Masterclass

Gifts of Cooperation

22 – 26 September 2014

World Heritage Site Zeche Zollverein Essen
The second Masterclass of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research, entitled “Gifts of Cooperation”, took place at the UNESCO World Heritage site Zeche Zollverein from 22 to 26 September 2014.

During five intensive days, participants from more than ten different countries and various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, political science, history and economics, discussed the theoretical foundations and implications of the gift paradigm as well as a wide range of empirical case studies. In doing so, they asked which role the logic of the gift plays on the level of global cooperation. Can the gift generate an anti-utilitarian basis for forms of international recognition and solidarity, e.g. in development cooperation, international philanthropy or debt reliefs?

Mauss, The Gift and Beyond: Conceptual Bases

In the opening lecture, Alain CAILLÉ (University of Paris Nanterre) explored the conceptual bases and political applications of the gift paradigm, i.e. the triple obligation of “giving”, “receiving” and “returning”, to which he added a forth obligation, namely “asking”: According to Caillé, asking marks the beginning of the cycle of the gift, which – as he pointed out – makes societies human and cooperative. Conversely, ignoring (instead of asking), taking (instead of giving), refusing (instead of receiving) and keeping (instead of returning) are what prevent people from cooperating. As he further explained with reference to Lévi-Strauss, the simple gift paradigm of direct reciprocity (A gives to B, B returns to A) must be extended to a generalized form of reciprocity (A gives to B, who gives to C, who gives to A). Another important extension he emphasized is contained in the meaning of the word gift in the sense of “talent” as it is explored by Lewis Hyde in his considerations on poetry and painting. In this sense, the “gift” also refers to the relationship between humans and what transcends them, be it called cosmos or otherwise.

By virtue of this general applicability of the gift paradigm, Caillé argued that it is well positioned to constitute a theoretical alternative to the utilitarian model of the homo oeconomicus, which prevails also in the social sciences. This is the aim of the “Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales”, or “M.A.U.S.S.”, which turned the name of the author of the “Essai sur le don” into an acronym which contains a theoretical motto.
In emphasizing that theory must not be separated from politics, he then went on to present the project of “Convivialism”, a political philosophy of how men can live together without slaughtering each other. The central principles of this project include the “common humanity” of each individual regardless of his peculiarities, the belonging of everyone to a “common sociality”, as opposed to the idea of auto-sufficient individuals, and the principle of “individuation”, i.e. the legitimacy of competition and opposition, as long as these are contained and do not amount to individual hubris. Political measures proposed by Convivialism on the basis of these principles include a minimum and a maximum income, a fight against corruption and a control of financial speculation. These principles and measures are formulated in the “Convivalist Manifesto”, a text written by almost fifty intellectuals and as of now signed by thousands of individuals and associations, the aim of which was to formulate what the initiatives fighting for “another world” have in common.

The relationship between such political and philosophical projects and Marcel Mauss’s “Essai sur le don” was later challenged by Mario SCHMIDT (Käte Hamburger Kolleg Duisburg / Artes Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne) in what he himself described as a “provocative” response to efforts of “naïve appropriations” of Mauss’s work as “vague inspiration”. Against these attempts, Schmidt aimed at retrieving the complexity and polyphony of the “Essai sur le don” by reading it as an anthropological exploration of food and money as the materialized equivalents of what Mauss calls “prestation totale”. Accordingly, Schmidt interprets Mauss’s normative conclusions as not directly linked with the empirical data and sees the only “therapeutic” value of the “Essai” in its way of questioning primary sociality, thereby calling for self-distance and self-irony.

Whereas Schmidt saw money as pivotal for the understanding of the gift and the “Essai sur le don”, Arthur BUENO (University of São Paulo) stressed the opposition between the gift and the medium of money. Based on a reading of Simmel’s “Philosophy of Money” in connection with his late vitalist writings, Bueno suggested a reinterpretation of the gift as the basis of a critique of modern life and the development of an emancipatory project along the lines of David Graeber’s “communism of the senses”.

Ilana SILBER (Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv) concentrated on “Asymmetric Giving and the Public Sphere”, which she presented as an important but still relatively underconceptualized type of giving, from a macro-sociological perspective, which complements Maussian theories with insights from Max Weber, Jonathan
Perry and Karl Polanyi. As she pointed out, her explorations of this expression of giving are part of her attempt to develop a non-unitary gift theory which not only allows for diversity, but makes diversity a focus of interest instead of aiming at overcoming it.

In the course of her argument, she advocated a greater attention to non-reciprocity and asymmetry in the analysis of the gift, and especially of public giving and also stressed the importance of institutional and cultural aspects of giving.

