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kula, potlatch, dan and hau

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The four figures of gift: *kula, potlatch, dan and hau**

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Abstract

Drawing on actual reinterpretation of Mauss's classical essay on "the Gift", the authors examine four ideal-typical forms of gift which recur in the anthropologic literature, and theoretically analyze them under relevant contemporary phenomena. Kula - as reciprocity gift-, Potlach - as competitive gift-, Hau - as non-returnable gift - and Dan - as asymmetrical gift- do not have in common something that allows us to use the same term for all, however they are tied to each other in many different ways. There is a complicate net of similarities that overlap and cross one another. According with this perspective the "gift" appears as a polythetic and polisemic concept: it is crucial tools in the understanding contemporary societies, cultures and economies as well as useful starting point for a new dialogue between anthropologists and economists .

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1. What is gift?

«The classic point of reference for thinking on gift-giving and reciprocity is the famous text by Marcel Mauss, the nephew of Emile Durkheim, *The Gift*, published in 1925, deals with the anthropological research on economic exchange from a systematic and theoretical point of view. Mauss synthesized the research of his time, especially that of Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas, and laid the foundation for economic anthropology. All subsequent social theorists pondering the gift refer to his work» (Adloff, 2006, p.412). We shall briefly recall five of the most relevant post-maussian definitions of gift: the economicistic, the dichotomous, the anti-utilitarian, the purist and the continuist. In regards to the economicistic conception, *gift is an enforcement-less voluntary exchange*. Its voluntary nature excludes that it rises under duress or from moral obligation. The absence of enforcement (either contractual or of any other kind) makes gift not binding: who receives one can also decide not to return something else. It follows that the gift beneficiary returns it by deciding timings and amount as s/he wishes. By calculating the optimizing decision, the donor's and beneficiary's utility function can therefore include, next to the usual material and monetary incentives, more refined reasons such as reputation, equity or gratitude. The essential thing is that none of these additional reasons tarnishes the voluntariness of the choice (Akerlof, 1982; Stark e Falk, 1998).

The dichotomic vision compares gift exchange with goods exchange, and it has been particularly supported by Gregory (1982) and Carrier (1991). Gift economy privileges relationships between people rather than those between things: instead of producing goods by means of goods, it makes them circulate as if they were people. We donate, waiting for the other to accept and return our gift: we enter a reciprocity circuit. We donate, by circulating means that express our position within the society: that represents us and never totally alienates from us. We donate, eventually, by establishing to give, accept, and return: we integrate the exchange into a relationship with the counterpart. Therefore, while means trade is the voluntary bilateral alienation of goods between anonymous subjects, *gift is the mandatory transfer of an inalienable good in the range of a social relation*.

According to the anti-utilitarian vision, also supported by the exponents of M.A.U.S.S., gifts are «those goods that serve the creation and consolidation of social bonds, and what firstly matters is not their usage value or trade value, rather what we could call bond value» (Caillé, 1994, p.9). The sphere where gifts circulates differs, though is not in contrast, from those of monetary and political redistribution exchange, and places itself at the same distance in between egoism and altruism, interest and selflessness, compulsoriness and freedom. It expresses a giving desire that, amongst humans, is as important as that of receiving. Therefore, gift is «*any performance of goods or services that is carried out with no guarantee of return, and with the only aim of creating, enhancing or recreating the social bond among persons*» (Godbout, 1992, p.30, italics added).

In the purist conception Derrida (1991) observes, countering those that emphasize the reciprocal and relational dimension, that a gift arises from the lack of reciprocity and personal connection, as it consists in offering something with no reward expectation, and in receiving with no obligation. «Derrida suggests three conditions implicit in the idea of a gift. Firstly, there must be no reciprocity. The gift must neither be in return for a previous gift nor anticipate any future return. Gift giving cannot, in short, involve any calculation or interest. Secondly, and for the first condition to be met, the recipient should not acknowledge gift as a gift, as this would lead to a feeling of indebtedness and the obligation to make a return. Thirdly, the giver should also not acknowledge gift as a gift. Even if the giver does not expect reciprocity from the recipient, acknowledging to have given a gift would still allow him/her to derive satisfaction or gratification from his/her action; that is, the recognition would still lead to an exchange, even if only internal to the giver» (Venkatesan, 2011, p.47). As soon as goods are perceived as gifts, they then become involved in a giving-accepting-returning cycle and cease being gifts; «we cannot even speak of a gift without making it disappear» (Laidlaw, 2000, p.621). The "impure" gift is contradictory, because it lends in order to have back; however, every transactional mechanism, either mandatory or voluntary, implicates the possibility of returning as a sort of convenience or interest. Hence, *the "pure" gift consists into a one-sidedness transfer of something to someone, with no reciprocal acknowledgement nor reward whatsoever.*

Lastly, in the continuist conception, the gift-commodity dualism is radically forsaken. Gift sphere and commodity sphere are superimposed inasmuch as the roles can even swap: the choice of goods based on an explicit assessment can concern gifts, while in the consumption process, commodities can be drawn from the market and made social or personal (Miller, 2001). We placed this conception at last, as it marks the evanescence of the need itself of a peculiar definition of gift.

We shall now summarize. Gift meant as a “wonky” mercantile trade; as a generalized interpersonal transaction; as a reciprocal offer with no equivalence of value; as a self-less action that denies itself; as a possible demonstration within the consumption of goods (and vice versa). All these five definitions seem not to have a common foundation that could determine a substantial convergence. In §2 we will examine the theoretical features of non-mercantile, appropriative and mercantile economies in order to verify how and where the phenomenon, or phenomena, of “gift” might be placed. In the following four paragraphs we will linger on a theoretical reinterpretation of an equal number of ideal-typical patterns of gift, which recur in the anthropologic literature: *kula*, *potlatch*, *dan* and *hau*. The §7 concludes.

