

## Anti-utilitarianism, economics and the gift-paradigm

By Alain Caillé

I intend to give here a sketchy presentation of the academic work accomplished by an interdisciplinary review in social science, *La Revue du MAUSS*, The Review of the anti-utilitarian Movement in Social Science ([www.revuedumauss.com](http://www.revuedumauss.com))<sup>1</sup>. This Review was founded in 1981, by economists, anthropologists and sociologists as a reaction to the overwhelming development and imperialism of what has been called the “Economic model” in the social sciences. In the years 1960’, and especially with the Chicago School and the work of Gary Becker (or Hayek in another way), economists began to believe that their Rational Action (or Choice) Theory (RAT) was likely to explain not only what is going on on the market and through monetary exchanges, but any kind of social behavior : learning, wedding, religious belief, love or crime etc.; And, what is more surprising, the other social sciences, starting with sociology, have at this time largely agreed with this contention (Let us think for instance of James Coleman and Raymond Boudon. Or, in another way, Pierre Bourdieu). In fact, this enlargement of the traditional scope of economic science has been the intellectual and ideological prelude and the starting point to neo-liberalism which is nowadays triumphing as well in academic economic science as in the real world.

What can be opposed on a theoretical level to this overwhelming victory of the economic model ?

1°) One must show first that the vision of Man as an *homo oeconomicus*, which underlies this economic model, is the cristallisation and the condensation of a broader and more ancient anthropology and philosophy : utilitarianism. If this is true, criticizing the imperialism of economic science on thought and of the hegemony of the market on society implies to criticize, more deeply, the utilitarian anthropology, *i. e.* the instrumental vision of Man underlying them.

2°) And now, what can be objected to this utilitarian vision ? Our main intellectual ressource can be found, I believe, in the discovery made in 1923–24 by the french anthropologist Marcel Mauss (the nephew and intellectual heir to Emile Durkheim) of the fact that primitive, archaic

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<sup>1</sup> More than 1000 articles have appeared in the Review and about 30 books have been published in the collection (La Bibliothèque du MAUSS, Editions La Decouverte) linked to the Review and to the anti-utilitarian school. The Review counts contributors, readers and subscribers all over the world, but is really well known only in France, in Italy (where an italian version of the Review is published by Bollati-Bollinghieri, Casa Editrice, Turin), and a little less in Brazil. Cf. [www.revuedumauss.com](http://www.revuedumauss.com)

and traditional societies – and in some sense modern societies too - do not rely upon contract and commercial exchange but on what he terms the gift, or, more precisely, the triple obligation to give, take and return. The obligation to display one's generosity.

This discovery, I think, can and must be used as a foundational basis for social sciences (including economics) as well as for moral and political philosophy. It permits to show how and why the nowadays dominating human type (the *Menschentum* as Max Weber said), *homo oeconomicus*, the economic man, the man who is only interested in maximizing his own satisfaction, utility or preferences, is not the natural and universal one – whatever economists may think - but one among many others which have appeared and existed throughout History. And this is particularly important to state in order to understand that giving less room to economic necessities, to the market, and more to society, implies to give less importance to *homo oeconomicus* and more to other types of Man, for instance to *homo politicus*, to *homo ethicus* or to *homo religiosus*.

In this paper I will explain how utilitarianism (I) and gift (II) can be defined. And I shall draw a few conclusions.

## **I) Utilitarianism**

What is utilitarianism ? And in what sense can it be said to be the matrix of the generalized economic model which is spreading through social sciences and moral philosophy since almost 50 years ? At first sight the answer is not an easy one. A doctrine is frequently understood in quite different ways. This is the reason why, for instance, Marx may have been reputed at times to be Hegelian or as Spinozist, Bergsonian or Husserlian etc. In the case of utilitarianism yet, this diversity of possible interpretations is somewhat astounding. In Germany, France or Italy, until quite recently, almost nobody was interested in utilitarianism any more. It was held to be an empty and outdated doctrine. Histories of philosophy, of sociology and economics hardly mentioned it. Only sometimes did they remind their readers of the existence of a Jeremy Bentham – thought of as the father of utilitarianism and a poor philosopher as well – and of his main book, *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). If they were to go into details, they added the names of his alleged precursors – the Scottish moralists, Frances Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith; or, on the continent, Helvetius, Maupertuis or Beccaria – and at least one important and famous heir, John Stuart Mill, supposed to have given the utilitarian doctrine its most synthetic formulation in *Utilitarianism* (1861).

