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## **On the Theoretical and Practical Relevance of the Concept of Gift to the Development of a Non-Imperialist Economics**

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### **Abstract**

There is growing awareness of the need for interdisciplinary research on complex issues, but also of the obstacles that historical boundaries between social disciplines pose to such dialogue. It is increasingly recognized that the somewhat constitutive autonomy, the progressive autonomization, and finally the “imperialism” of economics have severely reduced the possibility of interdisciplinary discussion. This paper is a first step towards developing a research programme on the foundations of a non-imperialist economics. It investigates gift exchange as a missed opportunity for economics. It aims at showing that, by refusing to tackle the complexity of the gift, economics has not only lost an opportunity to develop a method suitable for the analysis of complex problems, but has voluntarily chosen not to follow a path which would have prevented it from colonizing other disciplines. Reintroducing the concept of gift into the economic discourse may thus represent a required precondition to produce an innovating discourse on economics.

**Keywords:** economics imperialism, interdisciplinarity, gift, economic methodology, economic thought, complexity

**JEL Classification:** A12, Z13, B1

## 1. Introduction

Economics is under severe pressure: the global crisis has laid bare a marked degree of disunity among economists, as well as the growing difficulties the discipline encounters in interpreting real-world phenomena and behaviours of a complex nature. There is growing awareness of the need for interdisciplinary research, but also of the obstacles that historical boundaries between social disciplines, as well as the somewhat constitutive autonomy, the progressive autonomization and “imperialism” of economics pose to such dialogue. The expanded scope of inquiry and sphere of influence of economics owes, writes Lazear (2000: 99-100) in defence of economics imperialism, to the discipline’s “rigorous language that allows complicated concepts to be written in relatively simple, abstract terms”. While contiguous social disciplines identify issues, economics provides “specific, well-reasoned answers” (p. 103). Although it may add to the “richness of description”, complexity “prevents the analyst from seeing what is essential” (p. 100): economics succeeds in forcing complexity within a “simple” scheme, which allows to “strip it away” (ibid.) from the analysis.

Much time has passed since Becker's contributions on the “economic approach to human behaviour” (1976), and in truth, economics imperialism has been severely and widely criticised for impoverishing our ability to understand phenomena outside the traditional boundaries of economics. Also due to its imperial attitude, economics has been growing in size and diversity since the heyday of economics imperialism. Unprecedented specialization in a more and more fragmented discipline (see Cedrini and Fontana 2015) has increased awareness of the “decreasing returns” of economics imperialism (see Hirschleifer 1985, Frey and Benz 2005, Fine and Milonakis 2009, Marchionatti 2012) and opened up the possibility of cooperation with other disciplines, while damaging the previous compactness of the mainstream. The advent, since the Eighties, of a series of different research programmes (the most important being evolutionary game theory, experimental economics, behavioral economics, evolutionary economics, neuroeconomics, complexity theory), all of them significantly deviating from the neoclassical core of mainstream economics, signals the transition “from neoclassical dominance to mainstream pluralism” (Davis 2006).

Mainstream economics is changing face (see Colander, Holt and Rosser 2004) and exploring new research paths. The rise and success of complexity economics and evolutionary game theory promote a new conception of social interaction, one that involves heterogeneous agents endowed with bounded rationality, helps focus on institutional structures, and draws attention on

unpredictable, emerging properties of social systems shaped by interactions themselves. Collaboration with other disciplines (sometimes under the clothes of “reverse imperialisms”; see Frey and Benz 2004, Davis 2013) is a crucial but critical factor of this transformation. Hodgson (2007: 20) points in fact at the scarcity of truly interdisciplinary dialogue as obstacle to such progress, and advocates a “reconsideration of the nature of and boundaries between the social sciences, and their possible reorganization on different lines”. Remarkably, various mainstream reformers, so to speak, believe that the desired post-neoclassical mainstream of the discipline will result from reconciling the competing non-neoclassical research programmes in today’s economics, many of them born under the influence of other social disciplines. Thereby, it is argued, economics will be able to help solve the “scandalous” (Gintis 2007: 15) problem of today’s “social sciences pluralism” (Colander 2014), by contributing to developing a “common underlying model” of human behaviour.

Gintis (2007, 2009) finds in “both mathematical models and common methodological principles for gathering empirical data on human behavior and human nature” (2007: 15) the preconditions for constructing a unifying framework. Recent laboratory and field research (see, respectively, Fehr and Gächter 2000, Henrich et al. 2005) have emphasized the importance of cooperation and reciprocity, upon which sociologists have traditionally focused their attention, and revealed the biological-evolutionary roots of the concept of preference consistency. Main analytical tools of the new theoretical framework, wanting to replace the flawed traditional model of individual choice behaviour, are thus an evolutionary perspective (that of gene-culture coevolution, treating culture dynamically) and game theory – “the universal lexicon of life” (8). Yet Gintis insists on the continuing relevance of “the most important analytical construct in the behavioral sciences operating at the level of the individual” (Gintis 2009: 222), that is the rational actor model, based on choice consistency, to represent behaviour.