2. Non-mercantile, appropriative and mercantile economies

There are numerous anthropologists that, by pondering about differences between goods and gifts, have recalled the Marxist analysis of capitalistic commodification (e.g. see Graeber, 1996). The interpretational operation that we suggest is different as it does not relate to Marx, rather to one of the most original and undeservedly unpopular Marxist scholars: Alfred Sohn-Rethel. We shall briefly recall an aspect of his contribution. In the capitalistic society the generalization of market occurs. Each worker produces goods according to private modalities, while the socialization of production indirectly takes place through the mercantile trade. Whilst circulating on the market, goods are not considered for what they are (use-value), rather for what they are worth (exchange-value). More precisely, it takes place the abstraction from the concrete use-value of sundry goods on the market, which are all quantitatively valued as commodities, or rather as generic wealth.

Commodities are not equal, it is the exchange that makes them such. On the market, indeed, it happens that x commodity A = y commodity B. So far, yet Marx (1863).

However, how can the exchange equalize, in terms of value, commodities? What is the process that distracts from the several usage values of goods, in favor of abstract equalizations of their exchange-values? By wondering such questions, Sohn-Rethel executes a shift of theoretical attention from the commodity-abstraction, which Marx's consideration concentrates on, onto the exchange-abstraction. His answer observes that, whilst exchanged amongst their owners, commodities must be suspended from any usage deed. During exchange actions, the only allowed change concerns the owning status of commodities, whereas their status as objects of usage deeds must stay unvaried. *The fact that usage deeds are not executed is the prerequisite for making trade deeds happen.* «The exchange action only changes commodities' social status, or rather their status as their owners' property. In order to regularly realize this social mutation according to their norms, commodities must be exempt from any contemporary physical change, or they must be considered materially immutable. Exchange is then abstract throughout its whole duration. In this case, "abstract" means that every signs of a possible usage of the commodity are detracted. [...] On the market, the usage of things stay "mere representation" for the people concerned. By creating markets, the human beings' imagination separates from their actions and slowly individualizes in their private awareness». (Sohn-Rethel, 1977, pp.43-44).

The junction of Sohn-Rethel's thought concerns the circumstance for which every trader learns to discern usage deeds of goods, limited within a private setting after the market closing, from trade deeds, during whom the concrete qualities of certain goods stay unvaried. In the market, the trader's interest towards using a certain good cannot be translated into action, rather it must be expressed on the imaginary level: commodities are placed behind the display window and cannot be touched; subject and object are separated from an invisible barrier as hard as glass. *Commodities express an identity that cannot vary throughout the duration of the exchange;* their circulation is a pure movement, through an abstract space-time, with no qualitative connotations. In trading, human beings' actions are

abstract even before their thoughts. However, in a long term the mental representation of exchange becomes abstract too. In order for it to happen, currency must intervene. The latter is the symbol-commodity that, according to social agreements and political ratification, has to be considered devoid of any usage peculiarity.

«In coinage, the previous relationship by which the value of a commodity serving as money was subordinated to, and covered up by, its material status is reversed: now the social form of value makes use of a certain and particular natural form for its purpose. Any coin has it stamped upon its body that it is not to serve as an object of use, but rather as a means of exchange. [...] The coin constitutes the conjunction element through which trade abstraction turns from being social to awareness and can become conceptual abstraction. Anybody who carries coins in his/her pocket and understands their function, bears in mind, whether s/he is aware of it, ideas which, no matter how hazily, reflect the postulate of the exchange abstraction. Indeed, s/he concretely deals with coins as if they consisted in an indestructible and uncreated substance» that mediates every exchange (Sohn-Rethel, 1976, pp.126-27). Those conceptual abstractions that reside in the coin owner's mind cease, in the exchange abstraction, every change of nature, and more generally of any extra-human process. Nature is discerned from society as mere object world, as well as use-values are discerned from monetary values. That drives the trader to abandon those (magical-mythological) representations where human communities and nature interpenetrate. Hence, according to Sohn-Rethel, the deepest anthropological discontinuity introduced by the "pure" mercantile exchange consists in the temporal severance between usage deeds and trade deeds. If we cannot produce nor benefit from goods while trading, it means that their features are not conveyed, they stay unvaried; and that, as we can only imagine these features, we replace the direct experience with its abstract representation. Money is the social pattern (whom is increasingly abstract itself, from money-commodity, to money-pawn, to virtual money) which synthesizes this severance. On the contrary, the "pure" non-mercantile economies are those where acquisition of goods superimposes their usage, as well as circulation superimposes production and consumption; they are those where human beings keep in

consideration the concrete qualities of goods throughout every economic activity; those where changes in nature and in society interpenetrate; those where both goods and people can see their identities modifying during the exchange. Therefore, *goods trading can turn into commodities trading only if it disregards usage deeds.*

Obviously, "pure" mercantile economy – where commodities trading is the only *nexus rerum* – and "pure" non-mercantile economy – where peers have direct relationships in regards to production, circulation and consumption – are ideal-types whom never end the close examination of an historical society. In particular, every pre-capitalistic society has also been based, as Sohn-Rethel states (1977, p.96), on the asymmetric seizure of somebody's goods by somebody else. Formally, as a commodity trading act, *the seizure deed is also separated from the usage deed.* Confiscated or handed goods are, indeed, not altered while being gathered, in order to be used in further places and times; they are, also, treated as quantitative unities that can be registered and calculated (as, for instance, the imperial official used to do in ancient oriental societies). However, that does not necessarily imply that an economy based on compulsory one-way conveyances coincides with a market economy. The biggest difference concerns the role of those that acquire goods: whereas, in trading, the purchaser becomes owner of the commodity and introduces it in a private sphere, the one who carries out the seizure is member of an overall hierarchical power and answers to it for any future usage of the appropriated goods. This difference impacts the conscience of those who carry out appropriation deeds: for them, the foundation of abstracting from usage deeds does not consist, as for commodity traders, into the domain of exchange-value on use-value, but rather it consists in belonging to a social or political organism that counters individual goods and subjects' qualities, in favor of an impersonal reproductive mechanism.

