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Bourdieu, a Paradoxical “Inheritor”?¹

Philippe Chanial

In many respects, Mauss’s *The Gift* (1950) looks like an inheritance with neither a testament nor inheritors. From this perspective, the brilliant introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss by his pupil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, can be read as a first-class burial, despite Lévi-Strauss’s praise of his “revolutionary character” and his desire to develop all the potentialities that had merely been outlined. Like a modern-day Columbus, Mauss had not made the discovery he thought he had made: he had not set foot on “one of the rocks on which our societies are built” (Mauss 1989, 148) but had unwittingly set foot on a completely different continent, namely that of the “principle of reciprocity,” a fundamental rule of human social life. Now, for Lévi-Strauss, this principle opened the way to a discovery far more essential than Mauss’s, namely the emergence and pervasiveness of symbolic order and thought, the difference between nature and culture as manifested in exemplary fashion through the universal prohibition of incest. In short, behind gift-giving, there is exchange; behind exchange, there is a whole forest of symbols; and behind the forest, there is this fundamental prohibition, this universal taboo, that gives rise to culture.

Out of this prohibition comes another, just as binding, albeit of a methodological nature. Proclaimed by structuralist science, it

1. This text is taken partly from our introduction to Chanial (2008, 15–22). For an in-depth and invaluable discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of gift-giving, see Silber (2009).

proscribes any “verbose phenomenology” that “would risk committing sociology to a dangerous path: even a path of destruction, if we then went one step further and reduced social reality to the conception that man—savage man, even—has of it” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 57–8). In short, not only does gift-giving hide the forest but—worse still—by getting too close to it, the sociologist would sink into a truly bad form of sociology. Given this “tragic risk,” and as a consequence of this methodological taboo, for Lévi-Strauss there is no alternative for understanding the meaning of human actions other than to detach oneself from them to obtain a clearer perspective, the better to reveal them in the very structure of exchange.²

Given that Bourdieu critiqued what Lévi-Strauss called the “mechanical laws” of the “cycle of reciprocity,” focusing on how the objectivist approach to structuralism leads agents to be reduced to the “status of automata” and causes the permanent uncertainty—the “charm”—of these exchanges to be written off (Bourdieu 1990a, 98–99), he could very well be considered Mauss’s legitimate heir.

He certainly numbers among the French sociologists who have attempted to draw out all the consequences of Mauss’s theory of gift-giving; so much so, that one might consider his overall sociological theory in large part to have originated from an ongoing dialogue with (and against) *The Gift*. Hence, when Bourdieu masterfully expounds his concepts of the logic of practice and habitus, it is in the context of his ethnography of Kabyle gift exchange (1977; 1990a). Likewise, he first discusses the scope of the concept of rules in the social sciences—and through it the fundamental issue of “determination” and the social regularity of practices—in reference to the rule of reciprocity (1977; 1990a). Finally, when he sets out his theory of symbolic capital, it is again in response to the paradoxes of gift-giving examined by Mauss: a giving that is both self-interested and generous, free and obligatory (Bourdieu 1990b, Book 1, Chapter 7).

2. And, thereby, as Claude Lefort (1951) would reproach him in an important paper, to make the concrete subjects of the exchange disappear. And, in the case of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to favor “the truth of generalized sociology” to the detriment of that of “microsociology,” somehow neglecting the fact that it is not the formal structures that “make men, society and history exist”. These must, in fact, be fulfilled, embodied, “the most proper task of anthropology” consisting precisely in “joining objective analysis to lived experience” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 119). For a more Maussian reading of the work of Lévi-Strauss, see Marcel Hénaff’s fine summary (1991).

The Dual Truth of the Social and the Dual Truth of the Gift

In the desire to find a middle way between objectivism (something for which he criticizes structuralism) and the subjectivism characteristic of the humanistic tradition of the philosophy of the subject, Bourdieu's theory of action in fact systematizes this dialogue with Mauss and (or through) Lévi-Strauss.³ Is the rules-strategy pair not intended to show that, like gift-giving, action is inseparably "constrained" and "free"? Likewise, does the hypothesis of a "dual truth of the social" not generalize what Bourdieu would later call the "dual truth of the gift" (Bourdieu 1997, 229–240), i.e., the fact that any social practice necessarily expresses both "self-interest" and "generosity"?