She then turned to historical precedents, such as giving for the good of the city in Greco-Roman Antiquity and giving in various religious contexts, such as the Medieval West. Thereby she not only pointed out that public giving is not a new phenomenon but also stressed that especially religious giving achieved a relatively high degree of organization and institutional autonomy, a phenomenon she conceptualized as a dis-embedding of the gift from primary primordial social relations, applying Polanyi’s analysis of developments in the economy to the question of giving. In her analysis of modern philanthropy, which is currently expanding in an unprecedented way, she found another occasion to renew her plea for abandoning an exclusive focus on reciprocity and exchange. Based on her own empirical studies, she highlighted how especially modern philanthropy is characterized by a marked asymmetry and lack of reciprocity. However, instead of being the object of admiration, philanthropy is constantly confronted with suspicion and is therefore in need of justification. According to her reading, this illustrates the need to overcome a way of thinking in dichotomies such as reciprocity vs. non-reciprocity, spontaneity vs. obligation and instead focus more on the plurality of “worlds of worth”.

Non-reciprocity was also at the centre of the presentation by Nicola TAMS (University of Freiburg), who recalled Derrida’s opposition to reciprocal theories of gift exchange and his emphasis on the obligation to give without any expected reciprocity. She then proposed a fresh look on the performative aspect of Derrida’s theory as a starting point to think about community aspects of gift-giving.

Also Frank ADLOFF (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) ultimately aimed at decoupling the gift from reciprocity, without, however, relying on Derrida’s theory of the pure gift. He started by presenting a systematic overview of conceptions of the gift in social theory. In this scheme, he first distinguished
between gift theories which assume uni-lateralism or the “pure gift” (Derrida, Marion) and those who assume multi-lateralism or reciprocity. The latter group was then divided again: One subgroup is composed of those who ultimately discard the free gift a social lie (Blau, Gouldner, Bourdieu) assuming either utilitarian calculation or norm orientation as the “return” on the gift; the other one consists of those who suggest a non-utilitarian and non-normative take on the gift (Caillé, Hénaff).

Against this background, Adloff developed his own definition of the gift, arguing that the respective “expectations of expectations”, especially the awareness that there is no guarantee of a counter-gift, are more relevant for the constitution of a gift than the intentions of the giver. Therefore, a smile to a stranger can be seen as a gift, because it is not given on the condition of receiving something in return. In a first approach, following Alain Testard, he conceptualized the renunciation of any legal right over the service or good given away as the differentia specifica of the gift.

Adloff then elaborated on the importance of the gift for social interactions, which are always about the relationship of self-assertion and community bonds: While ordinary gift practices bear witness to a shared symbolic order, the extraordinary gift is able to restore the realm of normality in situations of alterity and crisis. As he pointed out, balances and imbalances in interactions are primarily perceived affectively and regulated through gifts. This is so because affections are linked with values: gifts are always value-charged, and they symbolically represent the self and / or the community.

Anne RAWLS (Bentley University, Massachusetts) opened the spectrum of theoretical tools further by bringing in what she called a “sociological parallel” to the gift studies of cooperation in anthropology, namely constitutive practice or social fact making. The approach was first developed by Emile Durkheim and then built on by Garfinkel, Goffman and Sacks. It challenges the notion that “things”, the individual or reason simply exist and treats them instead as created through cooperative processes. It is through the reflexive, i.e. back and forth, process of giving and receiving, not only gifts, but also social acts, words, turns in a talk or moves in games, that shared meaning is achieved.

In her talk, Rawls established an interesting link with last year’s Masterclass by referring to the different anthropological models which were discussed there, namely the cost benefit motivated “homo oeconomicus”, the “homo sociologicus”, oriented towards norms or role expectations, and an alternative
model based on research on cooperation. With its emphasis on cooperation as the basis for meaningful and rational human existence Durkheim’s approach was intended explicitly as a replacement of the first two models. As Anne Rawls pointed out, it is also much more compatible than others with the recent findings of anthropology and biology on the cooperative nature of men, such as those of last year’s Masterclass speaker Martin Nowak.

Applications and Case studies

Although some questions concerning the theoretical bases had to remain open, the general usefulness of the gift paradigm was illustrated by a variety of case studies, which covered a broad spatial and temporal range.

For example, Donni Wang (Stanford University) recalled that also Moses Finley’s seminal publication “The World of Odysseus” drew on Marcel Mauss’s “Essai sur le don”. She then went on to present Homeric Greece as an example of a sociological and political configuration which gave rise to and sustained the circulation of the gift. As she pointed out with reference to episodes in the Odyssey, scenes of gift exchange provided an opportunity to “celebrate” the others enshrined in the gift, and to keep the ties with the original maker and the previous owners of the gift. Thereby, gift exchanges were instances of “conviviality”, as she argued by borrowing the concept from Illich (although also in keeping with Caillé and the “Convivialists”). Besides gift-exchange, she identified another expression of this convivial culture in the importance of feasting in Homeric society and its implications of multiplicity, interdependence and horizontality of interpersonal relations, which ultimately contributed to a fertile ground for the development of democracy.

