I give therefore I am

Inequality, consumption and recognition

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In a system in which inequality, consumption and the desire for recognition correlate, giving plays a central role: gifts express our sense of our own value as much as that of others. Only by legitimizing areas of acknowledgement beyond economic success can we move towards a more inclusive form of giving, argues sociologist Alain Caillé.

Revue Projet: In the introduction to your book La quête de reconnaissance (The Quest for Acknowledgement), you claim that our society has moved from the ‘language of having’ to a quest ‘for being, for identity and for subjectivity’. [1] How do you explain this radical change?

Alain Caillé: Humanity as we know it has both needs and desires, meaning that the quest for having and the quest for being have always been bound together. Until the 1980s, social conflict related primarily to ownership of the means of production and redistribution. What was to be redistributed and to whom? From the 1980s onwards, other underlying conflicts emerged: between men and women (the conflict is of course older than that, but we used to think that, like class conflict, it would resolve itself), between generations, between minorities (sexual, religious, ethnic) and majorities. It was as if these conflicts were suddenly becoming independent of each other. Politics came to be based on an identity founded upon resemblance: if you belonged to the same social class then you struggled alongside your own class. Now we have tipped over into identity based on difference, on ipséité (ipseity) as Ricœur would have it, an identity in which each of us wishes to be different and cannot be reduced to identity with another.

Over the last four decades, the West has transformed itself into a type of political and social system that might be called inverse totalitarianism. Twentieth-century totalitarianisms sacrificed individuals on the altar of the collective, whether the state, the race, or something else. Today, whatever is communal must be deconstructed, so that there is nothing left but individuals, or fragments of individuality. This kind of totalitarianism comes with neo-liberalism and speculative, rentier capitalism. What we are witnessing is the de-legitimation of everything associated with commonality. This makes society unstable and is associated with an increase in consumption.
Isn't there a danger that the quest for being can nevertheless only be fulfilled through having?

The anthropologist Mary Douglas and the economist Baron Isherwood have shown that an enormous proportion of the things that we buy are acquired so that we can fulfil our role as givers (having a guest room in our houses, buying champagne so we can welcome our guests, etc.). [2] We fulfil our role in terms of the threefold obligation beloved of Mauss: giving, receiving and giving in return. Gifts enable us to be acknowledged as givers and to acknowledge the value of others whilst simultaneously asserting our own value, with the assurance that we will be acknowledged in proportion to what we give.

Even purchases that we make for ourselves can be seen as gifts. One acknowledges oneself according to the degree of pleasure that one gives oneself. It is not simply a question of egoism. Consumption may occur where we feel that there is some gap that must be filled. But acknowledgement is a never-ending quest. One of the factors that contribute to increased consumption involves an increasing struggle to be acknowledged, and this is linked to weakening of identity. This weakening can be explained in particular by the fragmentation of social conflict. The subject is no longer just a representative of the working class, but may simultaneously be a young person in opposition to older people, a woman in search of autonomy, and someone of immigrant origin. Contemporary society requires that each individual affirm his or her individuality. Despite this, there is a need, very pronounced among young people, to identify with a collective, even one that is fragile. We are tugged between two extremes: hyper-singularization and hyper-conformism.

The philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour argues that hyper-consumption first burst upon the world on 30 March 1929. During an Easter Parade in New York, a PR agency closely associated with tobacco companies persuaded a group of women to light up cigarettes all at the same time - an act that, in those days, was the prerogative of men. These cigarettes were dubbed 'Torches of Freedom'. This display of women's liberation was, at the same time, a way of capturing a market. Acknowledgement, the quest for freedom and the opening-up of markets have become inseparable.

How are consumption and acknowledgement related to each other?

Part of consumption may be explained as need. But we can never really know where need begins and where desire takes over. The two are inextricably intertwined. I prefer to approach consumption from another angle: the desire for distinction, explored in particular by Bourdieu. [3] Unlike utilitarian visions of social action, the Mauss movement [4] sees the principal motive for human action as being the desire for acknowledgement. More precisely, it sees the desire for acknowledgement in terms of gifts, the desire to be acknowledged as a generous donor; and, beyond that, to be seen in terms of generativity. We wish to be seen as being involved in life-enhancing, creative action.

In German, ‘there is’ translates as *es gibt*, literally ‘it gives’. But what is the ‘it’ that is giving? If we reject the idea that it is God, we can say that there are a great many things that are given to us: life, the world, the air that we breathe, and so on; but these are not given by anyone and not given to anyone in particular. Phenomenologists speak of ‘donation’. If this logic does not imply a donor and a receiver, then it seems to me that we
must conceive of donation on the basis of the Mauss model. This implies the idea of the
counter-donation, that is, that one must reciprocate a gift. By extension, this means that
we must give back to life, to nature, etc. It is in this sense that I would understand ideas
such as spontaneity, creativity and generativity.

How do the ideas of donation and counter-donation apply to presents, for example?

