

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern  
Societies. New Directions in Theoretical  
Reflection and Empirical Analysis**

**Scientific Report**

Delmenhorst, Germany, 24 - 26 May 2007

Convened by:  
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## **Executive Summary - Introduction and general context**

Since the end of the Cold War Western societies have seen confronted with new social tensions, processes of economic globalization as well as with a crisis of the welfare state. As a reaction, throughout Europe and the United States a strong interest in fostering communities, civil society or neo-republican ideals can be witnessed. What all these various approaches share is the common view that there should be a third principle on which democracy can rest, which differs from market transactions and state bureaucracy. This third realm is depicted differently depending on the theoretical approach followed.

The purpose of this workshop was also to discuss a ‘third realm’, namely the meaning of gift-giving and reciprocity in modern society, and the thesis taken as a starting point was that the ‘paradigm of the gift’ is still relevant for the social integration of modern societies.

The broader background of the workshop was that anthropologists like Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Marshall Sahlins pointed out that archaic societies were organized around the principles of giving, taking, and giving back. According to Mauss, pre-modern societies reproduce themselves through reciprocal gifts. However, most contemporary authors think that with the transition to modernity a separation has evolved between a private sphere of personal gifts and impersonal spheres of the state and economic markets. The dichotomy between, on the one hand, utilitarian individualistic action and, on the other, patterns of action that can be described as oriented towards values and norms goes hand-in-hand with the above development.

It can be shown, however, that many institutions and practices in modern society are constituted around patterns of reciprocity, such as certain macro-structures within the economic or state spheres. This claim constituted one of the motives of setting up the workshop and it deviates from the conventional wisdom of empirical sociology: empirical studies over recent decades have concentrated on private giving – e.g., birthday and Christmas gift-circles – since it was taken as given that gift-giving and reciprocity could not be found outside the private sphere. However, it can be claimed that even the meso- and macrostructures of modern societies rest on gifts and reciprocity: such as the division of labour, families, welfare states and non-profit-sectors. Hence, broadly understood, gift-giving can be found in numerous fields of interaction.

Marcel Mauss’s essay ‘The Gift’ proposed an approach suggesting that actions are simultaneously self-interested *and* disinterested, voluntary *and* obligatory. All contemporary approaches to reciprocity refer to Mauss’s essay, the spectrum ranging from rational choice theories through normativist approaches to attempts to overcome the dichotomy between interests and norms.

In the social sciences, various concepts currently try to answer the question of what we mean by “reciprocity.” In his introduction to the workshop, Adloff distinguished between (1) rationalistic and individualistic approaches, (2) non-individualistic and normativistic theories, and (3) an approach that explicitly tries to transcend the usual distinction between self-interested and normative action.<sup>1</sup>

1.) The utilitarian strand of thinking sees reciprocity as an outcome of selfish or self-interested behaviour. The underlying logic is a sort of *do ut des*: ‘I give you something to get something back, immediately and of the same value or worth.’ This strand of theory can be found in neoclassical economics, rational choice and versions of exchange theory.

2.) One can also find theories that focus on the symbolic, cultural, structural, and normative grounds of reciprocity. These holistic theories are interested in gift-giving because it cannot be reduced to mere instrumental exchange. Some scholars of the Parsonian tradition like Alvin Gouldner see reciprocity as a norm that individuals follow because they have internalized it.

3.) However, the point that can be made in proposing the fruitfulness of an independent ‘paradigm of the gift’ is developed mainly in current French sociology, which criticizes for example both Bourdieu’s and Derrida’s concepts of the gift from an anti-structuralist perspective. Some French sociologists, especially Alain Caillé, who unfortunately could not participate in the workshop, are involved in a re-examination of the concept of gift-giving and are trying to use the concept for a new foundation of social theory. Since its foundation in 1981, the M.A.U.S.S. network (*Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales*) of scholars in France, Canada, Switzerland and Italy, set up in France by Caillé, has given a new impulse on sociological reflections on gift-giving and reciprocity in Europe.

In our workshop, we engaged in this theoretical discussion and asked how fruitful the claim of a third paradigm is. And we also discussed empirical research into the forms of reciprocity, its gift-giving logic in the field of philanthropy, social control in the family or in institutionally mediated relationships.

The members of the workshop drew on their own and previous studies by others on the gift and reciprocity, and aimed at formulating a more concrete research agenda that would be visible at the international level. The aforementioned French discussion is rather theoretically abstract and internally directed to mainly inner-French debates. Thus, part of the workshop’s task was to build a bridge between these debates and other discourses in the international social sciences.

