

## THEORY AND RESEARCH ON SOCIAL RELATIONS

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### Gift and the Coefficient of Sociability Relational Sociology and the Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences\*

*Abstract:* At the beginning of the 1980s, Pierpaolo Donati initiated in Italy the relational turn in sociology, while in France Alain Caillé stipulated the anti-utilitarian movement in social sciences. The acronym MAUSS (from *Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales*) simultaneously refers to the surname of Marcel Mauss, author of the pioneering work on the gift—*Essai sur le don*. This movement forms and spreads a new gift paradigm. The notion of the gift has shifted from a specific phenomenon researched in archaic societies towards a basic category for theorizing social order and taking a central position in research on modern transformations. The relational paradigm also focuses on the gift as a crucial aspect of social relations, and on its importance for the civil society. The article traces and discusses various interpretations of the concept of gift, along with the influence of the anti-utilitarian movement and the gift paradigm on relational sociology.

*Keywords:* anti-utilitarian movement, gift, relational sociology, symbolism, Marcel Mauss

#### Reflecting on the Gift

For some decades, scholars have been making efforts to place the phenomenon of gift-giving back in the center of research on cultural and social transformations and on the very essence of humanity. I am referring here primarily to the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences, initiated by Alain Caillé, and the Italian relational turn initiated by Pierpaolo Donati in the 1980s. It is no accident that the acronym for the name of the anti-utilitarian movement is MAUSS, since an essay on the gift written by Marcel Mauss, who belonged to the circle of Émile Durkheim, is considered the founding text. This movement, initiated in Paris, aims to spread a new gift paradigm, but also to once again add value to French sociology, in line with the achievements of the *L'Année Sociologiques* circle. Mauss, who has hitherto remained a background figure in the history of sociology and anthropology, is now being placed in a central role. Although he did not write any systematic work, his discovery of the gift, along with sowing the seeds of criticism towards Durkheim's sociologism (the collectivist distortion of the concept of social fact) suffice in Caillé's interpretation to feed

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the new movement, which is simultaneously intellectual, political and ethical. The “dogmatism of egoism,” i.e. the egoism of rationality in social theories, built upon the premise of instrumental, utilitarian and functionalist rationality, is contrasted here with the altruistic dimension of sociability.

I will refrain here from answering whether Mauss really deserves a spot in the pantheon of eminent sociologists, and if so, why (Caillé 1996: 182). Instead, I will focus on the interpretation of the obligation to give presented by Caillé and by Jacques T. Godbout, the coryphaei of MAUSS<sup>1</sup> (*Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales*), a movement focused around its own journal, *La Revue du MAUSS*.

I will be particularly interested in the symbolic and interactional nature of gift-giving discovered by Mauss, and thus also in another question: how the discovery of such symbolism helped overcome Durkheim’s sociology (Caillé 1996: 185), considering to what extent symbolism became the central point of the way of thinking about society for Durkheim himself. As the possibility of returning *au vrai Mauss* (Caillé 1996: 185) seems very doubtful, I treat the interpretations presented by Caillé more like his own concept of the gift. This approach is critical in regard to the concept of Claude Lévi-Strauss (a student of Mauss), who reduces the phenomenon of gift-giving to exchange.

Here, the gift, or *l’esprit de la chose donnée*, consists of three separate obligations: giving, receiving, and giving back. In this concept, the phenomenon of the gift as a social fact is a normative fact and the universal basis of morality. Freedom of giving and spontaneity of giving go hand in hand with the moral obligation that this is what giving should always look like. The question appears here whether the gift is a phenomenon that transcends Durkheim’s concept of the social fact. After all, the social fact is normative as well. It is, however, defined by social coercion that is external in regard to the individual (Durkheim 1966: 1–13).

