

Elementa

*Intersections between Philosophy, Epistemology
and Empirical Perspectives*

3
(2023)
1-2

The Gift

Edited by Francesco Fistetti

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The Gift Paradigm: Towards a Science of “total social facts”

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/elementa-2023-0102-fisf>

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that Marcel Mauss’s “Essay on the Gift” (1925) is not only intended to inaugurate a new paradigm on the terrain of ethnology and anthropology, but at the same time to make the gift a kind of novum organum of the social sciences and of moral and political philosophy itself. In the first part, I reconstructed the critique that M. Merleau-Ponty and C. Lefort have made to Lévi-Strauss’s “structuralist” reading of Mauss, and, in a second part, I emphasised the importance that M. Hénaff assigned to the ceremonial gift of traditional societies as an intentional procedure of public mutual recognition between groups. But, using some of A. Caillé’s indications, I explain that this device of mutual recognition and alliance, characteristic of the gift cycle (giving/receiving/reciprocating) also applies in modern societies whenever legal-political institutions become sclerotized and lose their legitimacy in the face of new actors in political action (newcomers or new arrivals, to use the Arendtian category of natality in a broad sense).

Keywords: convivialism; gift and hegemony; gift paradigm; new encyclopaedia of humanities; recognition.

1. MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY IN FRONT OF MARCEL MAUSS

The theme of the gift can constitute the axis of an epistemological revolution that crosses longitudinally the human and social sciences (from sociology to economics, from political philosophy to ethics, from the doctrines of law to the psychological sciences, from literary criticism to theories of language). Moreover, this was, after all, Marcel Mauss’s project when he

published his *Essay on the Gift* (1925): rather than inaugurating a new paradigm on the strictly disciplinary terrain of anthropology, what was at his heart was to make the anthropological approach to modern society – and its rationality – a sort of *novum organum* of the human and social sciences. In the sense of being able to understand the differences between languages, traditions and forms of life where, as we know from Bruce Chatwin, they are in constant danger of being flattened and neutralised, and to know how to transform them into cultural exchanges, in which identities mingle, or even interpenetrate, without cancelling each other out (Chatwin, 1987). On the other hand, is it not globalisation itself, with its openness to the plurality of cultures, that is pushing towards an epistemology of complexity in which it is the status of disciplines, starting with medicine, that needs to be reshaped? “Can medicine today – Adriano Favole, for example, asks – ignore the existence of [...] other languages, as body ones, for instance? Could a medical science, in its aspiration to an universal efficacy of treatments, ignore the symbolic universes of witchcraft and possession and in general the culturally grounded languages of the body and illness?” (Favole, 2016). Maurice Merleau-Ponty was among the first to realise that, according to Mauss, the study of “the social ‘things’ themselves, in concrete form and as they are” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, p. 102) must go beyond the traditional antinomies between individual and collective, on which Durkheim still insisted, and grasp in societies “more than ideas or rules [...] men, groups and their different forms of behaviours” (p. 102). Merleau-Ponty emphasised the fact that the *datum* to which Mauss draws attention in explaining the scientific fertility of his heuristic principle of “total social facts” is a historically identified and determined *datum*, “it is constituted”, Mauss points out in a passage quoted by Merleau-Ponty, “by Rome, by Athens, by the average Frenchman, by the Melanesian of this or that island, and not by prayer or law by itself” (p. 103). Merleau-Ponty did not miss the epistemological revolution implicit in Mauss’s anthropological approach, which pushes Western reason to “dilate” beyond its ethnocentric boundaries and, more importantly, urges it to get involved and self-define its hermeneutical categories in the light of the encounter with the other than itself. “In conceiving of the social as a symbolism”, writes Merleau-Ponty, Mauss “had provided himself with the means for respecting individual and social reality and a cultural variety without making one imperious of the other” (p. 116). It is not irrelevant to note in this regard that, while appreciating the conception of the social proposed by Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology, Merleau-Ponty warned, with a polemical subtext, albeit oblique to Lévi-Strauss, that “As a matter of principle, structure is no Platonic idea” (p. 117) and that “Structure does not deprive society of

any of its weight or thickness” (p. 118), as if to remind him of the need to respect the individual, the reality of the social and the variety of cultures “without making one impervious of the other” (p. 116), as if to remind him of the centrality of the Maussian heuristic principle of “total social facts” and the consequent imperative of the study of the “concrete form” (p. 102). Ethnology – Merleau-Ponty never tires of repeating – “requires us to transform ourselves” (p. 120), requires us to experience a journey outside of ourselves that leads us to construct no longer a universal from the top of a rigorously objective method, but, as it were, a lateral universal through which we can incessantly “see what is ours as alien and what is alien our own” (p. 120). Here we also find a valuable indication for developing the Maussian paradigm of the gift in the direction of a *novum organum* of the human and social sciences, if not a new encyclopaedia of the sciences *tout court*. It is where he invites us to relate to sciences such as psychoanalysis from a critical perspective that makes us realise that psychoanalysis “is our own witchcraft”, the therapist is the analogue of the shaman and transference is far from being “a purely objective method” (pp. 199-122). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty tasked anthropology for “broaden our reasoning to make it capable of grasping what, in ourselves and in others, precedes and exceeds reason” and, to this endeavour, he called upon all the other sciences to work, those he called “semiological” (p. 124) and, quoting Niels Bohr, the physical sciences themselves (p. 122). However, Merleau-Ponty did not follow Mauss in the direction of making the gift cycle as the axis of reunification of human knowledge, for he was more concerned with reconciling the Lévi-Straussian lesson on the “profound nature of exchange and the symbolic”, governed by structural laws, with the Husserlian phenomenological lesson of lived experience and the Marxian lesson on the historicity of cultures. Indeed, the openness to otherness, which was the foundation of an “oblique universality” (p. 135); or pluriversalism, as we would say today in the language of the *Convivialist Manifesto*, stemmed for him from the realisation that “frontiers between cultures are erased; for the first time, no doubt, a world civilisation becomes the order of the day” (p. 124)