A few words on these two disturbing and recurring homologies: first, by showing that the giving—or exchange—of women results from "matrimonial strategies," Bourdieu underscores how the logic of practice, by virtue of its plasticity, its indetermination, or even its generative spontaneity, generally forbids us to see it as the simple mechanical application of an underlying rule—for example, the rule of reciprocity—which the sociologists claim to have revealed "by putting themselves in the objectivist position, that of God the Father watching the social actors like puppets moved by the strings of structure" (Bourdieu 1990b, 9). Even so, the idea of strategy for Bourdieu does not imply a conscious or calculated orientation of practice. Practice does not dissolve into explicit intention or calculation, any more than gift-giving can be summed up in the economists' "exchange of equivalents". Every strategy is the product of the "feel for the game"—for example, the sense of honor—associated with each social game, and acquired by practicing and experiencing it. In this sense, this metaphor of the game and the feel for the game—which is to say the very concept of habitus—enables Bourdieu to explain that the subject of practice, like the giving itself, can be determined, "constrained," and nonetheless active, "free."⁴

3. In the long and invaluable interview that introduces *In Other Words*, Bourdieu confides at length that most of the concepts he used and the research he had conducted up to that point "came into being on the basis of a generalization of the results of the ethnological and sociological work [he] had done in Algeria" (Bourdieu 1990b, 23).

4. Or, rather, because it is fashioned by the practice itself, resulting from an incorporated understanding, and as such falling under the conscious/unconscious

The second homology derives from the first. When Bourdieu refers to the “dual truth” of the social—its “objective truth” and its “lived truth”—it is once again gift-giving that he uses as a model. What is this “dual truth of the gift” that is so paradigmatic for his general theory of action and even of social relations? He explains it as follows: “On one hand, [the gift] is experienced (or intended) as a refusal of self-interest and egoistic calculation, and an exaltation of gratuitous, unrequited generosity. On the other hand, it never entirely excludes awareness of the logic of exchange or even confession of the repressed impulses and, intermittently, the denunciation of another denied truth of generous exchange—it’s constraining and costly character (Bourdieu 2000, 191). So there is a “lived truth” of giving, which must be considered as such, i.e., as a free and above all disinterested act, and not as a cynical calculation. However, there is still an awareness of the “structural truth” revealed by Lévi-Strauss, namely the principle of reciprocity. As many Kabyle proverbs attest, gift-giving is not only an act of kindness, it also brings misfortune. Why? Because it infringes the freedom of the receiver and requires him to give back, sometimes more than he has received; and because the gift is constantly suspected of having been made only for this purpose—to oblige the other and, without saying so, to obtain greater benefit.

The Constitutive Illusion of Gift-Giving

The argument with which Bourdieu explains the social conditions of this dual truth is well-known. Starting with the observation that “in every society... if it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be *deferred*” (1977, 5), he suggests that this interval of time is what makes it possible to obscure the contradiction between the subjective truth of the gift, conceived as a generous and unreciprocated act, and its objective truth, namely the fact that the gift is only one moment within a relationship of exchange governed by the principle of reciprocity. “If I can experience my gift,” Bourdieu says, “as a gratuitous, generous gift, which is not to be paid back, it

distinction, habitus also falls “under the distinction between what is the product of a simple causal constraint and what is ‘free’” (Bouveresse 1995, 583).

is because there is a risk, no matter how small, that there will not be a return (there are always ungrateful people), therefore a suspense, an uncertainty, which the interval between the moment of giving and the moment of receiving causes to exist as such” (1994, 94).