Now, although Gintis’s proposal includes an implicit condemnation of economics imperialism (which however is technically definable as “a special case of the more general methodological norm of explanatory unification”, Mäki 2009: 5), it is remarkable that Gintis assigns to biology in particular, and evidently the “new” post-neoclassical economics the task of leading the reform plan. Edward O. Wilson’s sociobiology is admittedly an influence on the proposal (see Getty 2007), and the affinity with Hirschleifer’s (however reasoned) “economics imperialism” project – proclaiming the impossibility “to carve off a distinct territory for economics, bordering upon but separated from other social disciplines. Economics interpenetrates them all, and is reciprocally penetrated by

them ... There is only one science”, wrote Hirschleifer (1985: 53), with economics as its “universal grammar” (ibid.) – might be a matter of concern. After all, many research programs of today’s mainstream pluralism are struggling to leave a conception of the “social” (that they explain, de facto, on the basis of methodological individualism) as “rational” response to imperfect market relations, such as those connected with information (Fine 2000: 14). With the result that while economics “takes the social seriously as something distinct from the economic”, it nevertheless “provides a rationale for it” (ibid.).

Although economics may therefore be finally relaxing its pugilistic habitus, the pluralistic essence of today’s mainstream economics might not be a sufficient condition for truly democratic exchange between social disciplines. This probably requires enhanced understanding of the historical origins of such imperialistic attitude, in particular, and the removal of its deep roots, to avoid such dialogue being victim of the above-mentioned presumed comparative advantage of economics. After Robbins’s tremendously influential definition of economics as the science of rational choice, the refusal to make assertive *a priori* hypotheses about human behaviour other than the requirement that they behave consistently – as though they were maximizing something, this “something” to be named after empirical observations of human behaviour (see Binmore 2005) – exerts an almost irresistible appeal to social scientists.

Challenging mainstream economists' ideology, this article is a step towards developing a research programme on the foundations of a non-imperialist economics. It traces back the historical origins of economic imperialism to the very birth of economics as a separate discipline with Adam Smith (section 2), thereby directly addressing the problem of the *historicity* – rather than *naturality* – of market exchange. In so doing, the paper explores a territory of social science that evidently resist economic treatment in neoclassical terms, namely the interpretation of archaic societies and in particular, the related concept of gift and gift exchange, around which such societies are structured. While the anthropological-sociological literature has considered gift-giving as the foundation of a radically different sociality from the one underlying the contested economicist paradigm of “rational fools” (Sen 1977), economics has substantially failed to participate, as shown in section 3, in the interdisciplinary debate organized by social sciences around the gift throughout the twentieth century. We show that by tacitly establishing the universality of economics on the hypothesis that the primitive man is already a *homo oeconomicus*, economics has refused to address the complexity of the gift. We thus argue that the reintroduction of the concepts of gift and gift exchange into the

economic discourse can encourage an innovating discourse on economics, contributing to lay down the foundations of an anti-imperialist turn. Having highlighted, in section 4, the central role played by the gift in organizing a most important transdisciplinary debate on the socio-political foundations of modern societies, we then speculate on the legacy of Marcel Mauss' pioneering study (and the literature it has inspired) for a redefinition of economics on non-imperialist bases. In section 5, we throw light on the political essence of Keynes's late plans of global reform, thereby providing a concrete illustration of the still-to-be-explored potential offered by a rediscovery of the "political anthropology" of the gift in today's economic discourse. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. The historical origins of economics imperialism, or the construction of the stereotype of "primitive societies" and the "bartering savage"**

Primitive societies with which anthropologists are chiefly concerned are considered, in Western thought, to be the furthest from modern market societies. A common model underlies virtually all accounts of so-called "savage" societies offered by economic theory over time (Marchionatti 2012). The model finds the fundamental characteristic of primitive societies in economic backwardness: they would be subjected to an iron logic of necessary material dependence. Hence the necessary corollaries of limited needs and absence of predictable surplus. The former implies that the state of general poverty and insecurity is not eliminable: this forcedly imposes a strong ethics of redistribution and a condition of socio-economic equality. The latter, namely absence of surplus, impedes both economic development and the existence of an organised state. Institutional conditions prevent the transformation of "saving" into "investment" and the development of market system in the rare cases where the formation of surplus is possible. It follows that self-sufficiency is the only viable strategy. Market exchange is simply absent or very limited, due to restricted needs and lack of reasonably stable surplus.

A sort of postulate of the economic literature, this crucial assumption of primitive wretchedness is contradicted by the available anthropological and ethnographic evidence. In the late Sixties, anthropologists provided convincing criticisms of the traditional concept of subsistence economy: research fields found evidence of only intermittent subsistence quest, of adequate dietary intake and available technology, of under-use of resources (Sahlins 1972). New quantitative data have then confirmed that hunter-gatherers economies were characterized by abundance of leisure time and consequent limited work effort. The economic approach to primitive societies was therefore

criticized for having failed to yield satisfactory interpretative results, but also, and more importantly, for drawing a veil over some fundamental features of primitive economies, thus impoverishing the understanding of archaic societies.

The origins of this interpretation lie in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith's account of the evolution from "savage nations" to their exact opposite, "civilized nations", draws upon a stage theory positing the civilized one (or market society) as the ultimate stage of human social evolution, and the (ab)use of a method of (after Dugald Stewart's 1966 [1793] definition) "conjectural history", whereby conjectures, or explanatory hypotheses replace facts which are unknown or too hard to handle theoretically. In his *Lectures* at the University of Glasgow of 1762-3, Smith (1982a) employed Montesquieu's notion of 'mode of subsistence' to construct a model of historical growth in which it is population rise that induces division of labor and exchange, both substantially absent in wretched, savage nations). Notwithstanding ample ethnographic evidence of community life systems based on principles that are definitely different from those of market societies, Smith created the theoretical stereotype of "bartering savage" as the very early figure of political economy. This ideological-conjectural construction rested on a notion of exchange of philosophical essence, centered around the XVIII-century category of nature. The bartering savage is the primitive *homo oeconomicus*, who acts as a rational economic man. Smith's founding analysis of the economic discipline had the bartering savage at its core, and the stereotype was to become the crucial explanatory concept of the discipline. The "bartering savage" is, according to Smith, the primitive essence of human being, because he possesses the natural characteristics of humans. It is on these grounds that Smith can found the universality of economic statements, scattering the seeds of (the earliest form of) economics imperialism. Any other characteristics of real life – first of all, the *fact* that gift, not commodities, are the object of primitive exchange – was in fact excluded from the analysis as a non-essential fact, one that is subordinated to the concept of (market) exchange.