2. CLAUDE LEFORT CRITIC OF LÉVI-STRAUSS

Moreover, a decade earlier, Claude Lefort – a pupil of Merleau-Ponty – had emphasised Mauss’s epistemological revolution as it is based on the study of “concrete” and “total social facts”. To Lefort, Durkheim’s nephew’s way of working appeared very close to the phenomenological method “when one sees Mauss”, he wrote, “striving to overturn the artificially erected bar-

riers between sociology and history or between sociology and psychology, and affirming a reciprocity of perspectives on a real in itself indefinable” (Lefort, 1978, p. 16). Towards Lévi-Strauss, Lefort, while pointing out his convergence with the latter on certain key points, such as the concept of *hau*, indicative of a physicalistic – “chosiste” – interpretation of exchange (pp. 20-21)¹, had been, unlike his master Merleau-Ponty, explicitly polemical. “The ‘real’ Mauss”, Lefort had argued, referring to the Introduction that Lévi-Strauss preface to Mauss’s miscellany of essays *Sociologie et anthropologie*, “which would inaugurate a new era for sociology, announcing its progressive mathematisation, we think was ‘constructed’ by the author of *Elementary Structures of Kinship*” (pp. 16-17)². And yet, Lévi-Strauss says of Marcel Mauss that he “might have been expected to produce the twentieth-century social sciences’ *Novum Organum*; he held all the guidelines for it, but it has only come to be revealed in fragmented form” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, p. 45). It is then a matter of revisiting and resuming Mauss’s “encyclopaedic” project where Lévi-Strauss’s logicist rationalism had interrupted it by channelling it into the framework of a “logic of relations” (p. 64) oriented, rather than to Mauss’s method, implicitly to the *Principia mathematica* of N. A. Whitehead and B. Russell (1910-1913), and, explicitly, on the one hand to the formalism of phonology and structural linguistics of N. S. Trubeckoj and R. Jakobson and, on the other, to the discovery in psychology of the “unconscious mechanisms” of the mind made by Freud. Lefort had already observed that reading social life as a system of logical relations, which can be found behind the heterogeneous appearance of empirical operations, this leads to the cancellation of the concrete specificity of social phenomena themselves for the benefit of an “underlying reality” (Lefort, 1978, p. 49) that closely resembles the Kantian *noumenon*. “When one replaces”, he acutely noted, “the *lived exchange*, the experience of rivalry, prestige or love, with the *thought exchange*, one obtains a system

¹ This reading of *hau* as a “mystical” link between things, common to Lefort and Lévi-Strauss, will be contested by Vincent Descombes in *Les institutions du sens*, “The Notion of *Hau*”, Descombes will explain, “is a juridical one. The thing is animate rather than inert not because the participants have an animistic conception of inert things but because things are integrated within the system of exchange” (Descombes, 1996, p. 256).

² The passage from Lévi-Strauss’ Introduction targeted by Lefort is the following: “The *Essai sur le don* therefore inaugurates a new era for the social sciences, just as phonology did for linguistics. The importance of that double event (in which Mauss’s part unfortunately remained in the outline stage) can best be compared to the discovery of combinatorial analysis for modern mathematical thinking” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, pp. 41-42). For an interpretation of the relationship between Lévi-Strauss and Mauss in defence of the former’s structural approach based on the analogical application of the rigorous method of linguistics to the “products of social activity” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, pp. 38-39; Hénaff, 2008).

of cycles of reciprocity between A B C D families: the concrete subjects of the exchange have disappeared. The plurality of consciousnesses is reduced to a plurality of symbols, i.e. it is erased”. “Sociality”, says the author, “is only real if it is integrated into a system” and by system he means the mathematical function. “Only he forgets that the system is obtained at the price of the negation of sociality” (Lefort, 1978, p. 22). Lefort’s thesis is very clear: Lévi-Strauss “moves away from a phenomenological analysis” and the “underlying reality” he gives us back is a “mathematical reality” (p. 21), not the historical dialectic of a struggle between human groups, not a “political anthropology” (as the subtitle of *Les formes de l’histoire* sounds) as the key to understanding the constitution of sociality – of the social bond –, especially since the modern era, in its radical *indeterminacy* and in its aporetic outcomes of the dissolution of the political in the discourses and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. It is not by chance that Descombes reaches by other means (that of Peirce’s triadic logic) Lefort’s critique of Lévi-Strauss, where he shows how Lévi-Strauss opposes a chain of causal explanations, aimed at the knowledge of unconscious psychic mechanisms, to Mauss’s “holistic” programme: “Mauss’s description fails to satisfy Lévi-Strauss simply because Lévi-Strauss seeks to go beyond simple description in order to come to an explanation” (Descombes, 1996, p. 252), founded, instead, on the historical-morphological study of “total social facts”. Lévi-Strauss’ rationalist programme shows all its limits here: on the one hand, the “logic of relations”, invoked by him, is much narrower than Peirce’s extended logic, which in the case of the exchange of gifts analysed by Mauss includes both the relations of people to things and the relations of people to each other (Eco & Sebeok, 1983; Maddalena, 2005; Bonfantini, Fabbrichesi, & Zingale, 2015)³; on the other hand, the causal explanation, which thanks to its objectivity will no longer be “ideological”, is resolved in the passage from the intentional dimension to a natural dimension, from “ideological facts” to “brute facts” (Descombes, 1996, pp. 240-241). Hénaff insists on re-proposing the objectivist and naturalist explanation of the gift cycle and its operations (to give / to receive / to return), since he is convinced, like Lévi-Strauss, that Mauss has left us only “fragments” of what he announced as a *novum organum* of the social sciences. In his view, Mauss in the *Essai* approaches a rigorously