Following up on the conceptual considerations of Adloff, Caillé and Rawls, Basil Wiesse (University of Eichstätt / University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) drew attention to a special aspect of the situational grounding of gift processes, namely its atmosphere or ambiance. He conceptualized this atmosphere as both subject to practices as well as delineating the horizon of practices that take place within it. He then applied this conceptual tool to situations of intercultural encounter, as they occur in diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of maintaining ambivalence and applying affective labour, in order to allow the gift to resonate with a given situation.
Emotional or affective ties were also highly relevant to the presentation by Verena ROSSOW (University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf), who asked how domestic labour conditions of Eastern European care migrants in a “grey” labour market are negotiated and contested. By applying the paradigms of various gift theories to her empirical findings from extensive fieldwork, she argued that the logic behind these negotiations is best understood when analysing daily routines of giving and receiving.

As opposed to the emotional aspects, the presentation by Lina PRANAYTITE-WERGIN (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle), highlighted the religious context of giving and receiving. She drew attention to the fact that although in Roman Catholic dogma gift, sacrifice, offering and donation are omnipresent, the Catholic milieu is largely neglected by studies of the gift. In her presentation, based on fieldwork in a church village in Southern Lithuania, she demonstrated how religiously established practices sustain institutions through the roles of items.

While most explorations of case studies applied social and anthropological theory in the Maussian tradition, a completely different approach was introduced by Martin SCHMIDT (University of Göttingen), who explored the question when and how heterogeneous agents cooperate from the perspective of experimental economics: As the result of his experiments, he presented the finding that cooperation, in the sense of allocating endowment to the public good rather than to the private good, took place and could be enhanced by sanctions, rewards, and third party enforcement.

**Scaling Up: The Gift Paradigm in International Relations**

Verena Rossow’s presentation on transnational care arrangements already touched upon migration as a phenomenon of globalization. Elena PULCINI (University of Florence), professor of philosophy and, like Alain Caillé, one of the first signatories of the Convivialist Manifesto, developed the relationship of the gift and globalization further. In her presentation entitled “The Gift to the Distant Other in a Global World” she discussed how giving is possible not only in a face to face interaction but between those distant in space and time. As she emphasized, the global age has produced an “unprecedented extension of the circle of concern” through the erosion of boundaries and the interdependence of events, so that any separation between “us” and “others” has become illusory. At the same time, she recalled the dangers of destroying
the basis of life on earth, which is becoming ever more threatening, but not acted upon.

Against this background, Pulcini argued for the necessity of a twofold gift, namely the “gift of hospitality” which we owe to the other distant in space and the “gift of the future”, which we owe to the other distant in time, i.e. the future generations. Pulcini then turned to the factors that keep us from living up to these necessities, namely negative passions, such as fear, and defence mechanisms, such as denial and repression. As she argued, in order to overcome those obstacles, what is needed, is not “naïve altruism”, but the retrieval of a dimension that is constitutive of the subject as such, namely the “desire for the other”. Therefore, we have to activate our empathetic emotions, which are already part of our nature as social beings in need of the other for survival. In the case of the other distant in time, she called for a recognition of our relation of debt and thereby gratitude towards nature in order to become responsible subjects.

An interesting case of giving to those (initially) distant in space was then discussed by Benjamin HAAS (University of Leiden) in his presentation on volunteer services such as the German government funded programme “Weltwärts”, which sends young volunteers to the developing world in order to work for non-profit organizations. The volunteers are turned into a medium for a number of processes of gift exchange, which, at the level of the official discourse are constructed as reciprocal. However, as he pointed out, due to the structural asymmetry of the set-up, these processes are so full of ambivalences that reciprocity is thoroughly undermined.

The finding that the reciprocity of the gift giving process is often undermined as a result of asymmetry between givers and receivers was also one of the findings presented by Ildikó ZAKARIÁS (University of Budapest), who explored the activities of Hungarian philanthropic organizations that offer cultural and economic support for ethnic Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries. At the same time, she analysed how ideologies of national belonging are used, reproduced and transformed in the personal narratives of the activists and in the course of philanthropic practices.

Another special case of transnational giving was presented by Dan LAINER-VOS (University of Southern California, Los Angeles), who concentrated on the activities and strategies of the United Jewish Appeal in the post-war era. In order to raise funds for Jews in Israel and Europe, this organization had to
generate the obligation to give among American Jews in the absence of direct reciprocity. His research, based on archive data and interviews with donors and activists, helped to answer the question how the United Jewish Appeal managed to create a sense of belonging among American Jews and at the same time regulate the complicated relationship between donors and recipients.