It was Robbins (1932), however, to lay the foundations of what we now understand as economics imperialism. By postulating the universality of scarcity and the consequent universal obligation, for men, to make correct – that is, rational – choices about the use of certain scarce means to attain alternative ends, Robbins's (as well as Frank Knight's and Ludwig Mises's) analysis was the fundamental source of inspiration for "formalist" anthropologists such as Raymond Firth (1939) and Melville J. Herskovits (1940). Conceiving the "social" as rational response to market imperfections (Fine's 2000 criticism of the new imperialism of the information-theoretic approach in economics



finds here a relevant antecedent), formalists succeeded in eradicating the most threatening source of resistance to the imperialism of economics. Formalists assumed scarcity to be an essential feature of primitive life, and characterized wants as arrangeable according to a scale of preferences. In so doing, they admitted that choices are socially conditioned, but claimed nevertheless, positing the existence of a Robbinsian universal concept of economic rationality, that individuals did make choices broadly related to welfare and the provision of material goods. Some decades later, Posner (1980) demonstrated that this concept of rationality could be profitably extended to primitive life as a whole, and be used to illustrate the rationale of the strong redistributive ethics that characterizes archaic societies. Far from a concession to anti-utilitarian moral principles, this ethics would be the rational response to the problems raised by uncertainty and high information costs. Norms of generosity and reciprocity would therefore be a protection against free-riding and moral hazard, while gifts, the main pillars of this system of insurance, would also accomplish a relevant communicative task, acting as vehicles of credible information about donors' wealth, tastes and attitudes. In this perspective, generosity, reciprocity and the gift are evidently subordinate elements, market exchange assuming the traits of "natural" field of action for naturally rational men.

Banished from the imaginary and system of representation of economics, and confined within the reserved domain of anthropology, the concept of gift was denied any constitutive difference with respect to market exchange. It conversely enjoyed great popularity in Karl Polanyi's heterodox "substantivist" approach (see below) to economic systems, but the mainstream of the discipline never attempted at traversing the seemingly impermeable boundary which protect it from the challenges posed by the gift. In light of all this, the concept of gift provides an ideal testing ground for a research programme on a non-imperialist economics.

### **3. The debate on the gift, a "lost moment of history" for economics**

It was only in the last decades of the nineteenth century that primitive and archaic economies became a topic of interest for the scientific community. Prior to the anthropological work of Franz Boas (1897), and later Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), as this latter observed, the "economic nature of man" was "as a rule illustrated on imaginary savages for didactic purposes only, and the conclusions of the authors [were] in reality based on their study of the facts of developed economics" (ibid.: 62). Such "rough conceptions" of the economic nature of primitives were of no use; on the contrary, "the study of extremely primitive economic institutions would no doubt prove very refreshing and

fertilising to [economic] theory” (Malinowski 1921: 12). Boas and Malinowski brought interest to two outstanding examples of the complexity of the social life of primitive societies. Boas introduced his readers to the agonistic gift-giving festival, or *potlatch*, of the American Indians of the Northwest coast, wherein givers (clan leaders) compete in displaying generosity to acquire essentially power, status, prestige. While Malinowski provided an accurate description of the *kula*, the (anti-utilitarian; barter was conducted in radically alternative forms) inter-tribal gift exchange system developed by the Trobriand Islanders in Melanesia, involving non-use items that were circularly and continuously passed on to partners.

An anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, was later to write a fundamental essay, *Essai sur le don* (*The Gift*, 1923-24), systematising the whole collection of previous studies of exchange in primitive and pre-capitalistic societies. Drawing inspiration from Boas and Malinowski, Mauss identified “one of the human foundations on which our societies are built” (Mauss 1990: 4) in the gift, which he described as basic social rule of pre-industrial societies. In these latter, all aspects of individual and social life were involved in “gift exchange”, a complex social cycle (made up of “total’ social facts” wherein “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time”<sup>1</sup>, p. 3) structured around the three interlocking obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. In Mauss’s vision, which is in many senses the perfect antithesis to Smith’s “bartering savage” as the founding image of the naturality of market exchange, gifts – rather than contract, barter, or market exchange – are the vehicles of social ties. Mauss was thus the initiator of a pioneering research programme on the socio-political foundations of human aggregates. At the core of the programme was the intention to reintroduce historicity in the analysis of the economy of archaic societies, from which the “bartering savage” stage-illusion of *Wealth of Nations* had removed it. The *Homo oeconomicus* was “not behind us, but lies ahead ... For a very long time man was something different; and he has not been a machine for very long, made complicated by a calculating machine” (Mauss 1990: 76). And Karl Polanyi (1944) later demonstrated that modern economic system were the result of the relatively recent autonomization of the economy from society and culture, in which it had been embedded for most part of history. He therefore proposed the “substantivist approach” in economic anthropology,

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<sup>1</sup> “These phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organized and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditure are all present...”.

considering the economy as “instituted process”, that is embedded in a societal context, and presented a threefold typology of forms of exchange (redistribution – reciprocity – market exchange), assigning critical importance to gift-giving.