We shall now direct our attention to economic subjects and specify a few considerations that Sohn-Rethel does not express, as we consider them coherent to his approach. In commodity circulation, severance between usage deeds and trade deeds entails a subsequent severance amongst people, as private producers only come into contact by means of the exchange. Nevertheless, if social relations are

not directly manifested, in trading some typical attributes of relations amongst things feature relations amongst people. For instance, a relation between private jobs (weaving and spinning) is expressed as a relation between commodities (canvas and thread) which is mediated by the exchange monetary value. This is a process of people's "reification". On the other hand, economic estrangement of subjectivity, as well as in mercantile economy, also occurs in appropriative economy. In appropriation, some typical attributes of relations amongst people feature relations amongst goods: the severance of usage deeds from dispossession deeds implies that subject A's power or prestige towards subject B is integrated in, and manifested by, the value of goods that B transfers to A. This is the process of "fetishism" or personification of things. In mercantile economies economic subjects are not able to express and modify their identity during mercantile trade or appropriation deeds, because they are separated from usage deeds. As well as goods identity shall stay unvaried, subjectivity shall stay objectified. Both who trade commodities and who are related to an expropriation nexus, are not persons, because trade or compulsory one-way transfer disregards them as such. In figure 1, whom illustrates the argumentation we have been through, we shall highlight that in the first line, the junction between usage deeds and goods' trade deeds neither generates fetishism nor reification. Nevertheless, that does not mean that this junction coincides with a situation of idyllic harmony between people and things, but rather that there is *no* demonstration of any of those economic estrangement modalities that we could observe in other ideal-typical situations. The theoretical scheme represented in Figure 1 consents to reconsider the concept of gift.

		Usage deeds			
		Joined to	Separate from		
Trade assets deeds		X			1
Appropriation deeds			X	Fetishism	2
Mercantile trade deeds			X	Reification	3

Figure 1

If we accepted a definition of gift as an economic category that differs from commodities and compulsory one-way transfer, that would be referred to line (1). Moreover, Sohn-Rethel's approach, as well as Marx's, asserts that every economic society reproduces itself through the controversial cohabitation of different regulating criteria. We could have (1) and (2), as in archaic market-less societies; or (1), (2) and (3), as in pre-capitalistic and capitalistic societies. It follows that criterion (1) is always interwoven to other criteria that generate fetishism and/or reification. There is no goods exchange that is not blended with those economic relations that separate usage deeds from trade deeds and that, therefore, generate forms of subjectivity estrangement.

Therefore, the economical practice of gift is always soaked with the economical practices of commodities and compulsory one-way transfers, whatsoever. Any theory concerning gift cannot do anything but reintegrating criteria (2) and (3). This thoroughly explains the wide ambiguity of Mauss's reflection: the practice of gift is both this *and* that, or rather it appears as contradictory, as who *donates is also the one who gathers resources and trades commodities*. The logical-analytical possibility of formulating a perfectly coherent concept of gift has, then, little importance, since it is *not possible to theorize*

anything but a "contaminated" gift. In the following paragraphs we will delve into this direction.

3- Kula as availability to receive

Attention is often solely captured by the circle: *donner, recevoir, rendre*. By forgetting a crucial and deflecting remark by Mauss (1923-24, p.188): «in the most complete, solemn, elevated and competitive form of *kula*, that of great maritime expeditions, *Uvalaku*, the rule states to start by having nothing to trade or do in order to receive back some gifts, even only food, whom are not even explicitly requested. It is all about pretending to do nothing but receiving. Gifts will be given back as usury, only when the visiting tribe will be hosted, the next year, by the visited fleet». *The initial move does not consist into giving, but rather into being available to receive*. One who gives something shows to own resources and power. One who offers a gift is already risking goods and honor, in case the counterpart does not accept or give something back. Rather, *kula* starts in its most complete form when somebody wishes to enter a "social game" whom s/he was not invited to: when the visitor asks the host to be involved in interaction. One who reports the availability to receive is voluntarily showing him/herself vulnerable, needy, ready to establish reciprocal alliances that, with time, will be giving something back to the partner. One who is carrying nothing while visiting the other, is simply offering the possibility of a future collaboration.