However, this uncertainty should not deceive us. Or, rather, it is the illusion that constitutes the gift in its lived experience. Indeed, this interval, coming between the gift and the counter-gift, enables the objective exchange to be experienced as free, for both the giver and the receiver. Moreover, “the interval that makes it possible to experience the objective exchange as a discontinuous series of free and generous acts is what makes gift exchange viable and acceptable by facilitating and favoring self-deception, a lie told to oneself, as the condition of the coexistence of recognition and misrecognition of the logic of the exchange” (2000, 192). Giver and receiver thus collaborate, unconsciously, in the mode of *illusio*, in an effort to dissimulate, aimed at “denying the truth of the exchange, the exchange of exact equivalents, which represents the destruction of the exchange of gifts” (1998, 95).

A Reverse Sociology Based on Gift-Giving

Beyond this argument on the temporality of the gift,⁵ Bourdieu seems to have built his entire theory of action and of social relations on this lie to oneself. If the dual truth of the gift in fact conceals the law of interest, a calculus as unconscious as it is generalized (Caillé 1994, Chapter 1⁶), the same seems to hold for the dual truth of the social. Bourdieu constantly invites us to generalize what he believes he has revealed in the apparent enigma of gift-giving—in short, to suggest that the very wide range of practices that do not have economic (monetary or material) profit or capital as their explicit or immediate purpose can be deployed effectively only when governed by the universality of the principle of economy;

5. Highly debatable. Cf. Testart 2007, 223–226.

6. In this work, Caillé develops a critique of Bourdieu to which the critique presented here owes a great deal, although here I stress more the strange reverse sociology through gift-giving in which this paradoxical heir invites us to engage.

that is, of implicit calculations aimed at ensuring the optimization of the cost-benefit balance sheet.

What is striking here is that the principle of economy is generalized in terms of gift-giving, and that it is used so as to more readily overcome the perplexing difficulties of representing the motivations of action and the social relationship in terms of quid pro quo. “Thus, the exchange of gifts (or women, or services, etc.), *conceived as a paradigm of the economy of symbolic goods*,” Bourdieu writes, “is opposed to the equivalent exchanges of the economic economy as long as its basis is not a calculating subject, but rather an agent socially disposed to enter, without intention or calculation, into the game of exchange” (1998, 98, my emphasis).⁷ If the model of the exchange of gifts can thus constitute the paradigm for action or for the relationship, it is in fact because it supplies the ideal, unvarnished *illusio*. According to Bourdieu, this makes it possible to study the various markets of symbolic goods in the form of “a system of objective probabilities of profit” (2000, 193) and to reveal that what is at the source of every generous or disinterested action, in the various social fields, is none other than the preservation or increasing of symbolic capital.

In this sense, interpreting the social in the register of gift-giving or through the lens of gift-giving paradoxically implies, for Bourdieu, unmasking all forms of denial, euphemization, or transfiguration of the real economics of real exchanges, deconstructing all the symbolic constructions that objectively tend to conceal the objective truth of practice and social relationships, whether they

7. Once again, the concept of habitus reveals the meaning of practices, i.e., the “interest” or the *illusio* that motivates and guides them. Hence this alternative formulation: “When one forgets that the giver and the receiver are prepared and inclined through the whole work of socialization to enter, without intention or calculation of profit, into generous exchange, whose logic is objectively imposed on them, one may conclude that the gratuitous gift does not exist, or is impossible, since the two agents can only be conceived as calculators giving themselves the subjective project of doing what they do objectively, according to Lévi-Strauss’s model, that is, an exchange obeying the logic of reciprocity” (Bourdieu 1998, 95–6, translation corrected). Or: “[T]he gift as a generous act is only possible for agents who have acquired—in social universes where they are expected, recognized and rewarded—generous dispositions adjusted to the objective structures of an economy capable of providing rewards (not only in the form of counter-gifts) and recognition, in other words a *market*, if such an apparently reductive term is permitted” (Bourdieu 2000, 193).

based on interest or power—in short, generalizing this model of the “social lie” or of *common misrecognition*. From this point of view, the concept of habitus, which was precisely supposed to articulate the two faces of gift-giving, and thereby the two faces of social action—obligatory and free, interested and generous—leads to a systematic emphasis on the first of each of these pairs of terms. Because it is the product of the structures it tends to reproduce, habitus implies submission to the “established order” and “causes the objectively calculable demands of a particular form of economy to be experienced as an unavoidable call of duty or an irresistible impulse of feeling” (Bourdieu 1990, 161).⁸

Preserving the Alchemy of Symbolic Exchange: Yes, But How?