Despite the undisputed relevance of Malinowski's and Mauss's work to economic anthropology, and the “formalists-substantivists” debate of the Sixties (the formalists arguing in favour of the universality in space and time of the categories of neoclassical economics, the substantivists insisting on the historical and cultural differences between specific societal contexts), the discipline of economics has *de facto* failed to participate in the huge discussion jointly organized by other social scientists around the concept of gift. The peculiar development of the economics of altruism (on which, in general, see Kolm and Ythier 2006) is highly revealing in this regard. On one side, it demonstrates economists' willingness to enlarge the narrow domain of economics with respect to the complexity of individual and social motivations. On the other, the dominant use of “interdependent utility functions” and the special attention posed on situations of “selfish altruism” (that is, oriented to the maximization of individual utility) when altruism economics was incorporated into the mainstream in the Seventies (Boulding 1973, Becker 1974, Phelps 1975) indicates that the concept and methods of mainstream economics were generally considered as sufficient for the analysis of these practices. Not surprisingly, since mainstream economics began to emphasize the heterogeneity of motivations of the *homo oeconomicus* when confronted with the challenge of socio-biology in particular, with the ultimate aim of demonstrating the primacy of economics over other social sciences (Fontaine 2012). Only in the Eighties (with Akerlof's 1982, 1984 and Camerer's 1988 works on, respectively, wage-efficiency theories and commitment in labour relations) did economists begin to borrow the concept of gift from anthropology and sociology to explain how cooperation and reciprocity can emerge between self-interested individuals. Such studies, however, explicitly used an instrumental conception of rationality (Zenou et al. 1992), while contributions appeared in the following decades trying to explain the persistence of gift-giving practices and, more generally, the role of the gift in modern economies (Andreoni 1990, Kranton 1996) were inevitably biased, so to speak, by a conception of the gift as residual. The new microeconomics of bounded rationality and imperfect information, and the subsequent integration of psychology and economics into the research programme of behavioural economics called into question the capability of economic theory to investigate behaviours that neither comply with the *homo oeconomicus* model nor are reducible to the abused category of non-rational behaviours. “Intrinsic” motivations to act (Frey 1997) were thus investigated, and attention was directed toward

the relevance of reciprocity as fairness (or inequity aversion: Fehr and Schmidt 1999, Bolton and Ockenfels 2000). Interdisciplinary researches on “strong reciprocity” as human behavioral pattern (Fehr and Gächter 2000, Bowles and Gintis 2011) then became a fundamental inspiration for the recent project of reunifying behavioral disciplines, potentially representing a historical watershed for the formerly imperial science.

Still, it was exactly through the question of the gift, of the breadth and complexity of the challenges posed by the notion of gift *per se* to our understanding of human life in society, that neoclassical theory came to manifest an historical impossibility to open itself to interdisciplinarity (Mirowski 2001). In a now classic work in social research of 1970, *The Gift Relationship*, the sociologist Richard Titmuss – a theoretical and practical father of Britain’s welfare state – defended (the British system of) blood donation, as against the market-approach to blood collection and supply (see Archard 2002). He set forth technical criteria and reasons of efficiency, but also expressed the view that market commercialization restricts the “freedom to choose to give or not to give” (Titmuss 1970: 245). He went so far as to claim that the commercialization of donor relationships “represses the expression of altruism, erodes the sense of community” (ibid.). Kenneth Arrow’s famous 1972 review of Titmuss’ book was a perfect example of “futility thesis”, as Mirowski (2001) calls it, simply asserting that gifts are impossible. Arrow (1972: 355) could not tolerate the idea that markets restrict (rather than enhance) freedom, and wanted “ethical behavior to be confined to those circumstances where the price system breaks down” (“I do not want to rely too heavily on substituting ethics for self-interest”). It was the philosopher Peter Singer (1973), in his defence of Titmuss against Arrow, to point out that this latter had simply failed to consider the support voluntary systems offer to attitudes of unselfish behaviour and cooperation, as well as the desire to help strangers in a community. “The nature of a community’s blood supply cannot be considered a purely economic issue” (Singer 1973: 320), he wrote. More in general, Arrow had eluded the key question, political in essence, at stake in Titmuss’ essay: “What sort of society do we want?” (ibid.). A question, it is argued below, that had conversely gained prominence in the political-philosophy literature exploring Mauss’s insights about the gift.

#### **4. Laying down the theoretical foundations of a non-imperialist economics**

##### ***4.1 On complexity and economics: a methodological premise***

If altruism appears as a more tractable and less troublesome concept for economics, this is likely because its assumptions about human nature are simply too strong to resist the reductionism of interdependent utility functions, wherewith altruism is reconciled with the standard egoism of neoclassical economics. Conversely, if economics has voluntarily left aside the gift, it is because the revolutionary essence of Mauss' work lies in "posing as morally desirable just what the whole of known societies seems to consider exactly as such: an invariant core which is common to all ethics. What men must do is no longer intrinsically different from what they in fact do" (Caillé 1998: 30, our translation). Both the power of the gift, which helps to explain the enormous interest it has excited in the other social disciplines, and its weakness, which causes it to be an easy victim of the reductionism of economics, owe to the same fundamental factor: the gift does not make any unnecessarily demanding assumption about human nature.