This deep lack of interest in utilitarianism is amazing if we remember that, as J. Schumpeter<sup>2</sup> and R. Pribram have clearly established, political

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<sup>2</sup> Schumpeter Joseph, 1954, *History of Economic Analysis*, Allen & Unwin, and Oxford University Press.

economy grew out of utilitarian philosophy, and that the main theoretical and political debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed within its realm and about it. Just three examples :

*First*, Nietzsche, when he was Paul Rhée's friend, was an utilitarian, before he became a radical anti-utilitarian, mocking and stigmatising the calculating and utilitarian "last man" only looking for his own happiness.

*Second*, it was in order to oppose the utilitarian sociology of Herbert Spencer – the most popular in the occidental world around the years 1880 – that Émile Durkheim created the French School of Sociology and *L'Année sociologique*.

*Third*, French 19<sup>th</sup> century socialism, which culminated with Jean Jaurès, developed an ambivalent relationship to Bentham's utilitarianism. He agreed with it based on his materialistic rationalism but tried to surpass it by giving altruism a bigger importance than egoism. The same is in some sense true for Marxism as well.

Egoism? Altruism? Here we reach the puzzling core of the debate. For most economists and sociologists, utilitarianism is this doctrine which asserts: First, that actors are, or should be held to be, mere individuals seeking nothing else but their own happiness or self-interest. Second, that this is good and legitimate for there is no other possible rational goal. Third, that this rational goal is to be pursued rationally, *i. e.* through maximising their pleasures (or their utility, or their preferences) and minimising their pains (or their disutility). Understood in this way, utilitarianism is what one of his best connoisseurs, Élie Halévy<sup>3</sup>, called "une dogmatique de l'égoïsme" and more than the anticipation of what is called today the "economic model in the social sciences" (Philippe Van Parijs) or, more generally, rational-actor theory (RAT). It simply is the general theory of the *homo oeconomicus*. This is how the sociologists Talcott Parsons or Alvin Gouldner still understood utilitarianism in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) or in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970). For them, as for Durkheim or Max Weber, sociology must be thought of as anti-utilitarian, *i. e.* a theoretical discourse recognizing the reality and the importance of interested calculations, but refusing to admit that the whole of social action could or should be reduced to instrumental rationality.

What makes things difficult, yet, is that the mainstream Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, from J. S. Mill to John Rawls, via H. Sidgwick, G. Moore or J. C. Harsanyi, has developed in the wake of utilitarianism but in giving much less importance to the postulate of rational egoism than to the utilitarian principle of justice formulated by Bentham: just (or right) is what brings the largest amount of pleasure to the greatest number. The conclusion can be easily guessed: if I intend to be (or look) just and morally irreproachable, I may have to sacrifice my self-interest for the sake of general happiness. Utilitarianism which seemed to be a "dogmatique de l'égoïsme" suddenly turns into a plea for altruism. Or even for sacrifice. This is

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<sup>3</sup> Élie Halévy, 1995, *La formation du radicalisme philosophique* (1905), 3 vol. PUF, Paris. Abridged translation in English

precisely the reason why John Rawls tried to formulate other principles of justice than the utilitarian ones which might prevent urging the sacrifice of individual freedom for the sake of the greatest number's interest. Did he succeed, one might ask? This is another story.

Egoism? Altruism? Is *Homo oeconomicus* necessarily self-interested? Not always, answers Gary Becker, the herald of rational-actor theory. Some of the individuals' satisfaction implies maximising the satisfaction of others. They might be called altruistic egoists. Here we begin to understand that the discussion of the true nature of utilitarianism is full of enigmas and mysteries. Lacking space to explore them, I will just state five theses:

1. Utilitarianism can be defined by the paradoxical and probably impossible combination of two assertions, one positive and the other normative. The positive one (about what *is*) holds actors to be self interested and rationally calculating individuals. The normative one (about what *ought to be*) says that just (or right or good) is what permits to obtain the greatest possible happiness for the largest number.

2.) Theories which advocate that the conciliation of the greatest possible happiness with individual self-interest is obtained through contract and free market can be held to be utilitarian *largo sensu*. Those, like Bentham's theory of legislation or Plato's theory of the philosopher king, which believe that it is possible only through the action of a rational legislator who manipulates desires through rewards and punishments – realizing what É. Halévy called an artificial harmonisation of interests –, can be said to be utilitarian *stricto sensu*.