If there is no alternative to the structuralist reduction of gift-giving to the principle of reciprocity other than its identification with the most advanced stage of the social lie, does Bourdieu not in fact invite us to be resolutely skeptical in order to disabuse us of the illusions of gift-giving?

Yet this is not the meaning, at least from a normative standpoint, of the paradoxical eulogy of the gift which stands out in his later works. In his *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu writes, “The particular difficulty we have in thinking about gifts is due to the fact that as the gift economy has tended to shrink to an island in the ocean of the fair-exchange economy, its meaning has changed... Within an economic universe based on the opposition between passion and interest..., between things that are free and things that have a price-tag, the gift loses its real meaning as an act situated beyond the opposition between constraint and freedom, individual choice and collective pressure, disinterestedness and self-interest, and becomes a simple rational investment strategy directed towards the accumulation of social capital, with institutions such as public relations

8. As he notes in his *Pascalian Meditations*, “The gift is expressed in the language of obligation. It is obligatory, it creates obligations, it obliges; it sets up a legitimate domination” (Bourdieu 2000, 198). In *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu had already shown that the study of gift-giving leads to the study of the “fundamental forms of domination.”

and corporate gifts (cf. Godbout, in Chaniel, 2008, Chapter III), or a kind of ethical feat that is impossible to achieve because it is measured against the ideal of the true gift, understood as a perfectly gratuitous and gracious act performed without obligation or expectation, without reason or goal, for nothing” (Bourdieu 2000, 196–7).

As what he calls “the economic economy”—the economy of the *quid pro quo*—has spread and generalized, and with it the “calculating disposition” inseparable from “the development of an economic and social order characterized, as Weber puts it, by calculability and predictability” (Bourdieu 2000, 196), it has become impossible to access the “real meaning”: of gift-giving—which is not to say that giving, which in the past was everywhere, is henceforth nowhere. According to Bourdieu, the exchange of gifts always leads to lasting relationships, and the various fields and markets of symbolic goods, in particular those of art or religion, partly resist this trend. Nonetheless, what is at play tends to cease to be understandable in these exchanges.

What meaning, then, should we assign to Bourdieu’s final, surprising eulogy of gift-giving, expressed in such Maussian terms? We are back to the paradox with which we suggested interpreting his strange sociology based on gift-giving. This paradox is in a sense way intensified by the later Bourdieu’s invitation to adopt once again the language of the gift in order to denounce the growing ascendancy of the economic, utilitarian vision promoted by our modern societies. Indeed, for him it is not so much a matter of loosening this constraint of reciprocity in order to look in a different way at what is at play within the exchanges, as of focusing on how this “symbolic revolution” was able to “break away from the gift economy, which, Mauss observes, ‘was ultimately, at the time, anti-economic,’ only by progressively suspending the collective denial of the economic foundations of human existence” (Bourdieu 2000, 196). For Bourdieu, it is a matter of defending this “collective hypocrisy in and through which society pays homage to its dream of virtue and disinterestedness,” of “saving this ‘alchemy of symbolic exchanges’” and, through it, the *illusio* that is necessary to the social game.⁹

9. Bourdieu concludes from this that the “scholastic question of whether generosity and disinterestedness are possible should give way to the political question of the

This paradoxical injunction that says, “Let us lie to one another the better to resist the economic truth that governs our exchanges and practices,” demonstrates Bourdieu’s very Pascalian, profoundly pessimistic anthropology (and ethic).¹⁰ Furthermore, and above all, once again the path that Bourdieu had (half-)opened is blocked off; the fault in the Bourdieusian universe of generalized unconscious calculation—a “fault that seemed capable of swallowing up the issue of generosity” (Caillé 1994a, 248)—is closed again.

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means that have to be implemented in order to create universes in which, as in the economies, agents and groups would have an interest in disinterestedness and generosity” (Bourdieu 2000, 201–2)—in short, of establishing disinterested habitus.

10. An ethic which, as noted by Sylvain Dzimira (2007), is not that of Mauss.

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