To grasp this point, however, economics should denounce the limits of what economists perceive as a key advantage of the discipline, justifying its imperialism: the ability to "strip off" social complexity, intended as an obstacle to "seeing what is essential" (Lazear 2000: 100). Two main strands have been quarrelling in economics as concern the adequate methodology for treating complex objects. First, the orthodox tradition established by John Stuart Mill and Carl Menger, resulting in the adoption of methodological individualism; second, the approach developed in modern economics by a series of pioneers in social sciences, from Marx to Pareto, to Alfred Marshall and John Maynard Keynes, who expressly addressed the problem of how to deal with social complexity, to institutional economists. In *System of Logic*, Mill (1843) assigns due importance to social relations, and even argues that complexity is a key issue in social sciences, but ultimately uses the term to denote a context characterized by large number of interacting variables and multiplicity of behavioural motivations (general economic equilibrium). He in fact believed that the laws of complex social wholes can be deduced from those ruling individual behaviour. Mill's proposal of a concrete-deductive method of analysis instead of the inductive methods of hard sciences, which would clash against the lack of adequate tools available to economists and the impossibility to conduct controlled experiments, was meant to overcome the limitations affecting human computational powers. Walras's and Robbins's conceptions of economics draw on Mill's famous expedient, the *homo oeconomicus*, and on his argument in favour of deduction.

On the contrary, outside the neoclassical field, Marxian and "old" institutionalist economists saw the economy as complex. But also in the mainstream of those times, Marshall and Keynes took a

radically different stance from the orthodox approach, although only recently has the great potential of their legacy (see Marchionatti 2002, 2004) been fully acknowledged, especially in relation to modern complexity science (Foster 2006, Marchionatti 2010). Marshall's perspective suggests that today's mainstream approach is necessarily unable to grasp the complexity of the real world, essentially because it traces precise borders exactly there where borders are uncertain, concepts are ill-defined and cannot be captured in one-dimensional definitions. In Marshall's *Principles*, economics is a science of human and social complexity: "Abstract reasoning", he wrote, is essential, but inadequate "to disentangle the interwoven effects of complex causes" (reported in Whitaker 1996, II: 393), and must be supplemented by "trained common sense". Rooted in Marshall's methodological stance was Keynes's conception of economics as a non-positivist "moral" science, dealing with introspection and ethical values. Pioneering works in the Eighties and contributions that followed (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2014a) have brought attention to the continuity between the early epistemological concern of Keynes's work on probability (*A Treatise on Probability*, 1921[1973b]) and his reflections on the method, theory and practice of economics in the *General Theory* (1936[1973a]). Economics is to Keynes (1983: 856) a "technique of thinking" required to cope with a complex economic material made of "motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties" (1973c: 300) and, in general, with a social world which is not simply explicable in terms of the individual behaviour of its presumedly separable parts. The "atomic hypothesis" – underlying much of neoclassical economics as well as the "blind" manipulation of unqualified, "pseudo-mathematical methods" (1973a: 297) – "breaks down in psychics. We are faced at every turn with the problems of organic unity, of discreteness, of discontinuity – the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts, comparisons of quantity fail us, small changes produce large effects, the assumptions of a uniform and homogeneous continuum are not satisfied" (1972: 262).

Keynes's reflections, along Marshallian lines, on economic reasoning, and the conditions to capture the complexity of economic process beyond the limits of simplistic theorizing, offer theoretical support for the construction of a transdisciplinary perspective on human behaviour, and insights that modern complexity economics can legitimately and profitably put to use in attempting to achieve significant developments in this regard. These authors were in fact concerned with the problem of building a theoretical framework able to resist the comfort of methodological individualism. It is this peculiar perspective, coupled with heterodox economists' concerns for the complex nature of the socio-historical world, that allows revisiting and reformulating the issue of interdisciplinarity.

#### 4.2. *The gift across social sciences: what neoclassical economics has evaded*

The debate on the gift across social disciplines has revealed its utmost importance to the general dispute between rationalistic-individualistic (rational choice theory, neoclassical economics) and normativistic (sociological, anthropological) approaches to the socio-political foundations of modern societies (Adloff and Mau 2006). The discussion of the complex gift/reciprocity has mainly occurred outside the utilitarian strand: in adopting, despite heterogeneity of approaches, Douglas' (1990) "political" view of Mauss's essay, the literature celebrates *The Gift* as a successful attempt to escape both the reductionism of methodological individualism and the modern ideology of the free gift. "The gift given with no strings attached" (Gouldner 1973: 277), doing nothing to enhance solidarity, is in itself a "contradiction" (Douglas 1990: vii). Givers usually act in the expectation of counter-gifts, notes Derrida (1994), whereas to be truly free, that is to escape return and calculus, self-interest and instrumental rationality, gifts should be unconstrained. Rather, it is modernity itself that constrains the gift within the restricted boundaries of pure altruism, making us fail to recognize the role it performs as promoter of social cohesion.