³ Peirce’s logic of relations goes far beyond the symbolic logic to which Lévi-Strauss seems to look. Referring to his conception of symbolism, Lévi-Strauss writes: “In fact, it is nothing other than Mauss’s conception, translated from its original expression in terms of class logic into the terms of a symbolic logic which summarises the most general laws of language” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, p. 64).

scientific approach, but fails to settle in the “promised land” he glimpsed. “In this essay, MAUSS seems – rightly – to be controlled” Lévi-Strauss continues, “by a logical certainty, namely, that exchange is the common denominator of a large number of apparently heterogeneous social activities. But exchange is not something he can perceive on the level of the facts” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, p. 45). But the “logic of relations”, to which Mauss would not have adhered, is, as we said, that of a mathematical nature elaborated in the first decade of the twentieth century by Whitehead and Russell in the *Principia mathematica*, rather than the triadic logic developed by Peirce and taken up again in polemical function by Descombes against Lévi-Strauss. Hénaff reaffirms with Lévi-Strauss that *exchange* is to be understood as “the internal linking of the three terms” and, therefore, as “an original structure of reciprocity” and as “the totality of a relation that must immediately be understood as integrating the moments and elements that compose it: reciprocating is already implied in the receiving that follows the giving” (Hénaff, 2017, p. 63). The diriment of the question concerns the way of conceiving the category of total social fact: while Hénaff with Lévi-Strauss wants to bring this category back to a deeper plane of thought in which operations such as *hau* and *mana* rest on an unconscious unity (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, p. 58), Descombes, making use of Peirce’s triadic logic, considers the plane of “intentionality”, i.e. the historicity and concreteness of the social actors involved in the operations of giving/receiving/returning, to be indispensable. Hénaff traces with rich argumentation the thesis of Lévi-Strauss according to which in Mauss the unitary phenomenon of exchange is dismembered into three empirical operations separate from each other with the consequence that Mauss “strives to reconstruct a whole out of parts; and as that is manifestly not possible, he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is *hau*” (Lévi-Strauss, 1965, p. 47). But if the *hau*, as Descombes suggests, is a juridical notion, that integrates the exchange of things into the network of people (so that we are always in the presence of a third party and never of a chain of dyadic exchanges), it follows that the symbolism associated with the total social fact of the gift has an eminently historical character in terms of the forms in which it is realised, i.e. it brings into play specific human subjects or groups, bearers of equally specific cultures and traditions, who through conflict can come to peace and mutual recognition. Undoubtedly, Marcel Hénaff is right when he states that the exchange of gifts – beginning with the matrimonial exchange investigated by Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* – is a structure that holds together the terms that compose it, precisely because it limpidly exemplifies a triadic

relationship such as those described by Peirce. And, since it is a legal phenomenon, it refers back to a pact, an alliance and, therefore, to an institution founded on a normative dimension, that is, on well-defined rules to whose respect the partners are mutually committed. But this is exactly what Mauss means when he emphasises the obligation to reciprocity inherent in the give/receive/reciprocate cycle and in the symbolic device of the alliance. The “obscurity” of this unitary structure that is the “total social fact” of the gift – which has to do with the genesis of society as a shared construction – dissolves as soon as we take hold of the great anthropological lesson that the ethnological investigation of so-called primitive societies delivers to us as an inheritance that could be described as imperishable. It consists in understanding the kind of “wisdom” that underlies “human evolution”, i.e. that our coexistence, although exposed to transformations that are hard to imagine, can only hold up and progress if we assume the vital principle that has so far secretly made it possible: the principle of “to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily” (Mauss, 1965, p. 91). Breaking tribalisms, breaking the closures that social systems tend to establish in order to self-protect themselves from the new and the different, putting the rules back into play by widening their field of application/interpretation and including, where appropriate, new actors. This is the historical dialectic to which the principle of “coming out of oneself” refers, which Mauss exemplifies in the Māori proverb: “Give as much as you get, all will be well” (Hénaff, 2018, p. 277). As for Lefort, Hénaff rightly observes that in his writings, one breathes the atmosphere of an “optimistic age of the dialectic” that is now “behind us”, while the triumph of history, which he praised in antithesis to the primitive societies that were blocked and “stagnant”, has resolved itself into the triumph of globalised financial capitalism, no less impanelled in “inflexible hierarchies and ferocious locking mechanisms” (p. 218). However, it is precisely this scenario that Mauss anticipated when he lucidly diagnosed that “*Homo aeconomicus* is not behind us, but lies ahead” (Mauss, 1965, p. 98). And it is precisely to the phenomenon of the globalisation of this anthropological figure that Mauss’s heuristic criterion of total social facts should be applied today from the perspective of the paradigm of the gift, i.e. of a theory that considers subjects – individual or associated – as actors/donors in their being in the world and entrusts to the “wisdom” of the principle of emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily, the challenge of building relationships of alliance and mutual coexistence. From this point of view, the paradigm of the gift wants to be something more than just a scientific theory alongside others and with interpretative pretensions superior to rival ones (a sort of inter- or meta-paradigmatic theory precisely because of its vocation to pro-