Therefore, *kula* (in its complete form) can be interpreted as *the strategic universal ploy that connects a group to another one*. This move can generate each of the typical modalities of socio-economic relations in ancient communities: ritual exchange of gifts (*kula* in its reduced form, always beginning with *donner*); administered or agreement-based commerce; market commerce (Polanyi, 1977, pp.130-34). It is, for instance, enlightening to compare *wasis* (reduced form of *kula*) to *emporia* (market commerce-based form). Mauss (1923-24, p.200) states: «A highly similar relation to *kula* is the one related to *wasi*. That establishes regular trades, whom are mandatory between people of agricultural tribes and, on the

other hand, of maritime tribes. The farmer lays his products down in front of his fisher fellow's home. The latter, in another occasion, after a rich fishing activity will head to the agricultural village to return, by giving the fishing outcome, the received gift on a usury base ». Polanyi (1963, p.233) notes down: « Carthaginians, according to Herodotus, used to performance sort of a silent barter with African coast indigenous, by trading their goods with gold. The vigilance used to induce both parts to head in turns for a place nearby the shore, where they respectively dropped a certain amount of goods and gold, and they used to repeat this operation until the other side was satisfied with the offered amounts; then, both parts used to leave the place with their purchased items, not even facing each other once».

The link between *kula/wasi* and *emporium* lays in the fact that both are oriented towards the integration, in a wider community, of actors and/or reciprocally extraneous groups. Moreover, and most of all, they have in common the fact that they both have had, as a foundation moment, availability to receive, or rather the complete *kula*.

We may represent this theoretical issue by recalling the language used in the games theory. In particular, in this and in §4 we will represent simultaneous games between two actors, initially having at their disposition a set of two pure strategies (cooperating – not cooperating). The games are represented in a normal form, by setting up charts displaying the possible choices, known as matrixes of the payoffs associated to each combination of strategies. The ordination of payoffs – whom are not necessarily related to money or other practical measures – aims at representing the consequences of behaviors, and attributes different weights according to whether the result has produced benefits or not. Both *kula/wasi* and *emporium* occur in low-institutionalization contexts. Mechanisms of agreements enforcement are, therefore, not available: there is a lack of contracts stating what and how to trade; surveillance and control structure: sanctioning structures for deals cheaters (North, 1990). In this situation, it is hard to trigger and maintain cooperation.

Let's figure two players that, autonomously, pick two strategies: either cooperation or defection. Let's assume that Tom plays against Dick for a public good, and that unit costs related to the good's supply are higher, for him, than unit benefits. The worst case scenario for Tom is option S, when he is the only one

collaborating while the other defects. Option P, that sees none of them collaborating, could be set on the third place. On the second, instead, we find option R, occurring when both do; whereas the best case scenario is option T, that verifies when Dick collaborates whilst he does not. Dick's strategy is exactly the same as Tom's. The greatest advantage, then, pushes both towards defection; however, as everybody defect, nobody is engaged in providing the public good. In other words, the converging option –that of no collaboration from both sides – is sub-optimal, because if everybody were engaged, the public good would be provided and they would all benefit from it. This paradigmatic solution, named "the prisoner's dilemma" and described in Figure 2, has been widely discussed in literature (Nowak-Highfield, 2011).

	C	D
C	R	S
D	T	P

C is 'cooperation'; D is 'defection'. R is the payoff if both players cooperate. S is the payoff when the first player cooperate and the second defect. T the payoff when the first player defect and the second cooperate. P is the payoff when both players defect. It is assumed that $T > R > P > S$ and $2R > T + S$.

Source: Nowak (2012).

Figure 2

One of the most effective ways to resolve the dilemma is based on reciprocity, meant in this context as a tendency to kindly respond to kindness, and to avenge betrayal. In the field of reciprocity-based strategies, tit-for-tat has been far considered the most solid: it consists in beginning with cooperation and in simply copying the contestant's former decision in the next ones (Axelrod, 1984). More recently, however, it has been illustrated that this strategy is vulnerable within non-institutionalized environments, such as *kula/wasi's* and *emporium's*. Indeed, if a player stumbles on unintentional mistakes (e.g., s/he gets offended by a kind

gesture executed by the contestant) these are not easy to be deciphered and communicated between playing subjects or extraneous groups, hence they are hardly correctable. Therefore, an accidental defection takes to mutual defection cycles (either groups clash or they detach from themselves), until a further mistake corrects the incomprehension. On another hand, a further evolutionary stability is expressed by the strategy named "generous tit-for-tat", whom considers addressing a defection with another defection only in (approximately) two thirds of cases: the latter strategy *for-gives* more than tit-for-tat's, and is hence immune from occasional mistakes (Nowak and Sigmund, 1992).

The "generous tit-for-tat" strategy effectively expresses *kula/wasi* and *emporium* features. Indeed, it only reacts to part of betrayals, and keeps, at the same time, the ability of replying: it is able to re-launch cooperation without laying down the arms. Nevertheless, this strategy's limit lies in being placed within the "prisoner's dilemma" coordinates which, as we reminded, only consider the options of cooperation and defection. In order to represent *kula* in its complete form, it is now necessary to add a third type of strategic option: drawing back from the social game, or rather refusing the interaction with the other player. Games that allow this option are named "optional games" (Hauert *et al.*, 2002). We shall present them through a very simple and immediate example. Let's assume to consider a bus as our example of public good. In the first case scenario we pay the ticket, namely we give our contribution to financing and/or producing and/or maintaining a social asset. In the second case scenario we take our journey for free, namely we defect from the mass behavior, by letting our engagement fall on the others, through a redistribution/appropriation strategy that we benefit from. In the third case scenario using the bus is optional, and we assume that all those who decide not to go on board will walk. The latter is called "the loner strategy": somebody who neither cooperates nor defects, but rather avoids being involved in the society game.