Assuming that Mauss really managed to free himself from the dichotomous divisions on which Durkheim’s thinking was based (e.g. the dichotomies of the sacred and profane, sociology and psychology, normality and pathology), I focus upon overcoming the dichotomy between the individual and society by introducing a relational phenomenon. The gift is a social phenomenon that makes it possible to solve the aporias of holism and individualism. We are dealing with a model of relations and social action that is simultaneously free and obligatory; selfless, but expressing interest. If no dimension of freedom existed, we would be dealing with a ritual. The act of giving is socially constructed, and although it requires individual initiative, it is simultaneously limited by obligations that specify “what” can be given, “when” and “to whom” (Caillé 1996: 198). With its four dimensions: obligation and spontaneity (freedom), interest and selflessness (pleasure), the gift reflects the four dimensions of social action in general.<sup>2</sup>

The model of social action based on the above-mentioned coordinates derived from the characteristics of the gift phenomenon is certainly an anti-utilitarian one. If the gift

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<sup>1</sup> The journal “La Revue du MAUSS” was founded in 1981. It became a center of the interdisciplinary activities of sociologists, anthropologists, economists and representatives of other social sciences, who attempted to develop a new paradigm for the social sciences. Their starting point was criticism of the rational action theory (RAT) as a reductionist model of human action (and instrumental rationality) (Caillé 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Caillé notes the analogy with the four proper goals of human life in Hinduism: *kama, artha, dharma, moksha* (Caillé 1996: 219).

is treated as a paradigmatic social phenomenon that shows the nature of sociability, this proves that social facts cannot be treated as “things,” i.e. in accordance with Durkheim’s methodological rules. In the perspective attributed to Mauss, social facts should be treated as symbols (Caillé 1996: 188). However, at this point it is necessary to explain the nature of Mauss’s supposed scientific revolution as presented by the MAUSS movement, since Durkheim himself presented society as a reality based upon a symbolic order.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Durkheim, who associated symbolism with the sphere of collective consciousness (i.e. the sphere of collective beliefs, ideas, sentiments), Mauss dealt with the symbolic nature of social relations. The non-utilitarian and supra-functional nature of the gift is expressed in its symbolic and relational dimensions. If giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts all possess a symbolic dimension, then symbolism is no longer something external and coercive; it becomes primarily an expression of freedom and selflessness. Such a notion of the gift comes close to the process of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionism in its many variants also contested, in its own way, the model of *homo oeconomicus*, as well as the impact of utilitarianism in sociology and in the social sciences (Hałas 1991). The phenomenon of gift-giving may be assessed as a conversation of meaningful gestures and symbols (Mead 1981), wherein identities are established and confirmed. However, a symbolic gift carries more than just a certain order of meanings. It also contains a moral and simultaneously normative component consisting of the tripartite obligation: give, receive, reciprocate. This obligation assumes trust and loyalty. Caillé notes that symbolic interactionism (particularly in those variants that take into account the structures of social networks) also represents that which he calls the gift paradigm, rooted in Mauss’s thought (Caillé 1996: 202).

The original form of the gift phenomenon described by Mauss is an agonistic phenomenon wherein rivalry is present, even if it is only rivalry in generosity. Thus, the semantics of the gift discovered through ethnographic studies of primitive societies becomes stripped of the content that Christianity has shaped for decades with its semantics of charity (Caillé 2000: 261–262). If we call wounds, blows, death or revenge a gift, this means forsaking the normative value of a gift as something that overcomes hostility. The gift paradigm proclaimed by the MAUSS movement would be indefensible if it relegated conflict to a marginal position in social life. Hence the distance towards the concept that associates giving solely with charity.

Underscoring the ambivalences of gift semantics, let us state clearly that this phenomenon interests us primarily from the perspective of non-antagonistic sociability: confirming the value, identity and dignity of those who participate in symbolic exchange or symbolic interaction. Modern contemporary relational sociology emphasizes this as well (Donati 2003).

Bearing in mind the oppositions introduced in the model of non-utilitarian motives of social action, one should take a look at the dimension of self-interest/selflessness, also characterized by the contrast between interest and pleasure, presented in Caillé’s best-known work on the “third paradigm.” It is the opposition between one’s own interest and interest in another person, called *l’aimance*. The semantics of this model (freedom/obligation,

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<sup>3</sup> “Ainsi, la vie sociale, sous tous ses aspects et à tous les moments de son histoire, n’est possible que grâce à un vaste symbolism” (Durkheim 1912: 314).

*l'aimance*/self-interest) is irrevocably rooted in history and culture, although this certainly doesn't exclude the universalization of these notions, which is actually taking place.