In his study on the norm of reciprocity as social regulative rule, Alvin Gouldner had observed that the norm of reciprocity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure social cohesion. "Mechanisms which induce people to remain socially indebted to each other and which inhibit their complete repayment" (1973: 249) are equally required in order to foster and preserve social stability: a principle of "something for nothing" provides the starting mechanism "for stopping vicious cycles of social interaction" and "helping to initiate social interaction" (Gouldner 1973: 274). Using Mauss's *The Gift* to advance his anti-Smithian political-philosophy interpretation of primitive societies, American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972: 169) pointed out that the gift is the equivalent, in archaic societies, of the social contract – ultimately guaranteed by the state – in civil society. "The transfer of things that are in some degree persons and of persons in some degree treated as things, such is the consent at the base of organised society". The gift is therefore "alliance, solidarity, communion – in brief, peace, the great virtue that earlier philosophers, Hobbes notably, had discovered in the State" (ibid.). Remarkably, Sahlins noted that the norm of reciprocity embedded in gift exchanges was functional to preserve freedom and equality. Archaic societies are characterized – as French political anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1977) made clear – by an always latent state of Hobbesian generalized conflict between rival tribes. It is the norm of reciprocity – or

(gift) “exchange as a form of political contract” – to impede the dissolution of “the separate parties within a higher unity” (170) that usually occurs by assigning the monopoly of the use of physical force, to say it à la Weber, to a third party – the State – standing over and above parties involved in gift relationships. It follows that all exchanges “must bear in their material design some political burden of reconciliation” (Sahlins 1972: 182). The basic principle of “an economics properly anthropological” is thus that every exchange, “as it embodies some coefficient of sociability, cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms” (p. 183).

By adopting a fully Maussian perspective (but taking inspiration also from Lévi-Strauss' 1980[1950] reading of the *The Gift*), anthropologist Mary Douglas (1990: xiv) claims that cycling gift systems like those studied by Mauss express the essence of society itself; they are de facto the same thing. Gift exchange is thus “a theoretical counterpart to the [Smithian] invisible hand”. The peculiarity of primitive economic organization as well as the precise space of the economy in primitive societies become now intelligible. Resting on a general rule of reciprocity which depends on a non-contractual element (Hart 2007) committing “the whole person within a complex institutional system that defines the rules of life in society” (Rist 2010: 56), the archaic social contract – continuously renewed in gift relationship – guarantees political freedom (and independence) of the society as well as of its members. Equality raises to the status of a common good to be absolutely preserved: if independence is to be real, it requires productive self-sufficiency (with limited needs) and reciprocity, which are the basic characteristics of the domestic mode of production analysed by Sahlins in his work (see Marchionatti 2012).

This overall tradition of studies situating themselves at the boundaries between anthropology and sociology ends up with showing that Mauss provided that theory of social indebtedness which modern theories of reciprocity (or of the socio-political foundations of human aggregates) require to explain social cohesion. Mauss “discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange” (Douglas 1990: xiv). Authors gathered around the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (M.A.U.S.S.) propose to consider the gift as key to the construction of a “third paradigm” (Caillé 1998) opposing both the reductionism of the individualism of utilitarian conceptions and the reductionist anti-reductionism, so to speak, of holistic views. The M.A.U.S.S. focuses on the latent tension, in the course of Mauss's *Essay*, between the dimension of freedom (gradually accentuated) and the burden of obligation (progressively reduced; see Godbout 2004) implied by gift exchanges – themselves an irreducible



mix of obligation and freedom, social norms and individual interests. Confirming Sahlins's (1972, p. 170) motto: the gift is "no sacrifice of equality and never of liberty", the Mouvement concentrates on the complexity of a social environment characterized by uncertainty and want of freedom. It emphasizes the fundamental role played by "unconditional" gifts (that is, voluntarily offered, without guarantee of return), in an interactionist (political) perspective, in creating and sustaining social bonds and alliances between partners previously regarding each other as potential enemies. Denouncing the excessively strong assumptions about human nature made by economics, as well as the traditional duality between poles and motives for action, the M.A.U.S.S. draws the following epistemological lesson from the Maussian view of the gift. Behavioural disciplines must not be considered as separate or even alien one to each other, but rather as moments of a general social science investigating both the part humans devote to utilitarian practices and the one they devote to non-utilitarian activities (see Caillé 1998).

#### ***4.3. Mauss vs. Smith. The gift as the basis of a new economic discourse***

Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is the beginning of two stories, rather than one only: that of economics, but also that of economics imperialism. By actively encouraging the "bartering savage" paradigm, Smith ended up with expelling himself from a pioneering research program (launched by ethnographic sources which were available to him) on the historical origins of modern societies. Shedding light on the historicity of market exchange, on the contrary, Marcel Mauss helps us recognise the political aim of Smith's theoretical construction: the a-historical path towards emancipation from the serfdom of necessity ends with reaching exactly the societal context that allows man to fully express his "bartering" essence, that is a market society. He himself a promoter of a (radically different) political project, Mauss re-introduces historicity exactly there where Smith had removed it, with the result of dissolving the notion of history in that of nature, from the analysis of primitive societies. As if he were discussing Smith's stage theory, Mauss notes: "Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear ... Only then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms. Thus the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another" (emphasis added). Here lies the primitives' lesson for our times:

“This is what tomorrow, in our so-called civilized world, classes and nations and individuals also, must learn. This is one of the enduring secrets of their wisdom and solidarity” (Mauss 1990: 82-83).