pose itself as a *novum organum*). It wants to embody, as we shall see in conclusion, a philosophy-world or a *Weltanschauung* that is up to the global age we have entered (and to which we can give the name of convivialism).

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FOREIGN

Hasn't the generalised utilitarianism of the *homo oeconomicus*, hegemonic today, become a symbolic device immanent to all aspects of common life, hasn't it become a "thought without concepts", which cannot exist, as Hénaff points out (Hénaff, 2012, pp. 199-210)? Is there not a symbolism of *homo consumens* (Z. Bauman), a social imaginary created by the hyper-modern rites of advertising and fashions (S. Latouche), a kind of religion of the market (J.-C. Micah)? Therefore, Lefort's political anthropology is still of great help to us where he makes us aware that the institutionalisation of social relations in modern societies – and *a fortiori* in planetary society – is inseparable from that system of collective representations that is ideology, which as demonstrated by the totalitarian regimes of the last century, tends to become "invisible", to "dissimulate" itself in the lie of the state, to homogenise through the media every "exteriority" and internal division, continually feeding the phantasmal illusion of "a community in the certainty of its cohesion" (Lefort, 1978, p. 318). We certainly cannot deny that symbolic devices of this kind – of manipulation/mystification/occultation –, characteristic of ideological discourse, are at work in the same societies organised around a central power we call the state with its legal-political and economic institutions. With the entry into Modernity, Hénaff explains, illustrating the difference with the ceremonial gift of archaic societies, mutual public recognition between groups – and of individuals themselves – is entrusted to the procedures established by Law (Hénaff, 2012, pp. 199-210). So he is perfectly right when, with a wealth of arguments, in a perspective founded "in particular, with respect to the accuracy of the anthropological data and their philosophical interpretation" (p. 151), which we cannot go over here, he clarifies that the ceremonial gift of traditional societies, in being an intentional procedure of mutual public recognition between groups, contains within itself an alliance, a pact, a convention. "An alliance", Hénaff continues, "takes up the social bond, encompasses and transcends it into a political bond – that is, an intentional relationship of association – and it embodies in every society the very emergence of the political" (p. 42). However, if we stop, as Hénaff does, to note that in state-type societies mutual public recognition "*is performed and guaranteed by the law and the whole of the political and legal institutions,*

which proclaim the dignity of our existence as citizens, subjects in law, and producers of goods” (p. 47), then we preclude ourselves from grasping the peculiarity of the Maussian paradigm of the gift. If this were the case, the latter would reach, by other means, in its ultimate outcomes the proceduralist theory of democracy elaborated by J. Habermas or, according to different declinations, by J. Rawls, M. Walzer, Ch. Taylor and many others (Fistetti, 1992). Compared to these authors, however, the Maussian paradigm of the gift contains an epistemological surplus – which is also an ethical/political overhang – represented by the disruptive status that the gift cycle can assume in the re-institutionalisation of social relations. In short, when juridical-political institutions become sclerotized, which is why the pact or alliance loses its original legitimacy in the face of new actors in political action (the newcomers or the new to use the Arendtian category of natality in a broad sense), at which point reopening the cycle of the gift means putting institutions to the “experience of the foreign” (*épreuve de l'étranger*: Berman, 1984). It may be the post-World War II generations advancing demands for the renegotiation of the social pact in terms of new rights (women, the disabled, homosexuals, etc.), or civic movements carrying general symbolic values such as climate justice and ecological transition, or ethno-cultural minorities. Re-opening the cycle of gift – to give / to receive / to return – means in these cases activating a process that goes beyond the logic of economic exchange, but also beyond the logic of political/symbolic exchange regulated by the Law⁴. Here we are helped by the hybridity of the Maussian concept of gift, which has, as is well known, a dual aspect: interest/disinterest, obligation/freedom, economic calculation/generosity. Redefining the citizenship pact may also partly obey an economic calculation (e.g. the realisation that we cannot do without the immigrants’ labour-power), but in order to set such an ethical-

⁴ In a little masterpiece entitled *La ville qui vient* (The coming city) Hénaff pointed out that in all civilisations, the city represents a *compendium mundi*, a place of articulation between men and gods, earth and sky, the order of nature and the order of man’s activities. The idea of public space, therefore, goes far beyond the juridical-political dimension, as it includes religious and cosmological values that make the city a symbolic dispositif thanks to which “the city is constructed and organised to be in itself a world” (Hénaff, 2018, p. 42). With the advent of Modernity, the city becomes a formidable techno-social mega-machine, which is no longer the “analogical copy of the cosmos”, but a “techno-social melting pot in which the world is transformed”: the mixing of peoples and social classes, the interweaving of cultures produce the “first device for the exploitation of the biosphere”, the first great technological change from which all others will derive, including the industrial revolution itself (pp. 47-64). Finally, the city has progressively become a “network of networks”, a place where “the most diverse interconnections meet and overlap”, a “centre of decentralisations” (p. 73).