The anti-utilitarian movement promotes "thinking in terms of the gift," but what does this actually mean? First and foremost, MAUSS follows a route that makes it possible to avoid the one-sidedness of individualism on the one hand, and holism on the other. This has been the epistemological goal of many modern social and sociological theories. It is also the route indicated by advocates of "thinking in terms of relations," i.e., the relational paradigm. More significant and more interesting for us is how to overcome the antithesis between 'myself' and 'the other', and gift-giving makes this possible. It remains questionable whether *penser selon le don* also means overcoming the antithesis between obligation and freedom, and furthermore, between heritage and future (Caillé 2000: 12).

The gift phenomenon does not exist on the outskirts, on the margins of social life in modern societies. It is neither a nostalgic subject nor a folkloristic one (Godbout 2000: 20). However, the presence of this phenomenon in modern societies requires its rediscovery, just as the gift was rediscovered by anthropologies in primitive societies. It would seem that a market ruled by utilitarian calculations, along with the welfare state, not to say a providential state (*L'Etat-providence*) (Godbout 2000: 11) have rendered gift-giving insignificant, if not a complete illusion. Especially the discourse of "the gift of oneself," which carries religious connotations, seems outdated today (Godbout 2000: 11).

If we agree that the gift is an ancient phenomenon, thus assuming a stance akin to perennialism, we must determine whether this phenomenon manifests itself in a new way or only remains a residue of sorts in interpersonal relations, with no significance for the social system. The gift phenomenon should not be viewed from the angle of things given, but (in Georg Simmel's terms) from the angle of pure sociability, which constitutes the foundation of social life. "The gift constitutes a system of truly social relations between social subjects, as long as these relations cannot be brought down to relations of economic interest or to power relations" (Godbout 2000: 23). The dichotomies of self-interest/selflessness and egoism/altruism, along with the conviction that the essence of gift-giving involves absolute selflessness and altruism, ultimately trap us in a web of tautologies that are conducive to making the gift phenomenon invisible under the conditions of the modern market and the welfare state. It is crucial to determine the nature of this phenomenon both in the sphere of primary sociability (based on interpersonal relations, i.e., relations between persons) in the lifeworld, and in the sphere of secondary sociability, i.e. in a social order determined by formal roles and characterized by growing anonymity (Godbout 2000: 25).

However, it is not only the prevalent utilitarian "dogma of egoism" (which precludes gratuitousness and generosity) that renders the gift phenomenon invisible. If the first element of the triad of "give, receive, reciprocate" essentially constitutes the system created by the gift phenomenon, we should emphasize three characteristics of this initial, non-utilitarian act, namely: spontaneity, freedom and a lack of calculation. Thus, reciprocity is not a central feature of the gift phenomenon (Godbout 2000: 138–139).

Apart from the state, the market and the lifeworld, developed societies also have a fourth sphere, one that reveals the importance and special character of the gift phenomenon in contemporary times. We may call it the sphere of gift-giving to strangers. Gifts no longer circulate only within the bounds of community relations, which are weakened by the influ-

ences of modernity. While Mauss discussed gift-giving with obligatory reciprocation, the modern gift is characterized by freedom. Unlike social security, a gift is not a right; it is gratuitous. A gift imposes no limitations and exerts no pressure. It requires spontaneity. We may speak of a debt here, but not in the sense of a utilitarian calculation. Crucially, relations between persons (subjects) are of central importance here, rather than the circulation of inanimate objects in a process of exchange. Particularly important is the transformation of the giver by the gift (Godbout 2000: 140–141). One does not give gifts in order to receive an equivalent gift. Gifts stand contrary to the spirit of utilitarianism, to instrumental rationality. This does not mean that the gift is irrational. All gifts are a move towards the Other (Alter).

### Gift and the Coefficient of Sociability

Although Mauss's work is considered paradigmatic and fundamental for the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences, the "true" sense of his theory is decidedly not unequivocal, and the presented theses are not indisputable. The daring interpretation of *Essai sur le don* performed by Marshall Sahlins remains very informative. I will not reconstruct it here. I will only underscore the lines of argumentation associated with what Sahlins called the coefficient of sociability<sup>4</sup> (Sahlins 1972: 183). In this way, he emphasized that no social exchange can be brought down to the material dimension, and such exchanges cannot be understood if we don't take purely social aspects into account. Sahlins looked at two layers of Mauss's work: the ethnographic layer and the philosophical one. Regarding the first one, he confronted Mauss's interpretation of the "spirit of the gift," derived from a Maori tale, with the interpretations of field researchers Raymond Firth and J. Prytz Johansen along with comments made by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but above all with the source data which Mauss had used, and which had been gathered by Elsdon Best (Sahlins 1972: 153–157).