As he argued, the UJA shifted the focus of the giving relations towards the relationships among the givers: By monitoring the funds raised by different communities and by organizing big “gift events” with public lauding and shaming of individual donors, the UJA used socially meaningful groupings and visibility to spark generosity competitions.

Another important aspect was that these events were designed in such as to create workable “zones of indeterminacy”, which allowed both American and Israeli Jews to view themselves as the leaders of the Jewish nation without arguing about who is occupying this position. At the same time, Lainer-Vos explored the relationship between giving and identity: While the development of a feeling of belonging to the Jewish nation on the side of American Jews encouraged donations, the very act of giving money also enhanced the development of identity. As Lainer-Vos pointed out, the big gift events organized by the UJA provided an institutional setting in which this mutually constitutive process was intensified.

While Lainer-Vos concentrated on transnational giving between members of one religious community, Grégoire MALLARD (The Graduate Institute, Geneva), focused on the interaction between states and their respective citizens with reference to the question of reparations and debt. In his contribution, based on a combination of historical reconstruction and legal reasoning, he linked research on Marcel Mauss’s anthropological and political writing with his positions on the question of reparations. He began his talk by pointing out that a failure to successfully negotiate sovereign debt led to the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. Thereby he drew a connection to the venue of the conference, a former coal mine, as an appropriate setting for the discussion of those issues.

First, he drew attention to Marcel Mauss’s contributions to the interwar debate on reparations to be paid by Germany: Mauss criticized the unilateralist way by which the nationalist French government applied the claims for reparations, isolating them from the broader context of Europe’s sovereign debt problem and relying on coercion for the enforcement of the treaty. However, he generally approved of the idea of reparations – as opposed to mere indemnities
as a way to reconstitute European solidarity and to balance the price of the war among the warring parties. Following the so-called “Solidarists” and a group of international experts who gathered in Brussels 1920 (including John Maynard Keynes), Mauss was in favour of a holistic strategy which integrated the question of reparations within the broader context of Europe’s sovereign debt problem and also allowed for a macroeconomic system of debt cancellation.

Mallard then went on to link these positions articulated in Mauss’s political writings from the interwar period with the “Essai sur le don”. Here, he suggested to read the “Essai” as an attempt to prove that such an integrated debt exchange had precedents in archaic European legal culture.

Finally, Mallard also discussed the implications for the analysis of some of the current foreign debt crises, such as Argentina or Greece. In contrast to David Graeber’s take on debt Mallard’s position is not sweeping rejection, since he recognizes the positive aspects associated with (sovereign) debt. Instead, based on Marcel Mauss’s anthropological and political writings, Mallard argues in favour of selective moratoria and restructuring, which would not solve the social bond established by debt, as would an all-encompassing debt relief.

The intricate relationship of gift, loan and debt was taken up and applied to another context by Inken WIESE (University of Konstanz), who discussed the aid modalities of Arab donor states with a focus on concessional loans as their preferred instrument. Thereby she shed light on the dynamics and effects of different forms of development assistance as gifts and at the same time contributed to the line of research which conceptualizes loans (and debt) as expressions of gift-relations. While the majorities of studies regard loans as forms of economic exchange, Wiese suggested an interpretation of concessional loans either as gifts of a hybrid nature such as those of the “moral transactions” described by Dan Lainer-Vos, or as “inalienable possessions” which represent an example of the paradox of “keeping – while – giving”.

The Art of Giving

On the last day of the Masterclass, art and art theory entered the scene and provided a fresh look on the question of the gift: First, Eric HAGOORT (Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp) discussed the dynamics of public art practices, in which artists invite others to cast off their role of observer, to forge a
relationship that may itself become the artwork. Calling for a “sensitivity for asymmetry”, a phrasing which had already been taken up by Ilana Silber, Hagoort argued that social art practices cannot but create situations in which their own main condition – reciprocity – is questioned by the asymmetry of the encounter even if there is a strong urge among artists to do something-for-nothing.

Then, public and conceptual artist Jochen GERZ held a lecture on the Gift in art, drawing on Lewis Hyde’s famous book “The Gift” and above all sharing his experience as an artist with his own “Gift” project: A work of art which has been performed and exhibited in Le Fresnoy (Tourcoing, France), The Museum am Ostwall (Dortmund, Germany) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Hundreds of participants from the general public had their portrait taken by a photographer. After the portraits had been exhibited in the respective museums for a while, each participant was allowed to take one portrait home, and exhibit it there. However, to their surprise, they did not receive their own photograph but someone else’s. At the Masterclass, Gerz talked about the sense of community created among the participants, and the way the art left the museum and spread out into hundreds of homes, including the grocery cart of a San Francisco homeless person.