Mauss intercepts the *homo oeconomicus* not at the beginning but at the (provisional) end of it. In the beginning, he finds human beings engaged in the attempt to escape the state of nature. He finds not a natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange elaborated on the model of modern, free-market societies (“*Homo oeconomicus* is not behind us, but lies ahead ... For a very long time man was something different; and he has not been a machine for very long, made complicated by a calculating machine”, Mauss 1990: 76), but a social contract. Primitives apply a sort of “substantial” rationality (Marchionatti 2010), which includes rationality *à la* Robbins but transfers it into a context of perceived abundance with socially limited material needs, with a view to preserving the ecological equilibrium. In this context, gift exchange protects both tribes’ independence in a Hobbesian world, and a tradition of socially preferred equality (hence the prohibition of hoarding and the marginalization of market exchange) threatened by the traditional pattern of resolution of such conflict, i.e. the state. What Mauss finds, in the end, is the *visible hand* of gift exchange, that is the sociopolitical foundation of societies, on which their economic dimension (and its rationality) depends. The dark side of economic exchange, gift exchange is truly a missed opportunity for economics. Owing to the (ab)use Smith made of the conjectural method in studying the evolution towards free market societies, economics lost sight of the non-contractual element of the social contract, and erroneously came to perceive self-regulation as a natural quality of market exchange. The attention Mauss posed on the complexity of both social practices and human motivations, as well as on the political-symbolical representation of society, might conversely be a chance for a discipline currently aspiring to become a non-imperialistic partner of sciences investigating social complexity.

## **5. An illustration of the fertility of the concept of gift: the political essence of Keynes's plans of global reform**

It is well known that the current troubled times of crisis brought unprecedented attention to John Maynard Keynes’s global reform plans of the Forties. Much less known is that Keynes’s international economics and diplomacy can throw light on the still-to-be-explored potential of the political anthropology of the gift in today's economic discourse. At the end of both World Wars, in fact, Keynes suggested the need to resort to a gift dynamic to favor international adjustment to a more

balanced economic world. It is in particular his somewhat heretical 1945 proposal of an American gift (which then became, to Keynes's disappointment, a loan of "business as usual" character) to a highly indebted Britain to strike the imagination. The literature has mainly regarded this surprising episode of Keynes's diplomacy as a desperate attempt to save Britain from financial decline, even more so in the transition to a new international system, which would have relegated Britain to the status of second-order power (see e.g. Skidelsky 2000). But the suggestion to reconsider and redistribute the costs of war, in 1945, in such a way as to strongly limit the evils their burden could produce for the transition to the new order, is not an *unicum* in Keynes's work of international diplomacy. Rather, the proposal provides direct continuity with the recommendations he had made at the end of WWI to cancel Inter-Allied debts as a preliminary and indispensable requirement for a more viable solution to the problem of German reparations. The literature has mainly focused on Keynes's presumed political *naïveté* and identified an abuse of moral arguments in his WWI diplomacy. A methodological reading of *Economic Consequences of the Peace* as an essay in the complexity of international economic relations (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010a), to the contrary, provides reasons to believe that the concept of gift plays a fundamental role in Keynes's vision.

Keynes considered the impasse of German reparations as a situation of general conflict within a continental economy characterized by organic interdependence, a fallacy of composition between particular and general interests, reflected and fostered by the uncertain economic prospects of European countries. The conflict was nurtured by Inter-Allied debts: it was mainly because of their burden that European policymakers could not recede from asking for impossible reparations to Germany, thereby inviting their own destruction as well. The Cambridge economist believed that the only possibility to overcome the continent's debt impasse lay in a starting gift in the form of generous Inter-Allied debt cancellation on the part of the two only creditor countries (the United States and Britain). This would have induced European countries, in their turn, to moderate their requests upon Germany to the advantage of the whole continent and its future trade partners. The gift, in Keynes's vision, was the triggering mechanism of a spiral of "generosity" progressively enlarging the spectrum of countries disposed to take part in the adjustment to a more equilibrated world.

Twenty-six years later, at the end of WWII, Keynes recovered this line of reasoning when suggesting that only creditors' generosity could provide a chance of restoring a multilateral world of free trade after the economic disasters and international animosity of both the war and the interwar period. In

discussing the proposal of an American gift to an exhausted Britain (overburdened with the costs of the Allies' war, and highly indebted vis-à-vis the sterling area and the US) in a correspondence with the Treasury Official in Washington Robert H. Brand in Spring 1945, Keynes referred to the "psychological atmosphere of the free gift" (Keynes 1979: 340). He described this latter as the decisive factor to induce sterling countries, which were the main creditors of Britain and the only nations who could revive multilateral trade in the postwar period by stimulating American exports, to participate in the adjustment to the Bretton Woods world (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010b).

Keynes had an "extraordinarily clear understanding of how pieces of global economy interact, driven by the policies of autonomous nations, in an only partly coherent manner" (Vines 2003: 339). He had acute awareness of the problem of freedom in a complex international society, to say it *à la* Polanyi, wherein economic interdependence seems to require a strong degree of discipline and a general tendency towards uniformity of policy. Keynes avoided assimilating nations to the utility-maximizers actors of rational choice theory (*ibid.*), and rather saw them as social actors who can and should cooperate internationally in the name of mutual respect for each other's freedom, if the opportunities of global interdependence must exceed its threats. Now, Mallard (2011) has recently stressed the affinity between Keynes's and Mauss's reasoning about German reparations and the European economic conflict at the end of WWI – it is to be noted that Mauss was then drafting *The Gift*. This comparison offers therefore a fundamental starting point for a highly promising research on Keynes's attempt to promote a desired social dimension in international relations.