3.) If the word “utilitarianism” is recent, the two basic principles of utilitarianism (about the *is* and about the *ought to*), are as old as European philosophy (not to speak of the Chinese. Cf. The legist school) whose history, since Socrates, can be read as an ever renewed struggle between utilitarian and anti-utilitarian formulations<sup>4</sup>.

4.) Utilitarianism is a theory of practical rationality, viewed as instrumental rationality, enlarged to the whole of moral and political philosophy. Economic theory can be seen as the crystallization of the positive dimension of utilitarianism.

5.) The critic of utilitarianism and of rational-actor theory can only succeed if it takes seriously the discovery by Marcel Mauss of the central place of gift in social relations.

## II) Gift

Since 1923–24, with the publication in *L'Année sociologique* of *L'Essai sur le don (The Gift)* by Marcel Mauss – Durkheim's nephew and intellectual heir – enquiries on the practices of ceremonial gift have been central in the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Alain Caillé, Christian Lazzeri, Michel Senellart (Eds), 2001, *Histoire raisonnée de la philosophie morale et politique. Le bonheur et l'utile*, La Découverte, Paris.

work of ethnologists<sup>5</sup>. But it would be a great mistake to believe that gift practices are relevant only for primitive societies and have disappeared in ours. The obligation to give – or, better, the triple obligation to give, take and return –, which embodies the basic social rule in at least a certain amount of primitive and archaic societies, as Mauss shows, is just the concrete face of the principle of reciprocity. This principle of reciprocity has been erected by Claude Lévi-Strauss as the basic anthropological principle and set by Karl Polanyi in sharp contrast with market and redistribution. If political economic sociology is to thrive it will necessarily be through asking, for each case of economic practice to-day, which role the logics of market, redistributive hierarchy or reciprocal gift respectively play. Beyond the special case of economic sociology, one can argue that the theory of gift relation is indispensable to general sociological theory and for the renewal of a moral and political economy.

Mauss' essential discovery is that in what one can call the first society ( This generalisation is mine. Mauss is more cautious. A. C<sup>6</sup>.) the social bond is not built on the basis of contract, barter, higgling-haggling or market exchange, but through obeying the obligation of rivalry through displayed generosity. Primitive gift indeed has nothing to do with charity. Pervaded with aggression and ambivalence, it is an agonistic gift. It is not through economising but in spending and even dilapidating or in accepting to lose his most precious goods that one can make his name grow and acquire prestige. This discovery represents of course a huge challenge to the central postulates of economic theory and of rational-actor theory, since it shows that “*homo oeconomicus* is not before but after us”, as Mauss writes. He entirely lacks the naturalness which economists attribute to him. The goods which are so given, taken and returned (counter-given) generally have no utilitarian value at all. They are valued only as symbols of the social relation they allow to create and feed through activating the unending circulation of a debt, which can be inverted but never liquidated. Gifts are symbols, and they are reciprocal. Through the circulation of those gifts what is secured is the public *recognition* of the identity and of the value of the partners, individual or collective engaged in the gifts circulation. The gifts which circulate are not only positive ones, benefits, but as well negative ones, misdeeds, insults, injuries, retaliations or bewitchings. The most famous illustrations of this type of gift are the *potlatch* of the Kwakiutl Indians (NW of Canada's coast) and the *kula* of the Trobrianders.

What remains to-day of this primitive universe of the gift apart from Christmas or birthday gifts ? Apparently not a great many things, and anyway our conception of gift has been altered and reshaped by 2 000 years of Christianity (all great religions moreover, buddhism or islam, must be construed as the results of a universalistic transformation of the primary system of archaic gift). Yet, if one looks closer at it, it appears that a large amount of goods and services still circulate through the gift principle. Since

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<sup>5</sup> Mauss Marcel, 1950, « Essai sur le don » (1923-24), in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, PUF, Paris. Translation into English : *The Gift*, (with an introduction by Mary Douglas), 1990, Routledge, Londres.

<sup>6</sup> Caillé Alain, 2000, *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme*, Desclée de Brouwer Paris

Titmuss' *The Gift Relationship*, the best known illustration is the case of blood givers. Jacques T. Godbout shows that the genuine specificity of modern gift is that it can become a gift to strangers<sup>7</sup>. More generally, it is possible to hypothesise that the obligation to give remains the fundamental rule of "primary sociality", *i. e.* of the face-to-face and interpersonal relationships developed in family, neighbourhood, love or friendship. In short, in all those types of relations in which the personality of persons is more important than the functions they accomplish. And even in the sphere of "secondary sociality" – impersonal on principle; the sociality of Market, State or Science, ruled by impersonal laws, in which the efficiency of persons is more important than their personality – the obligation to give, receive and reciprocate still matters. It is subordinated to market and hierarchy but its role is often nonetheless decisive.