Regarding the second layer, the philosophical one, Sahlins shows the analogy between the basic question whether a social order is possible, and the answer presented in Mauss's work, confronted with the theses on the law of nature presented by Thomas Hobbes in his classic *Leviathan*, published in 1651.

Mauss asked what force inherent in the gift forces the recipient to reciprocate. The narrative of Tamati Ramapiri, a Maori sage who explains the process of exchanging gifts, allows Mauss to determine that the force responsible for this is *hau*, a prototype of the principle of reciprocity, rooted in Maori beliefs about the spiritual bonds between things and interacting humans or groups (Sahlins 1972: 150). In Mauss's interpretation, the very spirit of the gift creates an obligation to reciprocate, because in a way, the gift embodies the giver, or rather the giver's spirit, which must return from whence it came. However, Sahlins presents an alternative interpretation. In its light, the interpretation of the idea of *hau* presented by Mauss proves false. Because modern theories of the gift inevitably draw upon the anthropology of primitive forms of this phenomenon, Mauss focused on the question why gifts are reciprocated. Sahlins notes that Mauss has dissected the process of reciprocation

<sup>4</sup> It would be worthwhile to compare the similarities and differences between Sahlins's concept of the coefficient of sociability and Florian Znaniecki's concept of the humanistic coefficient (Znaniecki 1934: 39–41).

(Sahlins 1972: 150). Mauss did not examine the foundations or roots of the obligation to give, nor the obligation to receive gifts. Because there are doubts as to the interpretation and significance of *hau*, inquiries as to the “spirit of the gift” that generates exchange were not Mauss’s main achievement. *Essai sur le don* presents the primitive forms of cooperative social relations: the coefficient of sociability. As Sahlins writes, Mauss’s work shows that this exchange is tantamount to continuously making peace treaties: the basis of social order. “All the exchanges, that is to say, must bear in their material design some political burden of reconciliation” (Sahlins 1972: 182).

Figuratively speaking, the exchange of gifts is a constant battle against war. Sahlins presents Mauss’s essay as a treatise on political philosophy dealing with fundamental issues of social order, and thus, an answer to the question posed by Hobbes: “How is social order possible?” Comparing the theses about the natural order contained in Hobbes’s *Leviathan* with the theses present in *Essai sur le don* shows both works in a new light. The gift is a primitive analog of the social contract that lies at the heart of the state, making peace possible (Sahlins 1972: 169). However, this is a fundamentally different type of social order, because it does not subordinate the exchange parties to some larger social body, a larger whole, since this order is based on reciprocity as the key element of relations “between” (Hałas 2019). The gift does not destroy equality or threaten freedom. Sahlins convincingly argues that both for Mauss and for Hobbes, war lies at the heart of society in a very unique sociological sense. The famous phrase *bellum omnium contra omnes* does not refer to man’s primitive tendency towards violence, but rather to primitive relations of power, which involve a natural right to use force (Sahlins 1972: 172). Such a state of nature is already a society of sorts; Hobbes considers it a society without a sovereign, without a common ruling power. Sahlins notes that when Hobbes discusses the war of all against all, he uses the archaic spelling *Warre* to refer to that primitive state where it is acceptable to use force. Hobbes did not, of course, consider the possibility that peace can be kept through gift exchanges; however, when formulating the laws of nature, he indicated the principle of reconciliation, and therefore mutual submission. The first law of nature discussed by Hobbes in part I, chapter 14 of *Leviathan* is as follows: “The first branch of which rule containeth the first and fundamentall law of nature, which is, *to seek peace, and follow it*” (Hobbes 2005: 99). Like Hobbes, Mauss considers reciprocity the basic foundation of peace (Sahlins 1972: 178).