political and legal process in motion, it is necessary to share a very strong democratic “passion”, feelings of solidarity towards the most disadvantaged, a propensity to understand the different and the distant, i.e. true civic virtues (Aristotle referred to *philia* or friendship as a genuine bond between citizens of the democratic *polis*). The lesson that Mauss draws from the anthropological discovery of the gift as the “rock” on which all societies, not just traditional ones, stand is that the public space of modern democracies, in order to be active and effective, needs a moral infrastructure that, in addition to the rights of individuals and groups, recognises above all the gifts of social cooperation, i.e. the fact that individuals and groups in their performance give something of themselves, their particular talents and their life-time. In a way, Mauss rediscovers on the ethnological and anthropological side one of Spinoza’s great teachings, that of the intimate connection between *utilitas* and virtue, since “the foundation of virtue is that endeavor itself to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness consists in this – that a man can preserve his own being” (Spinoza, 1954, IV, Proposition XVIII, Note, p. 202; Cristofolini, 2009; Toto, 2013). Of course, for Spinoza the determination to seek what is truly ‘useful’ requires that our affective life be illuminated by reason, that is, by an adequate understanding of ourselves and the world. Spinoza derives from this premise a very important political corollary, very close to the Maussian discovery that it is the gift that is the basis of the social bond. “From this it follows”, Spinoza continues, “that men who are governed by reason, that is to say, men who, under the guidance of reason, seek their own profit, desire nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men, and that, therefore, they are just, faithful, and honorable” (Spinoza, 1954, IV, Proposition XVIII, Note, p. 203)⁵. Is it necessary to recall that at the end of the *Essay* Mauss draws “moral conclusions”, as stated in the first paragraph of chapter four, in which he affirms that “things still have a sentimental value in addition to their venal value, assuming that there are only venal values” (Mauss, 1965, p. 83)? The connection between *utilitas*, virtue and politics is, therefore, very clear in Mauss’s eyes. We could enunciate his thesis as follows: the institutions of democracy are symbolic institutions (Hénaff) or institutions of meaning (Descombes) not only because they incorporate formal procedures of mutual recognition sanctioned by law

⁵ It is worth recalling Proposition 71 of the *Ethics*: “None but those who are free are very grateful to one another”, from which the Demonstration: “None but those who are free are very profitable to one another, and are united by the closest bond of friendship [...] and with equal zeal of love strive to do good to one another” (Spinoza, 1954, IV, Proposition LXXI, p. 239).

(constitutions, legal codes, etc.), but also because they presuppose mobilising civic affections and passions. It is this anthropological background, historically determined but ceaselessly variable, that irrigates not only the sphere of economic production, but also the juridical-political institutions, in the sense that the link between *utilitas*, virtue and politics is not something given in nature, but the outcome of power relations between social movements that are bearers of alternative and conflicting worldviews and projects for the construction of forms of coexistence. Therefore, if the mutual recognition of autonomous subjects as individuals endowed with inalienable rights is a specific achievement of modernity, it would be reductive to deduce this conquest of modern times from a transcendental matrix, as Jean-Luc Nancy does when, through a circular and, therefore, fallacious argumentation, he makes the debt and credit relations typical of *homo oeconomicus* descend from the human condition in general, from the notion of *being-together* borrowed from Heidegger’s existential analytics (*Mitsein*). “Sociality, community or collectivity”, he writes, “represent nothing more than the intrigue of language, recognition and mutual commitment. These three instances are not elements, but aspects of a condition which is that of being-together as the whole that is added to being but constitutes it” (Nancy, 2018, p. 32)⁶. Which is the fallacious argument typical of classical economists who, as Marx pointed out, considered the categories of capitalist society (capital, profit, interest, etc.) as “natural”, eternally existing categories.

4. FROM LEVINAS TO MAUSS

The Maussian theory of the gift thus contains a grid of concepts that, when made explicit, lead to integrating or redefining the classical conception of public space, both in the Habermasian sense of public sphere (Habermas, 1962), and in the reconstruction that Hannah Arendt proposed of it in her matrix aspects of the Greek *polis* (Arendt, 1958). With good reason, Hénaff reiterated that the public space of Western civilisation is “the civic

⁶ Nancy goes so far as to presuppose a “practical trading reason” – if one can call it that – in the Kantian sense in which reason is “practical”, i.e. through morality itself. Reason – understood as the human disposition – is itself engaged in commerce, it is also itself commerce: symbolic as much as material exchange. The symbol itself is formed in exchange and as exchange. The first trade is that of recognition. We used to speak of “commerce” in the sense of “company/society” and also of carnal relationship (Nancy, 2018, pp. 37-38). As if to say: In the beginning, there was *homo oeconomicus* (albeit, still in embryonic form!).