A single player's decision of not taking part to the game is sufficient for the game not to take place: in these cases, that are five in figure 4, both subjects obtain a payoff E ("Exit"). Let's assume that cooperators' payoff R exceeds loners' , E; moreover, that loners' payoff E exceeds defectors', P. This creates a dynamic

sequence along whom: «the three strategies exhibit cyclic dominance: if cooperators abound, it pays to defect, but if defectors prevail, it is best to abstain, and if no one participates, small groups might form and render cooperation attractive again» (Hauert e Szabo 2003, p.33). Moreover, and most of all, the game opens up to new players. Indeed, the second best case scenario for all players is option E, occurring when the game does not take place, whereas the best one is option R, when both collaborate. Under this condition, represented in Figure 3, it is convenient for the loner to take part to the game only if s/he cooperates or returns the other's cooperation: s/he only participates to the extension of the community by offering a gift or returning others' gifts. This is *kula*.

	C	D	L
C	R	S	E
D	T	P	E
L	E	E	E

If no game occurs, then both players receive payoff E.
 If $R > E$, cooperators C dominate loners L.
 If $E > S$, defectors D dominate cooperators C.

Source: adapted by Nowak (2012).

Figure 3

4. Competitive gift: *potlatch* and *thymòs*

As second theoretical figure, gift is a strategy that destroys resources, both of individuals and of the community. Instead of envisaging a return, it is intransitively addressed to *dépense* or waste-based consumption. According to George Bataille, its canonical or ideal-typical form is *potlatch*. During these meetings, that lasted several days, Indians from the north-west coast of America used to show the hosts their wealth and relevance by distributing their own

possessions, in order to push them to return in terms of similar or greater amounts of goods. The latter is a form of asymmetrical acknowledgement, where the ones who publicly establish their credentials in the dare of ceremonial destruction of resources, and place themselves upon an upper rank than the others, win. The challenge manifests itself through glorious behaviors concerning celebrations, luxury, games, wars, arts, initiations, weddings or funerals; each challenge «is glorious, as it is beyond calculation, sometimes» (Bataille, 1949, p.118). «Consuming and destroying are limitless indeed. In some *potlatch* you need to give everything you own, and save nothing. In such circumstances, competing is all about showing to be the most wealthy and foolishly lavish of all» (Mauss, 1923-24, pp.212-13).

Potlatch is a social behavior rooted in the need of acknowledgement. Proceeding beyond Bataille's work, though not, we believe, beyond his spirit, it is widely similar to *thymòs*, typical of the western philosophical tradition. This notion finds its origins in Platon's work, that «in volume IV of the Republic describes soul as made up by three parts: a rational one (*loghistikón*) that reside in the head, an appetitive and covetable one (*epithymeticón*) that reside the viscera, and an irascible or spirited one (*thymoidés*) that reside in the heart. A great part of human behavior can be expressed by a combined intervention of the appetitive part, which drives men to seek their dreams, and the rational one, which shows them the best way to obtain and spend them. Other than these, men also, and most of all, seek the acknowledgement of their asset, as well as that of people, things, ideas or principles they care about» (Galimberti, 1999, pp.592-93).

Thymòs is the irascible mind – from the verb *thyo*, to soar or fumigate, same root as the Latin *fumus* – that supplies a missing or insufficient acknowledgement (Bodei, 2010, pp.9 e 115). Bataille (1939-45, p.52) describes *potlatch* exactly by using the same words as Platon's for *thymòs*: «*potlatch* is the portrait of a human heart: turbulent, generous, but also aggressive». *Thymòs* (or *potlatch*) is the pursuit of glory, «the desire of power, fame and wealth that, in most cases, is the desire of importance. Obviously power, fame and wealth are partially desired for what they bring along: assets, pleasant experiences, convenient contacts. However, other than these particular things, power, fame and wealth also imply, in a

substantial way, importance in its two forms: to have an effect and to be considered. Moreover, they symbolize *to be important*» (Nozick, 2004, p.183).

The pure – and most famous, in the western ancient world – expression of *thymòs* is the wrath of Achilles: his anger, as an unconstrained passion, towards the ones who denies his glory. «When I am angry, I am indeed subject to this passion, and there is no closer reference to this emotion than when I am thirsty, or when I am ill, or taller than five feet (Hume, 1739, p.462). Therefore, *thymòs* does not evaluate an action according to a certain interest or to a certain rational motivation, nor according to its effectiveness or efficiency, but rather *to the action itself as such*. «Greatness, as specific meaning of every action, only occurs in execution and not in motivation nor in realization» (Arendt, 1958, p.152).

Secondly, the thymotical gesture can worsen the wellness of who carries it out. The eloquent baldness of a pride-dedicated exemplification, amongst others discussed by Montaigne (1580-95, pp.937-38), helps us perceiving how far, in the daily routine and in the intricate academic language, *thymòs'* horizon might look. «They say one of our young gentlemen, burning with passion, after succeeding with his perseverance in finally softening a fine woman's heart, desperate because when the time of performing had come he had discovered himself to be weak and insufficient, and because *non viriliter iners senile penis extulerat caput*, as he came back home he immediately deprive himself and sent it - cruel and bleeding victim - as expiation of his humiliation. If done for reasoning and devotion, [...] what would we say about such prideful deed? ».