The question about the foundations of social order is a central element of sociological theories, and various answers to this question form various paradigms. The gift has been proclaimed as the foundation of the “third paradigm,” which eliminates the antithesis between the individualistic paradigm and the holistic paradigm. This “third paradigm” is the gift paradigm, subsequently transformed into the relational paradigm (Donati 2011a: 20–58). Both are combined in the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences.

### The Gift and its Significance in Social Relations

The relational theory of society apparently focuses on gift and reciprocity. In the anthropological theory of Bronisław Malinowski, the two were closely investigated as phenomena

characteristic for primitive societies, starting with the notion of the pure gift. “*Pure Gifts*.— By this, as just mentioned, we understand an act, in which an individual gives an object or renders a service without expecting or getting any return” (Malinowski 1953: 177).

As shown in 1922 by Malinowski in his work *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and in 1923 by Mauss in *Essai sur le don*, the gift occupies a central place in primitive societies and in primary social relations.

Reciprocal gift-giving is an universal cultural phenomenon. The fundamental significance of the gift has been studied by anthropologists in primitive societies; the theoretical generalizations from these studies are presented in Mauss’s work, and Malinowski considered these conclusions congruous with the results of his own field researches conducted earlier. Since the significance of gift-giving for sociability has been discovered anew, Malinowski’s theses on gift and reciprocity in social networks deserve careful reading, as they help understand this phenomenon. The gift cannot be considered archaic. In particular, the relational theory of society is undertaking studies on the gift in social relations in the field of civil society functioning (Donati 2009a: 279). This means that in contemporary times, the gift is not merely a residual issue, limited to charity. Pierpaolo Donati claims that the rising complexity of society is the context through which giving, a social action, takes progressively more diverse forms in terms of goals, rules and means. Hence the problem of competences in giving. The issue of gratuitousness of gifts and exchange in the gift-giving process requires deeper reflection.

One might agree with Donati’s statement that in the social sciences, the non-utilitarian gratuitousness of the gift is radically contrasted with rational social exchange. Indeed, for example, Malinowski believed that gift exchanges are ruled by the *do ut des* principle. Thus, the tension described by Donati pertains to the pure gift and gratuitousness, but also to exchange perceived in utilitarian terms, as equivalent exchange, ultimately measured in money (Donati 2009: 280). However, in the light of research conducted by the classics of social sciences (Malinowski, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss), as well as the works of contemporary scholars (Godbout, Caillé, Donati, Sahlins), the act of gift-giving is part of a broader network of relations between those who give gifts and those who receive them.

The question arises whether we are dealing with an unsolvable paradox, wherein gift-giving is inevitably linked with exchange. According to some new theses, a pure, selfless gift cannot be associated with exchange. A critical approach to the gift phenomenon consists in radically doubting the possibility of selflessness; thus, to Maurice Godelier, the gift is a complete enigma (Godelier 1999). One may go further still, viewing the gift as violence, an act that subordinates the recipient. Jean Baudrillard (1976) and Jacques Derrida (1991) actually speak of gift-giving as killing: the gift of death. Thus, postmodernist social thought has begun to negate the positive value of gift-giving, simultaneously negating the essence and possibility of sociability.

Not only in social theory, but in actual modernization processes, the gift and the act of gift-giving no longer play the same role in creating social ties as they used to in traditional society; Ferdinand Tönnies illustrated this by contrasting community ties and contractual ties as different types of sociability.

In Donati’s relational theory of society, the gift phenomenon is presented as a constitutive element of the social relation. The question arises whether this pertains to social

relations in general or to some particular type of relations, e.g. familial relations or relations within voluntary associations. The great importance of the gift phenomenon for analyses of social relations is undoubtedly associated with the influence of MAUSS, an anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences. Donati's concept draws upon the reflection on gift-giving presented by Godbout in a series of books about the gift (Bramanti 2016: 69). The gift is a medium of symbolic exchange. According to Donati, the gift may be defined as a means that makes it possible to establish an authentic social relation, and may be studied using three interconnected relational semantics (Donati 2011: 86–89). In the *refero* semantics, the gift constitutes the symbolic meaning of action (orientation towards gift-giving); that is, full orientation towards the Alter. The *religo* semantics means a selfless relation and the affirmation of social ties without external limitations. Finally, in generative semantics, the gift becomes a life form that assumes being together (Bramanti 2016: 69). For Donati, the gift remains the foundation of social ties, which have become weakened in the modern age, with its ambivalent attitude towards gift-giving (Donati 2011b). The question appears whether the gift, and thus also a relation based on the gift, are entirely selfless, or whether the gift sets into motion the norm for giving, receiving and giving again in an extended cycle of exchange, which Malinowski studied. According to Donati, the essence of the gift is not contained in the object that was given, nor in the triple obligation of gift exchange (give, receive, reciprocate). It consists of the unique human characteristic the gift signifies and is a vehicle for. One might say that it possesses civilizing properties (Bramanti 2016: 160).