space of the Common Good” or, as we might also say, “a *device of relations* regulated by certain norms”, in which “a reasoned agreement between the members of the city is made possible with regard to what concerns the definition of institutions, the formation of laws and their application” (Hénaff, 2018, p. 88). But when, with the entry into the society-world of globalised and financialised capitalism, this idea and this practice of public space, which we have inherited from our Greco-Roman tradition and from the *Aufklärung*, are eroded not only in their architectural dimension, but also in their political-institutional one, it is only the reactivation of the political as a cycle of giving/receiving/returning, realised as an agonistic challenge of generosity, that can introduce the shared construction of a new “common space” and a new “common world”. The most eloquent example is that of the so-called *welfare state*. To put it bluntly, without a set of philosophical, religious and socio-cultural values such as the dignity of the person, the equality of individuals beyond the diversity of race, religion and culture, the belief in one’s own capabilities and life project, the desire to emancipate oneself from traditionalist prejudices and constraints, without this *Weltanschauung* common to parties that are ideologically very distant from each other, and even opposed to each other, the pluralistic and agonistic democracies of the post-World War II period would not have been possible. These values belonging to different symbolic universes nurtured the “conflicting consensus” (Mouffe, 2013) of the democracies of the “thirty glorious years” after World War II, creating collective and affective identifications that gave sap to universalist social policies and civic practices. As Seyla Benhabib would have put it (Benhabib, 2006), these cultural and affective values transformed the *ethnos* into the *demos* of post-World War II democracies. Political conflict and mutual public recognition between social actors were fuelled by positive affections such as solidarity, a sense of social justice, the moral imperative to reach out to the less fortunate, empathy, and the responsibility to care for the other. Was it not this true virtue ethic, which has become almost part of a mass common sense, that mobilised an unprecedented civic and institutional commitment? Without such an ethic inclined to compassion, care for those in need, and openness to the other, there can be no alliance. An alliance is a commitment between unequal beings (by status, income, power) who commit themselves to recognising each other as equal in dignity and in mutual duties to be fulfilled, not a contract between formally equal subjects. The alliance, in order not to resolve itself in the Hegelian logic of servant/master subjugation, must bet on diversity, otherness, and difference so that they translate into common and shared goods, into a form of coexistence in which, as Mauss states, it is possible to oppose each other

“without slaughtering each other” or “sacrificing each other”. There is no doubt that one or the other party can fail in their agreed duties in order to make their own will to power prevail. Therefore, in finding the balance – and such an undertaking succeeds only if there is the will to dialogue – lies the art of conflict management. Before Axel Honneth, Emmanuel Levinas had linked politics to “the struggle for recognition”: “Politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness. And political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition. Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition” (Levinas, 1961, p. 64; Honneth, 1992) to point out that the relationship with the other, in order to be authentic, must be, at least partially, asymmetrical, i.e. without reciprocity or, as Levinas puts it, it must be a “surplus”, which is “possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself” (Levinas, 1961, p. 64). But if Levinas calls this “possible surplus” a “religion” by relegating the exchange of goods to the circle of the economic and consigning happiness to justice understood as legal-formal equality (the question of the Third), Mauss, Durkheim’s nephew and pupil, takes a much more impervious, but theoretically more fruitful path. Reciprocity is not to be understood as the alternative or the opposite of Levinas’ “possible surplus”, but as its integration, as the other side of the same coin⁷. For Mauss, this is precisely the self-obligation of the gift, its ancipitous status of obligation and freedom. An *incipit* status means that what Levinas separates – ethics as an asymmetrical relationship with the Face on the one hand, and the question of the Third as a reciprocal pact between contracting parties considered equal on the other – Mauss, on the other hand, holds it together by playing out within different temporal contingencies now the register of reciprocity (of the mutual recognition of equals sanctioned by shared rules), now that of ethical self-obligation towards newcomers who demand recognition. Mauss’s spirit of the gift is not oblateness as a noble religious tradition has transmitted it to us, it is not the disqualification or putting reciprocity out of play, but in the modern age it is the willingness on the part of the dominant institutions – state, associations, organisations – to renew the cycle of giving/receiving/renewing every time the demand for recognition from new social

⁷ In this, Hénaff’s critique of the Levinasian conception of reciprocity as a concept confined to the sphere of contract and exchange of equivalents is a point-of-no-return. Levinas’s community is “a community of pure dissymmetry and unilateral recognitions: a boundless nonclosure [...]. The ethical bond is and remains beyond the political realm, situated as it is on a level impervious to symmetry” (Hénaff, 2012, p. 74). But ethics is that “surplus” required by the contenders to renew the covenant of living together, when the latter breaks down due to the emergence of new demands for recognition.

actors arises. To paraphrase a Habermasian expression from *Knowledge and Interest* (Habermas, 1973), the spirit of the gift is in modern societies the “emancipatory interest”, which goes beyond the “instrumental” or “strategic” interest, since it impels subordinate subjects (be they individuals or associated with human groups) to be recognised as public subjects of an organised community or as parts of a *demos* that understands itself neither as an ethnically defined identity nor as a set of rational agents moved exclusively by their own *self-interest*.

But it understands itself as a community of subjects willing to reopen the cycle of giving/receiving/returning, whenever the institutional system is subjected to the test of otherness.