Besides social theory, the workshop was discussing two major fields of interest: institutionalised philanthropy and social control in face-to-face interactions vis-à-vis ‘institutional society’. The first field of interest (philanthropic institutions, charitable giving,

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, reciprocity has been seen as a psychological or anthropological universal by Lévi-Strauss or as an expenditure of energy by Bataille, but these approaches are rather marginal nowadays.

voluntary action, the gift economy) has gained increased attention since the need for new relations of the welfare state with the economy and civil society in an age of state retrenchment has been articulated. The second field deals with current developments of the institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation of reciprocity (such as the breakdown of positive, generalized reciprocity, or also distrust and social exclusion) in the family and in the field of institutionally mediated relationships.

The idea of the workshop went back to an initiative of a group of five of the participants: Nathalie Karagiannis who unfortunately was not able to come, Bente Blanche Nicolaysen, Ann Vogel, Christian Papilloud and Frank Adloff. This group first wanted to meet for a workshop on gift-exchange in modern societies to be held at the ISA-World Congress of Sociology in July 2006 in Durban/South-Africa. This meeting had to be cancelled because of the lack of support in terms of financial and infrastructural means. The ESF-workshop has resulted from the failed ISA-workshop and thanks to the funding by the ESF the group was able to meet up for the first time in May and also to invite some other colleagues and scholars working on convergent topics. We exchanged our views on the abovementioned topics and, furthermore, discussed whether some cross-national research projects may be developed in the near future. The workshop was organized as follows: on May 24 it was opened by a keynote lecture by Aafke Komter. On May 25 and 26 we held two thematic in-depth sessions. Due to the positive and focused atmosphere at the conference the presenters also managed to carry the already day-filling discussions into discussions over breakfasts and dinners.

## **Scientific Content**

Aafke Komter, Head of the Department of Social Science at University College in Utrecht, where she occupies the chair 'Comparative Studies of Social Solidarity', gave the introductory presentation on the 'The evolutionary roots human generosity'. Komter drew on her book 'Social Solidarity and the Gift' (2005), in which she shows that a theory of solidarity should incorporate some of the core insights from gift theory. Komter argued against utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism and suggested that gift-giving serves the function of maintaining social life. A 'genuine gift', in the words of Derrida, is truly altruistic and 'unspoiled' by expectations or acts of reciprocity. To the contrary, the 'utilitarian' approach assumes rational actors weigh their preferences according to some utility. Komter compared these ideas to evolutionary theory or, more precisely, to the question of the evolutionary roots of the gift and reciprocity. She argued against the anti-utilitarian and utilitarian view by exploring the evolutionary roots of various forms of reciprocal behaviour: not only humans but also primates (chimps, for instance, show empathy and practice a kind of moral bookkeeping), dolphins and elephants engage in co-operative behaviour and reciprocal

altruism. Rather than seeing 'the gift' as a paradigm for a critical analysis of contemporary society, or stressing its function in purely instrumental exchange, Komter argued that human generosity can best be understood by analyzing its evolutionary origins and as adaptive aspect of the maintenance of social life.

The discussion after the presentation focused mainly on three aspects: (1) on the biological foundation of a social phenomenon which can be called 'philanthropic particularism', (2) on the translation mechanism between the biological substratum and human social behaviour and (3) on the distinction between functional and genetical/ causal explanations of behavioural patterns such as reciprocal gift-giving.

Frank Adloff's (University of Goettingen/ EUI Florence) presentation opened the session on philanthropy on the second day of the conference (25 May). Adloff argued that in philanthropy as a field of social action 'the logic of the gift' is ubiquitous. Currently, philanthropy and charitable giving are widely discussed from a policy perspective yet constitute a theoretically underelaborated institutional sphere of permanent giving. Philanthropic giving (foundation grant-making) sets up relationships that, following Marcel Mauss, cannot be seen as a solitary act: solidarity and inclusion are constituted here as are hierarchical relations and exclusion. To ground this approach empirically and historically, Adloff addressed the social meaning of philanthropic foundations within time and across societies. The paper illustrated analysis of modern philanthropy by comparing US-American and European forms of philanthropy in certain points of history. Therefore, he raised the question which basic ideas are institutionally embodied in foundations and how these relate to the common good.

The following discussion centred on the relationship between philanthropy and the development of the welfare state, on the memorial functions of many foundations and the question which consequences an 'institutionalisation of the gift' brings about. Whereas Adloff tried to apply the Maussian categories of gift-giving and reciprocity to the realm of philanthropy, Ann Vogel (Singapore Management University) in the second presentation of the philanthropy session chose a different theoretical perspective, which operates with frameworks of macro-sociology and economic sociology.