The gift appears as a medium of communication, one present in all fields of social life; not just in networks of primary relations, but also in relations within associations, oriented towards pro-social goals, in non-profit organizations, in civil economy that takes an ethical sense into account. These are the fields where we may observe relations based on gift-giving (Donati 2009b). The gift humanizes society. Donati argues that gift-giving is a part of all relations, which is difficult to maintain without narrowing down the notion of relations, giving it a positive connotation. Marginalization of the notion of the gift was a consequence of the changes of modern culture, where utilitarian thinking still occupies a central place. Relational sociology, in turn, introduces a new paradigm, which also presents the gift phenomenon in relational terms. It is particularly important to link the gift with the relational good as something generated within a social relation.

Like Godbout, Donati claims that the gift lies at the root of exchange, not the other way around (Donati 2009a: 281), not only because the gift triggers exchange, i.e. reciprocity in gift-giving. Donati proclaims the strong anthropological thesis that the chief characteristic of human relations, including exchange, is that these relations are initiated through the gift. The gift's gratuitousness does not preclude exchange. Unlike critical post-modernist reflection on the gift, Donati's work is in line with the trend of contemporary cultural reflection that is not free from utopian thinking. However, this is not a socialist utopia, which, according to Donati, has not allowed us to properly understand the role of gratuitous gift-giving in the history of humanity (Donati 2009a: 282). This does not mean that Donati's thought is in line with the classical tradition of utopian thought, since it rejects both nihilism and pure utopia.

Understanding the gift phenomenon is always possible in the context of the relational reference between the giver and recipient in a certain culture. Two modalities appear here.



The cultural context may ascribe an expressive or instrumental value to the gift. A different modality is to ascribe an internal or external character to the gift. It turns out that the pure gift is a rare occurrence. Donati draws attention to the objectionable tendency to depreciate the gift that is not a “pure gift” (Donati 2009a: 287). In the perspective of relational theory of society, the gift humanizes social organization. The gift confirms the autonomous value of a relation as such.

The gift, gratuitousness, acts of giving and selflessness are not easy phenomena to describe or analyze. These human activities are oriented towards the Other (Alter); thus, they are observable social actions on the one hand, while on the other hand, they involve invisible intentions and motives, and take place in varied social situations of collective life and in various cultural contexts. The gift and selflessness should be considered separately, even though it may seem that the gift is, by nature, selfless and gratuitous. It is difficult to describe and analyze these phenomena on the grounds of social theory, since such description and analysis must inevitably involve issues of human nature and entanglement in unresolved discussions about whether egoistic or pro-social tendencies are more primary in nature. Discussions of this sort are present both in age-old philosophical arguments and in modern evolutionary psychology.

These issues, marginalized by empiricistically and scientifically oriented social sciences, seemingly open the way towards a new viewpoint and new insights into the transformations of modern culture in highly developed Western societies, as well as into the developmental tendencies of the world society. However, this requires going beyond the conflict between those who have raised ethical questions associated with the gift and acts of gift-giving, and those who have focused solely on the gift's functions. Here, I will briefly, critically consider concepts pertaining to the gift and to selflessness, formulated on the grounds of the relational theory of society, making the assumption that cultures of giving differ over space and time. Of particular interest is the thesis about the exceptional importance of acts of gratuitous giving in the transformations of modernity, where the constantly increasing complexity of social and cultural systems, their differentiation and the new challenges associated with their integration mean that the types of acts of gratuitous giving are becoming more and more diverse, and simultaneously, a new culture of the gift is emerging (Donati 2003: 243). Drawing upon the work of Godelier, Donati mentions the enigmatic character of the gratuitousness of giving. Generally speaking, the religious cultural matrix (Terenzi 2016) may associate acts of giving with a mystical experience; however, when attempting a sociological description of the transformations of modern society, where secularization is an important factor, one should avoid any apparent mystification of the gift phenomenon considered on the plane of social actions.