5. GRAMSCI, MAUSS AND SEN: CONCRETE FREEDOM

In order to better understand the dialectic between reciprocity in the legal-political sense and ethical self-obligation, we are helped by Amartya Sen's reflection with his distinction between “functionings” and “capabilities”⁸. The “capabilities” approach, precisely because it looks not so much at goods or resources as at people's basic capacity to “function” in a certain way in the democratic space and to give concrete content to their freedom, emphasises the contingent dimension of the pact and the need for it to be open to the other, where reciprocity in the observance of rules and ethical obligation towards those who will legitimately claim to be part of it in the future are both constitutive elements of democratic coexistence. On the other hand, it may seem a coincidence we do not know how coincidental, Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* had reflected on the same example, illustrated by Sen, of suffering hunger to clarify the concept of concrete freedom linked to the objective conditions of life of the subject and his actual “possibilities” of choice. “Possibility”, writes Gramsci, “means liberty. The measure of liberty enters into the concept of man. That there are objective possibilities of not starving to death has its importance, it seems. But the existence of objective conditions, or possibilities, or liberty is still

⁸ As is well known, by “functioning” Sen means what a person may want to do or want to be in life. They concern basic needs and desires (such as being sufficiently nourished and not suffering from avoidable illnesses), as well as needs and activities of a high and complex nature (such as being able to participate in the political life of the community or having self-respect). By “capabilities” (or “capacitations”) Sen means all the possible combinations of functioning that each of us is able to enact in our life contexts: “Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)” (Sen, 1999, p. 75).

not enough: one must ‘know’ them and know how to make use of them. Man, in this sense, is concrete will, that is, the effected application of the abstract will or vital impulse to the concrete means that realise this will” (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1338). What is worth noting is that Gramsci attributes the “ability” to realise the conditions of concrete freedom to man’s political “capacity” to “transform” and “direct” other men, i.e. to associate in order to live together. This calls into question the politics of alliance as the creation of shared conditions of life in common and at the same time ethics as the realisation of the individual personality. In this sense, he states that “man is essentially ‘political’, since the activity to consciously transform and direct other men realises his ‘humanity’, his ‘human nature’” (p. 1338). In short, the alliance is not an immutable *datum* or a result guaranteed once and for all, but is itself an “agonistic” activity, which renews itself recurrently, based on historical circumstances and the re-interpretation of the values that generated it. In a word, the alliance must always be interpreted with respect to a parallelogram of power relations (with their respective symbolic and value universes) between social actors, including those that gradually appear on the scene, and, therefore, as an ever precarious point of equilibrium. It is no coincidence that in order to describe the uncertain and problematic nature of the alliance, Mauss takes as his model a situation that Gramsci would call a clash of hegemonies – and Honneth a struggle for recognition – when he writes that in relations between rival groups, “there is no middle way: one trusts completely, or one mistrusts completely” (Mauss, 1965, p. 104). Coming to terms, then, is a wager, a challenge, a risk, and presupposes the gesture of “laying down one’s arms” in order to renegotiate and redefine existing rules and values. The cycle of giving always begins again in this way: self-obligation to risk the gift of alliance and mutual trust. The phase of political democracy that we experienced after World War II (the so-called “thirty glorious years”) perfectly illustrates the “agonistic” essence of the alliance. The negative side effects associated with this historical-political cycle of democracy, which in part Tocqueville had already foreseen as an inevitable consequence of a mimetic passion for equality (clientelism, passivity, narcissistic consumerism, political disaffection, fiscal crisis of the state, etc.) or a narcissistic conception of equality (the “state’s” own “political” and “social” values, etc.), were the result of the “agonistic” nature of the “political” alliance or of a narcissistic conception of individual rights, it does not detract from the fact that modern democracies have been not only the outcome of power relations in the conflict between capital and the labour movement, but at the same time a declination of the Maussian spirit of gift, the expression of an “emancipatory interest”: an alliance, as Mauss put it, in which the contracting subjects

gave up something, “gave” themselves to each other “without sacrificing” (where “sacrificing” is equivalent to the cancellation of all self-interest). But if, as then happened with the triumph of neo-liberalism, over attachment to the common good prevails a complex of affections such as self-interest, the desire for easy personal enrichment, narrow proprietary individualism, the outcome will be the *hybris* of the logic of *homo oeconomicus* that will invade all institutions and all spheres of life. And on the political level, the regression from *demos* to *ethnos*, to the tribalisation of collective identities (Prosperi, 2016). Individual, civil, social and economic rights will also be dragged into an egotistic and nihilistic drift, to which no dutifulness on the part of social subjects and actors corresponds. Instead of citizens sharing, out of their singular differences, the same public space and a common *ethos*, we will have consumers and customers, subjects of oligarchic democracies, if not autocratic regimes. The ineluctable downside of this option, which may even be ideologically passed off as a rational choice (here again Lefort’s warning on the mechanisms of the functioning of ideological discourse returns), will be that of stirring up the sad and violent passions of envy, hatred of difference, mass narcissism, scapegoating, racism, sexism, nationalism, terrorism, etc. (Bodei, 1991; Pulcini, 2001). Certainly, trust and openness to the other entail exposure to the risk of checkmate. “Two groups of men who meet can only either draw apart, and, if they show mistrust towards one another or issue a challenge, fight – or they can negotiate” (Mauss, 1965, pp. 104-105). If there is no willingness to risk the “experience of the foreigner”, if those who previously recognised themselves in a pact of citizenship close themselves off in defence of their public space as if in a fortress, rejecting what Mauss calls the “law of hospitality” (p. 104), they will turn the pact into a fetish, into a theological dogma not susceptible to revision or further enlargement. The consequence can only be war, mutual hostility, the servant/master relationship, or “voluntary servitude” as the other side of the “steel cage” of an economic-political power that tends to be homogeneous and unopposed. In a word, the risk is that the *demos* will regress to the level of the *ethnos* with the result of a democracy without a *demos* or with a people conforming to the description of the classics, from Plato to Machiavelli, from Thucydides to Hobbes, from Tocqueville to Ortega y Gasset, from Croce to Canetti: a mass of individuals obeying irrational drives, prey to demagogues and barkers. In this framework, which is that of post-Fordist financial capitalism, Mauss’s diagnosis that *homo oeconomicus* is in front of us and not behind us takes on renewed relevance (Aime, 2013).