An interdisciplinary study of the non-purely economic aspects of Keynes's desired new world order shows in fact that the "American gift" proposal rests on the complex play of freedom and obligation which characterizes Maussian gift dynamics. This tension allows gifts to perform a role in creating socio-political alliances intended to defend individual autonomy, as stressed by the research tradition stemming from Mauss's work. Moreover, Keynes's gift proposal helps to grasp the revolutionary principles that inspire his lifelong effort to endow the world with public-spirited institutions promoting "shared responsibilities" approaches to global equilibrium. The culminating stage of this work, the International Clearing Union scheme designed for the Bretton Woods world, sheds light on the overall political essence of Keynes's desired reform. Designed to avoid the insurgence of excessive debt and credit positions, Keynes's rules for symmetric adjustment limited creditor countries' license to adopt rentier-like attitudes, but granted them the possibility to reap the fruits of the proposed recycling of surpluses. Yet this criterion of economic efficiency was

indissolubly associated with a full political vision centered on the need to defend debtors' policy space from the presumed inevitability of austerity solutions, and more in general their right to heterogeneity and diversity in devising road-maps toward growth and development (see Kirshner 2009). Expressly building on the peculiar social dimension of the gift as against the purely instrumental rationality of a market loan, the American gift proposal is a telltale sign of this general, political vision of the international economic order (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010b).

The Maussian character of Keynes's new order – wherein, as Sahlins (1972: 162) observed in relation to gift exchange in archaic societies, “the freedom to gain at others' expense is not envisioned by the relations and form of exchange” – may be profitably put to use in trying to devise the political foundations of a possible alternative to the current international disorder. The emphasis Keynes posed on policy space and his vision of the global order as a happy mix of international discipline and national freedom may in fact offer the foundations for constructing the “new Bretton Woods compromise” which Rodrik (2011), among others, posits as the only viable solution for today's world. And the interdisciplinary character of Keynes's approach to the complexity of international economic relations, coupled with the use he made of ethical arguments when defending the right to policy heterogeneity, supplies a powerful alternative of thought to the currently prevailing moralistic vision of intra-European imbalances<sup>2</sup>.

## **6. Mauss vs. Smith: the socio-political foundations of modern societies and the future of economics. Concluding remarks**

Economics imperialism considers complexity – that is the main motive why interdisciplinarity is required – not as the fundamental issue at stake when dealing with social contexts, but as an

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<sup>2</sup> “How Keynes would solve the Eurozone crisis”? Writing in 2012, Skidelsky and Miller urged a solution inspired to *Economic Consequences of the Peace*: “Europe hosts some of the best – and best paid – financial experts in the world; let their talents help governments shake off their paper shackles and devise ways of reducing debt without austerity”. Debt forgiveness easily comes to mind, but the recent intensification of the Greek crisis and the failures of the austerity doctrine seem to provide compelling evidence that a structural reform of the Eurozone is needed: “a sounder political economy” between European nations, as Keynes (1980: 43) would say. This requires a new European monetary system, modelled on Keynes's plan for an International Clearing Union (as was the case with the European Payments Union of 1950-58): one wherein the orderly unwinding of external imbalances is ensured by built-in expansionary mechanisms, creditors sharing the adjustment burden with debtors (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2014b).

unnecessary complication that economists luckily manage to get rid of in progressing toward better understanding of human behaviour. To overcome the obstacles posed by disciplinary boundaries, a non-imperialist economics should rather bring social complexity to the fore. Drawing on the anthropological-sociological literature on the issue, the interpretation of the gift proposed in this paper opposes the idea of naturalness of market exchange. A leitmotif of this article is exactly the opposition between the alternative paths traced and covered by Smith and Mauss to discovering the socio-political foundations of modern societies, and the resulting consequences for the development and evolution of the social discipline of economics. When light is thrown on these two radically alternative ways of implementing a common general research program, it becomes evident that any reflection on the nature and method of economics should necessarily address the issues Mauss identified as problematic in his account of the evolution of human societies. The Maussian approach makes the gift appear both a triggering mechanism for the creation of social bonds and a vehicle of such ties. Social cohesion is ensured exactly by practices of gift exchange, which appear to protect individual autonomy from the potentially excessive discipline of social norms, through the paradoxical – only to the eyes of contemporary economists – and complex mix of freedom and obligation on which the act of giving rests (see Godbout 1998).

We suggest that the rediscovery of gift exchange might prove an important stimulus to a reform of economics. To pass “from reductionism to complexity” (Rist 2010: 20), economics must fully accept the challenge of interdisciplinarity. Configuring a clear case of decreasing returns, economic imperialism – evidently losing explanatory power when applied to societies and phenomena whose complexity resists its reductionism – rejects, to the detriment of economics itself, the variety and diversity of economic practices. The changing face of mainstream economics is the result of modern field and laboratory research on human sociality, but also of willingness to investigate a series of black boxes (endogenous preferences, intrinsic motivations, complexity of micro-macro relations) and to refuse the reductionism of neoclassical ontology. Time will tell whether economics can successfully face the now pressing challenges of complexity, morality, political philosophy. Conceived as a sort of manifesto, this paper has tried to argue that if economics is to contribute to transdisciplinary theoretical framework for analyzing behavior, economics reformers should first address the original, historical, “Smithian” sin of their discipline, and possibly remove the deep roots of economics imperialism. Second, they should rediscover and update a methodological approach soon left aside, conceiving economics as a science of social complexity and the economic material as made up of human actions, beliefs and feelings shaping a social scenario. Third, they should explore

the benefits stemming from adopting the Maussian approach to analyse inherently complex social facts; benefits that include the possibility to rethink economics' potential contribution to the construction of a shared, interdisciplinary theoretical framework for the analysis of individual and social behavior.

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