing. What most social scientists are looking for nowadays is a new anchor for democracy in the habits and attitudes of the people, a counterbalance to the capitalist logic of commodity value. What these approaches share is the view that there should be an alternative principle on which society rests, which differs from market transactions (exchange) and state bureaucracy (force). Some want to nurture values and norms by strengthening communities (see Etzioni 1988, 1997). Others propose voluntary action and associations as a necessary underpinning of democracy (see Putnam 2000). A third group promotes strengthening democracy through deliberative procedures or a universalistic politics of justice or recognition (see Elster 1998).

These examples are simply meant to show that there is a search for a principle beyond maximizing utility in markets and hierarchic coordination via state institutions. This alternative realm is depicted differently depending on the theoretical approach (the concept of civil society is often mentioned here). But what all of these approaches have in common is a theoretical dichotomy with regard to the foundation of actions. All assume a clear-cut distinction between actions based on utilitarian calculation and selfishness on the one hand, and actions that rest on adherence to values and norms on the other. Thus in Western philosophy and the social sciences, there is a strong binary opposition between morality and value commitments on one side, and egoism on the other. The same is true for the Western religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, we find within economics and rational choice theories, the promotion of a hyper-individualistic paradigm of choice, utility, and market transactions. Yet, the history of the social sciences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can also be read as the attempt to analyse the conditions for establishing and sustaining social commitments, norms, and moral obligations against individualizing and socially destructive processes of economic modernization.

Nevertheless, this deeply rooted dichotomy between utilitarian and normative or value-laden actions has to be criticized on the level of action theory. My thesis is that this dichotomy is itself a product of our misled reflection on modernity, which caused us to overlook the realm of actions that do not fit into this dichotomy – such as creativity, freedom, spontaneity, love, and care – and cannot be traced back to utilitarianism or normative reasoning. A long-neglected paradigm of action theory, which acknowledges actions that can be reduced neither to the utilitarian nor to the normative, can be found in Marcel Mauss's 1925 essay 'The Gift'. In the essay, an approach can be found that hints at actions that are simultaneously self-interested *and* disinterested, voluntary *and* obligatory. The mistake of modern sociology and philosophy was to suppose that every action is either utilitarian or normatively orientated. Even in modern society, however, actions cannot be reduced to one of these approaches, but either explicitly follow a logic of gift-giving or are accompanied by such a logic.

The dichotomy between rational utilitarian action and normatively orientated action existed long before the establishment of sociology as a discipline around 1900. In Hobbes (2010 [1651]), we find one of the most influential conceptions of the utilitarian dilemma. In the state of nature, where everyone fights against everyone, no peaceful solution is at hand because everyone relies on his or her own power. According to Hobbes's famous line of reasoning, peace is only possible when all citizens surrender their individual force and become subject to the state. Another, more optimistic version of the utilitarian strand of thinking is Adam Smith's (2008 [1776]) famous notion of the 'invisible hand' of the market, which ensures that the pursuit of individual interests results in the common good. Orientation to the public good no longer seems necessary, because the public good will result from an aggregation of individual actions. Thus, the tension between private and common interests was by definition seen as untenable.

Normative approaches, such as Rousseau's (1987 [1762]) theory of the social contract, contradict both the state and the market-orientated types of utilitarian thinking. Via public virtues, individual interests have to be transformed into the *volonté générale*, which is more than the aggregation of individual wills. Only supra-individual norms and values can guarantee the functioning of a republic. Like Rousseau, the founding father of French sociology – Émile Durkheim – relied heavily on Montesquieu in his thinking, which touches on the question of what kind of morality we could expect to emerge in a modern society. Durkheim (1984 [1893]) witnessed the destruction of traditional social relations and traditional morality, which he termed 'mechanical solidarity'. He thought this would be followed by 'organic solidarity', which is closely related to the societal division of labour. Society is no longer integrated through the adherence of individuals to a collective consciousness, but through mutual dependence. In his sociology of religion, this 'cold' concept of solidarity was later accompanied by a 'hot' concept of the genesis of morality, which Durkheim (2008 [1912]) based on the experience of so-called collective effervescence. This term depicts rituals in physical co-presence, where people feel energized and bound to group values. A similar idea with regard to extraordinary experiences can be found in Max Weber's

concept of charisma (Weber 1972: 654–687; Shils 1972; Joas 2000). Weber's and Durkheim's hot ritualistic concepts of creating social bonds and values are still discussed in sociology, but show some severe theoretical problems.¹

Still paradigmatic for sociological thinking on norms and values is Talcott Parsons's (1968) reinterpretation of the sociological classics. In his view, social action and social order cannot be explained by individualistic and utilitarian action theory. Human actors orientate themselves towards norms and values, and this is the only way to overcome the Hobbesian problem of how social order is possible. Individuals are always socialized into a social realm of norms and values, whereas in the utilitarian mode of action no stable social order would be possible. Norms and values are ends in themselves and are not subject to individual calculations. The utilitarian model was accepted in principle, because it was seen as suitable for explaining economic actions. But sociologists were looking for the domain where non-rational normative action was sustained, and for them that was obviously outside the economy.²

As Donald Levine succinctly describes, in these sociological and philosophical writings on the normative – especially the French tradition of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Durkheim – they:

believed that social forces were needed to turn the human animal into a moral creature, but they trusted properly socialized actors to conduct themselves in a moral manner, enjoy the blessings of social solidarity, and be responsive to leaders who embodied their common ideals.

(1995: 233)

This approach of socializing and educating asocial individuals can also be found in Parsons, Habermas, Etzioni, and many others.

Conventional sociological wisdom says that with the development of modern society, we have witnessed a differentiation between self-interest and normative or altruistic action. The 'ideology of the pure gift' with no selfish strings attached is the result of this process. It is said, however, that these aspects were interwoven in 'archaic societies'. The current hiatus leads to the predominance of utilitarian thinking on the one hand, and a misunderstanding of the gift as a pure gift on the other. For Bourdieu, for example, the gift would have to rest on the total absence of calculation, so that if there is no perfect gift there is no gift at all. The same is true for Derrida: if he conceives of the gift as something that necessarily stands against returns and reciprocity, there is no gift at all. For Derrida, the gift should not appear to be a gift: it is more like an abstract *es gibt* than something bound to concrete persons engaged in gift-giving. Thus, both authors follow the conventional wisdom of modernity that there is a dichotomy between actions and motives: the ideology of disinterested gifts emerges parallel to an ideology of a purely interested exchange; both are modern inventions (Parry 1986). At the same time, Bourdieu and Derrida try to show that a pure gift is not possible: this means that in the end, only utilitarian calculation seems to be possible and sustainable. Since there seems to be no such thing as a free lunch, every sort of benevolence, care, or gift has