Vogel proposed a theoretical and empirical research programme for economic sociology of what she calls the 'public gift economy'. This programme, she argued, must address the systemic development of philanthropic and charitable behaviour. Vogel discussed gift, grant and redistribution formulations by Kenneth Boulding, Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi and Max Weber. She made a case for the synthesis of these historical and analytic frameworks into a unified analytic framework for which Talcott Parsons's concept of the 'double interchange' can serve as methodological tool. This requires, as she argued, a turn from institutional analysis to a differentiation-theoretical perspective, which underlies Max Weber's influential formulation of 'economic rationality' but which at the same time has been

unable to account for the modern gift economies (public and private, as in the family home) in contemporary capitalism. Drawing on her work on philanthropic fundraising, Vogel pointed out that contemporary gift economies are shaped by the state and professions as the ‘big rationalisers’ (as Powell and DiMaggio see them). Vogel emphasized that specifically fundraising officers of non-profit organizations as key brokers should be looked at sociologically.

The successive debate tackled the question if a theory of gift-giving and reciprocity for analysing these developments is needed, or if macro-theories, like Parsons’s AGIL-scheme, are more suitable for such a task. Vogel defended the second perspective and pleaded for introducing the gift economy into the field of economic sociology.

Bente Blanche Nicolaysen (University of Bergen) asked in her presentation what form volunteering can take when those called upon to act through a voluntary association for ‘distant suffering’ are thousands of miles away from the person that is suffering and where therefore patterns of reciprocation cannot arise. Empirically, Nicolaysen drew on a case study of the local branch of a large national humanitarian organisation in Norway. More specifically, she examined this voluntary association’s raising and spending of both monetary and non-monetary funds for humanitarian causes outside Norway during 1953-2000. In theoretical terms she proposed to address the question of how an engagement in ‘distant suffering’ is possible and how it differs from other forms of volunteering which often appears in research as fundamentally positive activity, of benefit to the volunteer and the recipients of voluntary assistance, but also society at large. The engagement in ‘distant suffering’ reminds us that volunteering is not exclusively the warm and friendly category it often is assumed to be. According to Nicolaysen, the engagement in ‘distant suffering’, where the act of giving often takes place outside the sphere of mutual ties, allows us to explore ways in which gift relationships in volunteering can break down.

In the following discussion she stressed that studying the engagement with ‘distant suffering’ allows us to examine irresolvable tensions and paradoxes involved in the practice of gift-giving. The participants discussed the linkage between the economic basis of a voluntary organization, as empirically studied by Nicolaysen, with the change in the ideas that direct the organisation’s work. Discussing Nicolaysen’s contribution in reflection of Vogel’s paper, it became clear that a historical perspective is much needed both in terms of analyzing intra- and inter-organisational developments underlying the gift economy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The fourth presenter of the day, the historian Stephen Pielhoff (University of Giessen), regards the paradigm of gift-exchange as a third approach – above and beyond the dichotomy of interest and morality and as an alternative to the prevailing theories of action (which explain philanthropic giving either as actions motivated by instrumental rationality or norms). In his presentation he proposed to combine the classic gift-exchange theories by Georg Simmel and Marcel Mauss with the theoretical analyses offered as ‘theories of recognition’ by Axel Honneth and Paul Ricœur. Accordingly, just as the success of gift-exchange

relationships are subject to the imperative of intersubjective recognition so, too, problematic gift-exchange relationships should inversely be seen as struggles for recognition. The historical part of Pielhoff's paper focused on the German Kaiser Reich, where urbanisation and resulting social segregation led to indirect and delegated gift-exchange and forms of mediation between donors and recipients. In urban societies, mediating figures were in greater demand than ever before to act as 'system builders' (Thomas P. Hughes) in forging connections between 'civil society', the municipality and the state. However, the cases of failed patrons, competing mediators of culture and disregarded outsiders illustrated why the history of philanthropy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries cannot simply be documented, as Pielhoff concluded, as a story of success of the middle-class "civil society".

In the subsequent discussion among the conference participants it became clear that the rise of the mediators in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as the forerunner developments to the philanthropic fundraisers and their organizations as analyzed by Vogel. The question then became what the difference between U.S. American and European brokerage patterns is: 'games of democracy' or patronage?