Thirdly, it does not envisage any *do ut des*, not even indirect and future: by stating that its return is glory, as a positive acknowledgement from the others, we should still admit that there is no expectation for that feedback to breach favorable occasions. As in Horace's verses, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, return is placed in a dimension that transcends any temporal horizon. The latter is an issue also treated by Schumpeter, whose theory on imperialism is based on *thymòs* (although he does not use this term). In a purely capitalistic world, the fight for markets and profits would absorb men's competitive energies. Wars would never be convenient. However, as Schumpeter states, as imperialism exists and its range is as high as to be able to set the most influent States against each others, we need

to admit that capitalism has not managed to establish itself at full. Throughout military assaults it can occur that some economic interests (markets, trade concessions, territories to take advantage of) are promoted, and that population self-convinces about these interests' importance; however, the origin of this process is not an answer to the advantages that conquer might bring. If interest is, tautologically, meant as the engine of everything that people do or desire to do, we have to admit that war, as it cannot not have some reasons, supports some interests; «on the other hand, the real cause is indeed an interest, though not towards the concrete purposes of war, but rather for the fact itself of conducting a war. [...] We shall, therefore, define imperialism as an *object-less disposition*, by the side of a State, towards a violent and intolerant expansion of borders» (Schumpeter, 1919, pp.4 and 6, italics added). In sum, imperialistic wars are *thymòs*-inspired gestures, as in them «people and classes want fight in the name of fight, victory in the name of victory, supremacy in the name of supremacy (*Ivi*, p.5). Within the same interpretational system, Fukuyama (1992, p.270) states: «Exactly as well as human history begins with fight and blood for pure prestige, international conflicts begin with a fight amongst States in the name of acknowledgement – whose fight can be identified as the primal source of imperialism». *Thymòs* is also present in Schumpeter's theory of economic development (1911, pp.101-03), according to which the three main reasons that motivate an innovator entrepreneur are the dream of founding a private emperor, the willingness of winning and the joy of creating. The innovator is, thus, a *homo timoticus*. However, in modern economy an institutional *medium*, the market, intervenes, and thanks to it the non-innovator entrepreneurs can avoid thymotical passions: it is enough, for them, to control price signals, in order to realize whether and how to emulate the innovators. As long as we stay within market borders, *thymòs* is funneled.

Lastly, *thymòs* is not subject to alteration according to the variance of monetary return: the *trade-off* between money and need of acknowledgement is absent. As Machiavelli (1513-19, p.304) notes down, «gold is not sufficient to find good soldiers, though good soldiers are sufficient to find gold. If Romans wanted to conduct wars more with money than with arms, the entire world's treasure would

not have been enough to them, given all the great feats and difficulties they had to face. Nevertheless, by conducting their wars with arms, they never had a gold shortage». Montaigne (1580-95, pp.491-92) adds: «Rewards of honor have no other merit and credit than this, namely that only a few people enjoy them [...]. Quality people [have] a bigger desire of such rewards than of those that produce earnings and profits [...]. If other benefits and wealth are added to the award, which only has to concern honor, this mixture, instead of increasing esteem, lowers and decrease it». Shakespeare (1598-99, act 4, scene 3, p.2) concludes:

I would not lose so great an honor
As one man more, methinks, would share from me,
For the best hope I have. Oh, do not wish one more!
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart. His passport shall be made,
And crowns for convoy put into his purse.

The gap between Henry, the heroic warrior, and the purchase of a wine bottle is, obviously, very wide. We shall, however, consider this prosaic and trivial example: «Je vais acheter une bouteille de vin pour l’apporter chez des amis qui m’ont invité. De quelle valeur? Dans ma tête, il y a la chiffre de 20 dollars qui flotte. Il s’agit là d’un don conventionnel à faible valeur de lien. Je me retrouve devant une bouteille de vin italien que, je le sais, mon hôte apprécie particulièrement: 40 dollars. Je la prends, dans un geste “gratuit”, sans raison. C’est une petite folie, un certain excès par rapport à la norme, à la règle, à la convention: c’est le moteur du don» (Godbout, 2007, p.115). Although less extreme, this example still concerns *potlatch* as in regards to the constitutive presence of excess within gift deeds. The gap between King Henry and the uncontrolled consumer that hangs out in a shopping centre is still notable.

The latter’s behaviors have been object of several interpretation keys, amongst which the need of status (Veblen, 1899) and the attention to a social position related to a reference group (Hirsch, 1976) stand out. Yet, the logic of excess adds an unavoidable element. «A fuller explanation of the global consumption boom should also take account of the ephemeral joy and wonderment that can be derived from momentarily transcending the boundaries of necessity and

indulging in a fantasy of unlimited abundance» (Martínez, 2010, p.610). Still, *potlatch*.

As it has been said in §3, the hub of social sciences' reflection on the issue of human cooperation concerns "the prisoner's dilemma", according to which there is no (sufficiently solid and general) way to lead the other towards the voluntary choice of cooperating. Yet a limit of such approach lies in only considering the defection from contributing to a public good, whilst there is a lack of attention to thymotical, or *potlatch*, or resources-and-wellness-destructive behaviors. Moving back to the bus metaphor, let's assume to pay the ticket or to take our journey for free. However, let's also assume, as an additional strategy, that besides not paying any ticket we damage the vehicle for our own fun. The latter scenario destroys social wealth, namely it lowers the level of public good. That might not happen for serious and well-grounded matters related to an economic miscalculation, rather for – thymotical - vandalism (for the sake of destroying something) or to look cool in front of fellow friends or a girlfriend. (We shall ignore any other possible destruction of private belongings). Figure 4 represents this scenario. As it shows, the best option is H_1 , occurring when both players have the willingness to wreck. The second best one is option H_0 , when only one player wrecks. Options T , R , P , and S follow, as in the "prisoner's dilemma" shown in figure 2.

	C	D	W
C	R	S	H_0
D	T	P	H_0
W	H_0	H_0	H_1

If one player wrecks, then both receive payoff H_0 .
 If both players wreck, then both receive payoff H_1 .
 It is assumed that $H_1 > H_0 > T > R > P > S$.