The connection between Mauss's discovery of the gift and the new economic sociology or political economy is clearly visible. As Mark Granovetter explains, the key to the understanding of social action must not be looked for in an overarching holistic rule nor in individual rationality, but in the networks or, more precisely, in the trust which the participants to the network share. All this is true, but it must be added that networks are created by gifts and that it is through the renewal of those gifts that networks are nourished. Network relationships are gift relationships (the first large network ever studied was the *kula ring* described by B. Malinowski).

But we can go a step further. A possible and even obligatory step if we believe the M.A.U.S.S group and the *Revue du MAUSS*). This group advances the idea that the specificity of sociology, as compared to economics, lies in an anti-utilitarian way of thinking shared by Durkheim, Weber, Marx or even Pareto. This principled anti-utilitarianism, however, can make full sense only on the basis of Mauss's discovery of the gift and in taking seriously what A. Caillé calls the *paradigm of the gift*. What Mauss shows, through his enquiry on archaic gift, is that social action is not shaped only by the individual and rational self-interest stressed by rational-actor theory but also by a primary logic of sympathy (called aimance (lovingness) by Caillé), and that this tension between self-interest and sympathy is crossed by another tension between obligation and freedom. The obligation to give is a paradoxical obligation to be free and to oblige others to be free too. Gift, so, is an hybridation between self-interest and other-interest, and between obligation and liberty (or creativity). And not only *is* it empirically so. It also *has to be* so. If self-interest were not mixed with interest toward others (and reciprocally) gift would become either a buying act or a sacrifice. And if obligation were not mixed with freedom (and reciprocally) it would become a purely formal and empty ritual or collapse into non sense.

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<sup>7</sup> Godbout Jacques T. (with Alain Caillé), 2000 (1998), *The World of the Gift*, Mac Gill-Queen's University Press, University Press, Montreal, Kingston, Londres, Ithaca.

## Conclusion

The main lessons we may learn from those considerations are four:

*The sociological lesson* is that social bond is constructed neither starting from individual rational interest or from an overarching and eternal law. It can be correctly construed neither on an individualistic or a holistic paradigm. It is built through an interactionist logic of alliance and association which is the very logic of the political. Maussian gift is a political gift.

*The political lesson* is that gift was long thought and enacted through religion, as a religious ideal. Today, the democratic ideal represents its most advanced form. The main problem all modern societies have to face is how to keep this ideal alive, somewhere between religious traditions and modern political ideologies.

*The epistemological lesson* is that economics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy etc. must not be thought, taught, learned and practiced as totally separate and alien disciplines, but as moments of a *general social science* the main question of which is : which part of social and human activities is and must be devoted to satisfying needs, to functional, instrumental and utilitarian activities ? and which to producing meaning, making sense of life, to symbolic, ritual, political and anti-utilitarian activities ?

*The economic lesson* is that markets and economies cannot work and function if they are not embedded in a political, institutional and juridical frame which allows the cooperation, or at least the coordination between all members of the society. For that reason, institutions and political logic have priority over economy. This conclusion is shared by Neo-institutionalism (R. Coase, O. Williamson, D. North, E. Brousseau in France), the moral economy of Amartya Sen, the Regulation (Robert Boyer etc. ), the Conventions (Olivier Favereau etc. ) or the anti-utilitarian Schools. All together they design what may be called a *New political economy*, quite different from the dominating standard paradigm in economics which thinks the economic science as a mechanical and mathematical science.

The specificity of the anti-utilitarian school is to link together the question of the political and religious foundation of societies with the question of the gift, of recognition and of the building of individual and collective identities. Its main hypothesis is that men are not only self-interested animals, eager only to get and own more and more things and riches, but that first of all they desire to be *recognized* (the craving for money and richness being interpreted as the most current translation of the need of recognition). The main present international philosophical discussion (which is now substituting the debate about Rawls' *Theory of Justice*) now bears on the problem of recognition and identity (Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser). The anti-utilitarian hypothesis is that Human beings' first desire is to be recognized and valued as givers.

Starting from this a certain amount of economic and political conclusions can be derived.

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