Nowadays, giving presents on festive occasions is an obligation. We are subject to
Mauss’s idea of ‘triple obligation’: ‘giving-receiving-giving in return’. Presents function as
a means of acknowledging the value that we attach to our children, to our family. In my
book, *Œil pour œil, don pour don* (‘An Eye for an eye, a gift for a gift’), co-authored with
the anthropologist Jean-Édouard Grésy, we attempt to apply the donation paradigm to
psychology, but introduce a slight complication in terms of the classic Mauss schema. In
order to achieve a complete cycle, we have changed ‘give, receive, give in return’ into
‘ask, give, receive, give in return’. This applies to presents. If the present does not fulfil a
request or an expectation, it falls flat. And we know that no gift ever completely satisfies
requests or expectations. We are therefore faced with an unending cycle. A whole series
of disappointments between people arises from an imbalance between asking, giving,
receiving and giving in return. There are bad askers, bad givers (those who shower you
with presents or, the opposite, those who don’t know how to give). But it is not just about
the presents; it is the whole idea of the gift, given at the right time, with the right degree
of attention and gratitude, that is subject to this tension.

Could we do without gifts as a symbol of our bond?

Not without inviting disapproval. But you do have to ask yourself about giving and what
can help us escape from hyper-consumption on a more political level. In my view, we
have to look for the answer in what I call ‘convivialism’. We are all faced with the
problem of excess, what the Greeks called *hubris*. Our present level of consumption is not
sustainable for the planet: we cannot have desire that is infinite, because we cannot have
infinite production in a finite world. But how can we place a limit on this hubris about
consumption?

We can approach this question in two ways. If we say that consumption is not primarily
dictated by utilitarian needs, but is driven by the desire for acknowledgement, this means
that it is not a lack of objects or possessions that explains this hubris. Hence, the problem
is not as economic as people generally think. This is a good thing. Over the last twenty or
thirty years, we have observed a disconnect in the richest countries between an increase
in gross domestic product and an increase in satisfaction. It follows that we are not
doomed to keep producing more and more for strictly economic reasons.

However, the desire for acknowledgement is much more difficult to regulate than
production. It is management of desire that religions have always found to be a stumbling
block. How are you going to hold in check desire for endless acknowledgement? Part of
the answer has to be sought in the factor that exacerbates the desire for consumption,
namely increasing inequalities. Amongst the exceedingly wealthy, there exists the fantasy
scenario of infinite wealth and absolute power, a scenario all the more difficult to manage
because we live under a regime of imagined equality. In a society where inequalities are
acceptable, desires are regulated: each individual consumes in accordance with his or
her social status; the range of what can be desired is more or less circumscribed. Once a democratic revolution has taken place, everyone feels that they are equal to everyone else, and therefore have the right to consume the same. The greater the differences in wealth, the more the desire to consume will accelerate.

*What about those who are not in a position to give in return for a gift because they do not have the economic means to do so?*

What really defines absolute poverty is the impossibility of, or even the ban on giving. I discussed this at a recent roundtable organized by the anti-poverty NGO ATD-Fourth World. [5] The NGO’s founder, Joseph Wresinski, was himself raised in great poverty. He recalled how, when he and his mother received gifts from charitable ladies, they were not allowed to pass on what they had been given. They were compelled to accept the passive status of beneficiaries and had no right to accede to the active position of donor. Studies of the most poverty-stricken prove the point: as soon as they receive a little money, they spend it on a large scale. This is misunderstood by charities and is seen as scandalous. But these people are not just stuck in the utilitarian world, they have gone beyond the level of need.

*How can you express attachment other than through objects?*

You have to agree to be indebted; you have to agree to receive. In my view that is more complicated than knowing how to give. A person who receives is obliged – in both senses of the word – to the person who gives. In Portuguese the word for ‘thank you’ is *obrigado* or *obrigada*. Whilst it is less the case nowadays, traditionally the person who receives is under the power, under the control of the giver. He is in debt and thereby demonstrates that he has less value than the one who did the giving. The giver may often say that it is nothing, thereby minimizing the act of giving. On the one hand, it implies that the giver could give much more and therefore has much more value than the gift that has been given. On the other hand, it is in order to avoid making the receiver too indebted and avoiding him feeling too obliged. You have to be relatively strong to agree to be weak, or at least to appear weak. It could be said that the true donor is the one who agrees to receive and to acknowledge that what he has received is a gift and not a due. Because it is the fact of receiving and acknowledging that constitutes the gift. If it is not acknowledged, then it is not a gift. Here’s a very banal example. When you are invited to someone’s house, it is usual to arrive with something (a bottle of wine, a dessert or a bouquet of flowers). I actually find that annoying. That is because it seems as though you have to carry out the give-in-return procedure immediately. I prefer to be in debt for a while and to invite the host to my house at some later date.

*How can we build a more inclusive society when individual success is so important?*

The key is to socially legitimise areas of acknowledgement other than those that are dominant today, the main one being acknowledgement of economic success through the fact of earning money, of being able to consume. Other areas of acknowledgement do exist. You can be acknowledged as an athlete, as a nice person, for your cultural creativity, and so on. What is at stake for our society is to enable humans to be recognized in terms of their ‘pro-social’ activities. This means activities that contribute to the strengthening of the social bond and the creativity of everyone. It means things such
as being a volunteer in a sports club, supporting local democracy and cultural diffusion. We must encourage such pro-social activities, as well as economic activities that are not exclusively profit-based. This is the field of the social and supportive economy, where material or financial motives meet civic and humanitarian interests. Developing this social principle of common humanity and legitimate individuality (being yourself among others) is the answer to the problem of how to live as well – or indeed better – with fewer material resources.

*Interview by Aurore Chaillou and Martin Monti-Lalaubie.*

**Footnotes**


4. Anti-utilitarian movement in social sciences, inspired by the ideas of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss.


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