Figure 4

Yet under what conditions subjects are driven into exceeding/destroying? By not claiming to give an exhaustive analysis, we suggest that an important condition when this happens is related to the assignment of an *indivisible good* endowed with an identity value. In order to assign an indivisible good, there are two main possibilities: either the suitor that renounces the good gets compensated, or one acquires the right of taking the good off the other (for a close examination, see Young, 1995). In the first form of auction, one offers economic assets to the other, until the latter accepts the sum and gets off the game. In the second form of auction, instead, the stake is not directly the indivisible item, but rather *the right of eliminating the other from the game*. The first form suggests a mechanism to turn the initial allocating problem related to an indivisible object, into a new problem related to divisible objects (monetary rewards). The second form, instead, emerges when suitors cease negotiating economic rewards in order to claim their right on the object. This point is sharply remarked by Guido Calabresi (1985, p.113): «When convictions of two opposing sides clash, economic reward is often not enough, because the claim does not compensate their convictions' violation. Stake is not related to the right of imposing someone else the *cost* of our own convictions (which is already quite difficult), but rather to understand if we actually have the right of imposing someone else our convictions. If carrying out what I believe in violates your convictions, and vice versa, it is possible that the reward is not much useful and it might even make things worse». Convictions whom Calabresi refers to – for which economic rewards are inappropriate or ineffective – have, in general, an “identity-making” nature.

When saying “subjective identity” we mean the process through which Ego acknowledges itself, and is acknowledged by Alter, as part of wider communities. By basing on this process, Ego assigns a meaning to its actions: if it wishes to give itself a sense, Ego must self-place in a group and be acknowledged by the group as a member. Identity requires a correspondence between Ego and Alter: Ego enters Alter's group if the latter acknowledges the former, and Alter acknowledges Ego as the latter, by entering the group, acknowledges the former. There is no before and after, or cause and effect: Ego is Ego because its meaning is stated by belonging,

together with Alter, to a group, whilst Alter is Alter because its meaning rises from belonging to a group together with Ego. Identity is not a requisite that somebody can gain or lose, produce or trade. It is nothing but the circular relation Ego-Alter-Ego, as acknowledgement is something that only exists on the others' eyes. The final foundation of subjectivity lies in inter-subjective acknowledgement, and this implies that identity emerges from an interaction that rises from meeting or clashing: either two people acknowledge themselves for solidarity, or because of distrust and conflict (see, on the theme of identity as of acknowledgement, Pizzorno, 1986 and 2007).

Potlatch and *thymòs* are identity-making behaviors in situations of indivisibility, namely when the acknowledgement of a suitor excludes that of the other. As the second form of auction – where one engages economic values in order to take off the object from the other – concerns an all-or-nothing identity-making stake, it well represents *potlatch* and *thymòs*. Let's now illustrate it through a paradigmatic case: the biblical episode where, in front of King Salomon, two women, Anna and Berta, claim the same baby as their own son. The baby represents an indivisible object not, obviously, only because a sword cannot cut him, but most of all because he is an identity-making object for both suitors: either Anna and Berta draw meaning, for their social actions, from being mothers, but they only have one baby at their disposition. The King ignores that the real mother is Anna. If only paying a sum to throw light on the truth was enough, the King would offer a prize for the fake mother to reveal herself, and Berta would step forward. In alternative, Salomon might threaten both by totally devaluing the object, in order to verify what woman gives more value to it. This is what the Bible tells: Salomon pretends that he wants to cut the baby into two parts with the sword; the real mother gives up, as she judges the indivisible value of that object higher than obtaining a part of it. The result is happily paradoxical, as the one that renounces discloses the truth and gets rewarded by obtaining the object. As a matter of facts, as long as Salomon pays or threatens, he keeps on carrying out the first form of auction: he compensates the one who renounces the object. Nevertheless, paying does not work because he does not compensate the identity-making injury. Nor works the threat, because, on both women eyes', it is not

credible that the King will actually destroy the object that he is in charge of assigning (hence bond to his own power). There is no other option, both for Salomon and for us, than looking at the second form of auction. The latter claims an exclusive right on the object. As Berta stakes her own identity on being a mother, she is willing to engage economic assets onto this claim, namely to get the other woman off the game. Economic assets do not compensate/affirm one's *own performance in negative* (renouncing the baby: first form of auction), but rather they question/eliminate the other's possibility of a positive performance (the other woman being a mother). Entering a thymotical and identity-making logic of *potlatch*, each player does not aim at cashing economic assets, but rather at spending them against the other. There is no interest in collecting resources, but in destroying them. Let's imagine a sequential game where King Salomon tries to understand what woman is willing to destroy the biggest amount of money to obtain the baby. The King's strategy is based on the plausible assumption that the value related to the baby is higher for the real mother than for the fake one: $C_A > C_B$ (he does not know that "A" stands for Anna). Salomon starts by setting up an initial sum, F , which each woman aiming at having the baby will have to burn (or give him for other purposes), in order to avoid that people who are not interested in the game start playing. Then is Anna's turn: she only claims the baby, as she does not know Berta's intentions. The third move is Berta's, whom states she is the mother; she burns, in order to have the baby, a sum B whose size can be up to C_B (minus F , which Berta, as well as Anna, has to pay anyways). It is Anna's turn again: as $C_A > C_B$, she burns, other than F , a sum that, exceeding the value of B , does not make a higher bid convenient for Berta. The game ends with the King assigning the baby-object to Anna (Glazer-Ma, 1989; Dixit-Skeath, 1999, pp.406-08, with a few adjustments).