The second thematic part of the workshop was opened by Jens Ehrhardt's (Free University of Berlin) presentation on divorce processes. Marital dissolution can be seen as a stressful life transition to which the former spouses must adjust. The divorcees have to solve several tasks: for example, they usually have to settle a child custody and set up visitation rules, build up a new identity not tied to the former marriage, set up separated households, reconstruct social networks, handle the economic consequences, and form new intimate relationships. In Ehrhardt's paper, which was based on an empirical project prospectus, marriages are conceptualised as an exchange process. Goods, emotions, services, sexual intercourse and money are exchanged in a way of 'generalized reciprocity' (Marshall Sahlins): being indebted to the spouse, reciprocation can normally be delayed and the value relation between the things and services given does not have to be equal. According to this view divorce is an exchange process as well: it aims to liquidate and cancel debts afterwards and at the end, the accounts of the ex-spouses should be balanced. Ehrhardt assumed that there are five key dimensions which explain the three pathways in this process: (a) ongoing conflicts: negative reciprocity, (b) cooperative liquidation: balanced reciprocity, (c) bargaining with limited damages. Ehrhardt focused thus on norm conflicts (1), on interest conflicts (2), on different assessments of values of the give and take (3), the volume of marital exchange (4) and on the conditions for remitting debts and forgiving previous damages (5). He pointed out that there are two general goals of the study: firstly, to explore divorcing processes with exchange theory, and, secondly, to discuss the construction of exchange theory itself.

In the discussion both goals were tackled: is a study of divorce best be conducted from the perspective of 'failed positive reciprocities' and what is the scope of exchange theory in general, respectively how suitable is it for explaining divorce processes?

Christian Papilloud (University of Lueneburg), as the second speaker in this session on new forms of reciprocity, presented a paper on the notion of trust in late modern society. He asked how trust is possible and what kind of relation to the theory of gift-giving exists – how can we trust each other today in such a complex and abstract society? Both trust and gifts, create time. Whereas Mauss showed that in pre-modern societies trust was created through time, late modern societies show the opposite pattern: time is created through trust. Furthermore, the idea that reciprocity is a universal category is, according to Papilloud, the last myth of the social sciences and he showed that trusting is a more fundamental category that is currently shaped socio-technical changes though. The technologically induced changes of processes of sociation need to be studied to find out how important trust is for societal integration.

The ensuing debate related those theses to the theoretical approach represented by the French M.A.U.S.S. movement. Especially Caillé's view on the anthropology of the gift was debated and partly severely criticized since he uses the notion of the gift as the universal foundation of sociation – across cultures and time.

Michalis Lianos (Sciences Po, Paris) gave the last paper (as part of the second session) on Saturday morning. Postindustrial societies can be seen as both universes of fierce competition and large-scale structures of 'assertive generosity'. One of the most interesting aspects of this parallelism is, as Lianos proposed, the radical segregation of these two dimensions at all possible levels: discourse, belief, identity and experience. In the 'institutional society', incitement towards personal adequacy is omnipresent; personal adequacy is to be reached via eliminating competitors and depriving others from benefiting from their own resources; donating resources is not prohibited in this context, it is just meaningless. On the other hand, no individual is an adequate 'citizen' in a capitalist society without the capacity to maintain an idea of himself or herself as a generous being. That idea will be reached via instituted channels of behaviour, such as charities or associations. One major aspect of that state of affairs is that the erosion of direct sociality to the benefit of institutional sociality has established giving as a 'register of adequacy' rather than a 'register of belonging'. In this sense, postindustrial capitalist conditions seem to assert that institutional sociality can transform the very core of direct sociality, mainly by segregating competition and solidarity; that segregation paradoxically turns solidarity into a competitive individual pursuit. Lianos formulated the thesis that this phenomenon is another expression of the erosion of prescriptive socio-cultural systems (which control the social bond via values and beliefs) and the ascendancy of institutional control over sociality through measuring performance.

The subsequent discussion took up on the theoretical categories involved, such as new identities, institutionally mediated action and social exchange and compared these with Papilloud's approach to the notion of trust. Lianos gave examples of some empirical work he had conducted in previous studies and related those to the diagnosis that 'the gift' becomes



more and more meaningless. Parallels to but also tensions with Vogel's and Papilloud's perspectives became visible.

### **Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field, outcome**

At the end of this focused and often passionate workshop, it was quite clear that a summary of all the topics we had tabled was impossible. Yet, the presentations and discussions were meant to be a first step, as they represent a variety of viewpoints on the gift — a circumstance which itself reflects the richness of an exchange of ideas and future research potentials on the gift. In the final discussion on possible future projects all workshop participants expressed their sincere hope that this workshop was only the first step in the process of establishing a regular forum and developing new collaborative social scientific projects.