6. A NEW PHILOSOPHY-WORLD

It is precisely in this context – which is that of a planetary society dominated by globalised capitalism – that it becomes meaningful to take up the Maussian project of a *novum organum* for humanities and social sciences that has the gift cycle as its gravitational centre. I refer to a more articulate discussion of this theme that I have developed elsewhere (Fistetti, 2017). On the other hand, it can be said that the critical work of MAUSS has been moving in this direction since its inception (Caillé, 2014). Here I would like only briefly to try to move MAUSS’s line of research critique of generalised economism forward. In fact, in Mauss’s perspective, it cannot be accomplished by limiting itself exclusively to the plane of scientific argumentation, but must be transferred to a new vision of life, to a civic philosophy, to a conception of living-together and being-in-the-world such that it is innervated in beliefs, habits and social practices that are alternative to the dominant ones. On this terrain we find the Spinozian theme of the affections and passions in their relationship with politics and, to use Machiavelli’s formula, with “civil living”. When Mauss emphasises at the end of the *Essay* that the transcultural wisdom of the gift consists in being able to invent a form of coexistence in which “to oppose without slaughtering each other”, we cannot forget that as a militant socialist, a friend of Jaurès, he devoted a considerable part of his time to the foundation of production and consumption cooperatives (Mauss, 1997). In this political and trade union commitment he saw the construction of forms of community life that not only raised the “social” level of the economy, but also strengthened, we might say, the power of action of individuals, i.e. the feelings of “loyalty”, “industriousness”, “respect” and mutual esteem of citizens (Mauss, 1965, pp. 106-108). Associationist socialism – of English inspiration, to which Mauss looked sympathetically – represented for him the ideological referent of a political praxis of this kind. Now, on the horizon of the global age, in order to defeat the hegemony of generalised utilitarianism, it is necessary to oppose a philosophy-world – or, as Gramsci would say, a philosophy of praxis – which, far from proposing itself as a complete theoretical system, brings together the instances, affections and socio-cultural values common to the various social movements of resistance and struggle against globalised capitalism in view of a post-neoliberal world. And that, above all, is concerned with placing at the centre of the critical debate new forms of social organisation aimed at restoring momentum to the democratic ideal, once it has been ascertained that the myth of the unlimited growth of the productive forces and with it the illusion of the *homo faber* of finding a technical solution to the global risks to which

humanity is exposed is now unfeasible. As if the catastrophes of technological progress could be escaped by unlimitedly increasing its intrinsic logic without changing the direction of travel (Dupuy, 2004). Of course, it matters little whether this worldview is called convivialism or by any other name. What is essential is that it embodies a widespread culture, a common sense in gestation, a collective consciousness *in fieri* that walks on the legs of concrete social subjects. For this to happen, it is best not to lose sight of Mauss's lesson, namely to link the *horizontal* dimension of movements criticising the generalised economicist model with the *vertical* dimension of the re-institutionalisation of public space so that the reopening of the gift cycle produces both the legitimisation of new social subjects and the renormalisation of the economic, which has been completely deregulated following the triumph of financial capitalism (Pennacchi, 2015). It is barely worth recalling the enormous importance Mauss assigns in the *Essay* to law as an instrument of institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation of social relations. Thus, a civic philosophy aimed at scanning the lexicon of a possible new world in the making and experimenting its translatability into concrete practices of coexistence here and now.

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RIASSUNTO

In questo saggio sostengo che il "Saggio sul dono" di Marcel Mauss (1925) non solo intende inaugurare un nuovo paradigma sul terreno dell'etnologia e dell'antropologia, ma allo stesso tempo fa del dono una sorta di novum organum delle scienze sociali e della stessa filosofia morale e politica. Nella prima parte, ho ricostruito la critica che M. Merleau-Ponty e C. Lefort hanno mosso alla lettura "strutturalista" di Mauss da parte di Lévi-Strauss e, in una seconda parte, ho sottolineato l'importanza che M. Hénaff ha assegnato al dono cerimoniale delle società tradizionali come procedura intenzionale di riconosci-

mento pubblico reciproco tra gruppi. Ma, utilizzando alcune indicazioni di A. Caillé, spiego che questo dispositivo di riconoscimento reciproco e di alleanza, caratteristico del ciclo del dono (dare/ricevere/ricambiare), si applica anche nelle società moderne quando le istituzioni politico-giuridiche si sclerotizzano e perdono la loro legittimità di fronte a nuovi attori dell'azione politica (nuovi arrivate o nuovi arrivati, per usare la categoria arendtiana di natalità in senso lato).

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How to cite this paper:

Fistetti, F. (2023). The gift paradigm: Towards a science of “total social facts”. *Elementa. Intersections between Philosophy, Epistemology and Empirical Perspectives*, 3(1-2), 57-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/elementa-2023-0102-fisf>