While advocating the necessity of returning to axiological issues in the social sciences, and above all, to reflection upon that which is human and non-human or inhuman, and affirming the relational approach, I recognize the fundamental importance of studying forms of sociability; however, I simultaneously draw attention to the limitations of focusing solely upon the social. Does human action really require the social relation of free and gratuitous giving to gain a human sense? As not all human relations are based on free and gratuitous giving, we are dealing here not so much with a concept that encompasses all sociability, as with an ideal type of a certain form of sociability; one that contains a potential for changes

and for shaping a non-utilitarian culture of giving in the sphere of civil society and in the lifeworld. One may argue that the spheres of the market and the state are not spheres in which action and influence constitute the realization of social relations as such.

According to Donati, free and gratuitous giving is a relation of this sort, and may be analyzed from the angle of the internal structure or configuration of four dimensions, which I will list here in the order in which they appear in the acronym created from the English terms: Means, Intentionality, Norms and Values. It is easy to see that the MINV schema is a transposition of the elements of Talcott Parsons's unit act. To become a configuration of gratuitous giving, the configuration of these four dimensions requires an internal (intentional) viewpoint: a particular kind of experience. In the dimension of values, the relation of giving is, so to speak, autotelic. The giving itself has value as a relation, not the object that is given or some sort of favor. In normative terms, giving is unconditional. The intention of giving is fulfilled insofar as the Other benefits from the gift. That which is given is only a means; it can take various forms and be utilized in a more or less appropriate way. Thus, Donati speaks of a relational structure that must be differentiated from relations not consisting of free, gratuitous giving (Donati 2003: 257). To distinguish a relation of gratuitous giving, a two-step selection is needed. This process is schematically depicted using the acronym ESAG, derived from the Italian words meaning heteronomy, instrumentality, autonomy and selflessness, respectively. Thus, we have the dimension of heteronomy or autonomy and instrumentality or selflessness. These dimensions make it possible to determine whether the giving is autonomous or depends on another relation. Selflessness does not consist of an absolute lack of any prize or utilitarian compensation; rather, it involves affirmation of the relation itself.

Significantly, Donati uses the terms "social" or "the social" in the narrow sense of a positively valued relation, in which the Other is a positive value. Gratuitous and voluntary giving is an universal anthropological principle expressing the sociability of an individual as a person (Donati 2003: 258). Reciprocity of giving is secondary to the very act of giving. Like Simmel (2004: 217, 415), Donati emphasizes the moral sentiment of gratuitousness. This kind of sentiment cannot be purely subjective; it arises in the social context of relations, and, we may add, in the cultural context shaped by the vocabulary of motives and emotions. Thus, obviously, giving occurs in the context of various cultural models and social norms, as well as intentions shaped in certain social situations. It relies on available symbolic resources. The interpretative perspective adopted here gives key importance to culture, which either facilitates or disallows the salience of symbolic expressions of gratuitous, voluntary giving in social relations.

### Conclusions

Reflection on the gift has gained renewed vitality and significance thanks to the anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences, where *homo oeconomicus* is criticized from the perspective of *homo donator* (Godbout 2000). As shown above, the gift phenomenon has recently shifted from the anthropological niche to the central focus of studies of contemporary changes in developed societies. The gift is being discovered anew as a fundamental

social phenomenon and an analytical category in theorizing the social fact and the social order. The affinities between the gift paradigm and the relational paradigm, both forming the anti-utilitarian movement in social sciences, have been pointed out and emphasized.

Interest in the gift phenomenon is associated with anti-utilitarian tendencies, increasingly apparent in the cultural processes of late capitalism. Relational sociology reveals the multidimensionality of the phenomenon of gift-giving. The question appears whether and to what extent the gift phenomenon undergoes changes, and thus whether and how the ways of gift-giving are transformed, and in what sense we can speak today of the gift as a universal value and as a coefficient of sociability.

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