Different topics and questions were thrashed out and we agreed on the following: firstly, a publication of the papers presented (either in a book or a special issue of a journal) would now be too premature because the topics were too diverse to present a coherent perspective on the gift to 'outsider'-readers of journals. In addition, since we discussed serious research directions, we decided that the next step should include reflection on the outlined choices and a subsequent definition of a common perspective which would allow us to grow not only audience for such an empirical and theoretical research programme but, equally important, a membership of a future collaborative network. Thus the workshop can be seen as a first step on the way of defining such a common perspective or a more narrowly defined set of perspectives. Such a further discussion would have to take up the question of what we can agree upon and where we do differ and what that means in terms of the consequences for the aforementioned goals. Nevertheless we envision a collaborative publication project in the near future and decided to discuss this further on email.

Among the topics to be discussed further is the question of the so-called micro-macro link in the field of theories of gift-giving, exchange and reciprocity. The question of the universality of the gift should be addressed as should the institutionalisation of the gift. Furthermore, the relationship between the realms of the market and the gift should be examined, and this might include the notion of trust. We were particularly interested in exploring this issue further with respect to Eastern and Central European transition societies.

In terms of perspectives involved we agreed on integrating more disciplines in possible future projects, such as anthropology, economics, law, literature, psychology, and theology. Finally, various possibilities related to the ESF's programmes were discussed, i.e. Forward Looks, Research Networking Programmes or Research Conferences. We discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each instrument in turn and agreed that we will expand the discussion on a future project via email in the incoming months after the conference.

We are grateful to our funder, the European Science Foundation, for the facilitation of this workshop. It gave a range of junior but nevertheless serious researchers the opportunity to present their own works and thoroughly engage with their colleagues' ideas and analyses. With this small but effective conference we hope to have established clearly the need for more research into the gift relationship and hope to have outlined a few viable possibilities of doing so in the near future.

*Frank Adloff, Christian Papilloud and Ann Vogel*

## FINAL PROGRAMME

### Thursday 24 May, 2007

- Early afternoon     *Arrival*
- 17:30                **Welcome Address of the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg**  
**Wolfgang Stenzel**
- 17:40                **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**  
**Dalina Dumitrescu** (Standing Committee for the Social Sciences)  
**Ulrike Landfester** (Standing Committee for the Humanities)
- 17:50                **Introduction to the Workshop**  
**Frank Adloff**
- 18:00                Opening Lecture: The Evolutionary Roots of Human Generosity  
**Aafke Komter**
- 18:45                **Discussion**
- 19:30                *Informal Get-Together/Bufferet*

### Friday 25 May, 2007

#### **Session 1: Institutionalised Gifts: Philanthropy**

- 09:00                The Institutionalisation of the Gift in Modern Philanthropy  
**Frank Adloff**
- 09:45                **Discussion**
- 10:15                The Gift Economy and Social Integration  
**Ann Vogel**
- 11:00                **Discussion**
- 11:30                *Coffee/ Tea*
- 11:45                Theorising the Humanitarian Gift with regard to "Distant Suffering"  
**Bente Blanche Nicolaysen**
- 12:30                **Discussion**
- 13:00                *Lunch*
- 14:30                Gift and Recognition: Philanthropy and the Rise of Mediators in the  
Kaiser Reich  
**Stephen Pielhoff**
- 15:15                **Discussion**
- 15:45                *Coffee/ Tea*

#### **Session 2: Changing Patterns of Reciprocity**

- 16:15                Pathways through Divorce Processes: How Reciprocity Sets the Course  
**Jens Ehrhardt**

17:00            **Discussion**  
17:30            Trust  
                  **Christian Papilloud**  
18:15            **Discussion**  
19:30            *Dinner*

## **Saturday 26 May, 2007**

09:15            Technical Empowerment of Reciprocity vs. 'Personal Inadequacy'  
                  **Michalis Lianos**  
10:00            **Discussion**  
10:30            **Summary session: Discussion on plans for follow-up research  
activities, publications and/or collaborative actions**  
12.15            *End of the workshop -lunch*  
Afternoon        *Departure*

## Final List of Participants

### France

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### Statistical information on participants:

Age Bracket: Besides two more senior participants (Komter and Lianos) the other participants belong to a younger generation of scholars, all born between 1968 and 1972.

Countries of origin are: Greece (1x), the Netherlands (1x), Germany (4x), Switzerland (1x) and Norway (1x).