In this interpretational key, *potlatch* is a competitive process having as an object a (material or, more often, symbolic) good that expresses identity through both players. Just for the fact that it concerns everybody's identity, the disputed good is indivisible. The good's assignment is finalized when somebody is thymotically willing to burn (or to pay a third suitor, for other purposes) more assets, in order to be the sole owner of that good. As well as in King Salomon's

strategy, *the waste of assets reveals how much a subject cares about an identity-good.*

5. *Dan* as asymmetrical gift

As third theoretical figure, gift is an asymmetrical socio-economic relation. This «necessarily takes us beyond Mauss' lesson, where an unbalanced regime of economic relations could only occur as a consequence of a gift spell breakage» (Libanora, 2008, p.277). As a tribute to the analysis of hindu practices, with whom Jonathan Parry (1986) introduced this issue to anthropology, we shall name asymmetrical gift *dan*: «Under certain circumstances, gift giver of inferior status may obtain rewards by two forms of hierarchical exchange: by cultivating a clientist relationship or by the granting of favours from one's superior. In either form the transaction is no longer gift exchange in its original sense» (Yan, 2002, p.80). We hereby focus on the second modality: the suitor with a superior status donates to the one with an inferior status. The examined case is the key situation in capitalistic societies: the contract binding entrepreneurs to wage earners.

Marx points out that in a stationary economy, wage could be equal to the price of production capacity, namely the capitalist would pay, for the worker's performance, the price that equals demand and supply. In an expanding economy, as the capitalistic economy typically is, workers demand increases and wages might raise. Nevertheless an "industrial army in reserve", or an unemployed people reservoir, that pushes to enter work market and lowers wages on subsistence level, develops. Hence, the entrepreneur can limit himself to give the worker an equal sum to the price of the reproduction means of the worker. If he manages to lengthen/intensify the working time of the wage earner beyond the necessary time to repay his wage, the surplus constitutes his profit (for a canonic presentation, see Sweezy, 1942). This theory has been countered by the fact that wages non-occasionally exceed the level that would equal supply and demand. George Akerlof (1982) interpreted this situation in terms of partial gifts trade. «According to this view some firms willingly pay workers in excess of the market-clearing wage; in return they expect workers to supply more effort than they would if equivalent jobs could be readily obtained (as is the case if wages are just at market clearing)»

(Akerlof, 1984, p.79). Akerlof's approach, however, examines the employment contract in terms of an *symmetrical* almost-gift, where the wage earner returns the capitalist's far-sighted generosity. He removes the "harsh" power nexus that leads the labour market.

More relevant, instead, for the argument we are treating, is the theoretical model presented by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (Gintis, 1979; Bowles-Gintis, 1992). In this model workers, by not owning assets, have to be in the service of entrepreneurs. The latter, by having the power of employing and dismiss them, controls their earnings. This control is as high as, for the worker, is the cost of losing his job: the more he is not able to easily access other employment positions with a similar wage, and cannot receive in a long term an adequate unemployment benefit, the higher for him will be the dismissal cost. We name "reservation wage" the remuneration level to whom the worker would be willing to resign: below that level, the opportunity of working looks worse than that of not working. If the entrepreneur paid the reservation wage, he could not order the worker to engage himself beyond the minimum amount of work: the threat of dismissal would leave the worker indifferent, as well as the reservation wage would leave him indifferent about whether going to work or not. Only a higher wage could make the worker willing to keep his occupation, hence to second the entrepreneur's orders. It is even possible, as in Akerlof's model, that every further increase of remuneration is returned by a higher devotion in the worker's performance. That continues until the moment when wages increases do not lead to an increase of working engagement able to reduce the unitary cost of labor anymore: this will be, for the entrepreneur, the efficiency wage.

This model's main implication is the presence of involuntary unemployment: there might be extra workers available to accept remuneration level which is lower than efficiency wage, and even lower than employed workers' reservation wage; nevertheless, it is not convenient for entrepreneurs to employ them. On the labor market, supply and demand are not balanced because «employers have no desire to change the wage offered, employed workers have no interest in changing the level of effort supplied, and workers in search of a position can do nothing but await an offer at the equilibrium wage» (Bowles-Gintis, 1992, p.339). Let's consider the

differences between Marx's explanation and Bowles and Gintis'. According to Marx, entrepreneurs pay the reservation wage as an external process – continuous setting up of an industrial army in reserve – lowers the worker's claims. According to Bowles and Gintis, instead, entrepreneurs give an asymmetrical gift to workers, by increasing remuneration beyond the reservation wage, because this poison-gift is the tool to obtain their obedience and devotion; it follows that unemployment endogenously generates itself. According to Marx, trade is amongst equals on the market: the entrepreneur pays the worker exactly according to the price of his working capacity. The power relation (exploitation) is situated in the production place: the entrepreneur has, as stated in the contract, the worker at his disposition for (we assume) eight hours a day; this availability does not correspond to qualitatively determined and precise tasks; hence, the entrepreneur can "squeeze" the worker so that (we assume) in the first four hours he returns the wage, whilst in the following hours can operate to the entrepreneur's advantage. According to Bowles and Gintis, instead, market is blended with gift. The subject that has power on the market donates to the weaker subject more than the latter would be able to obtain. However, he does it in order to maximise his earnings. Indeed, a wage increase reduces the labour cost, when passing from reservation wage to efficiency wage allows obtaining the worker's voluntary compliance on the production place. The asymmetrical gift circulates on the market, so that the return occurs in the production process. Power is already set within mercantile trades, so that the work relation can be based on submission. Without the poisoned gift of efficiency wage, the entrepreneur could only exercise command and surveillance, though he would not obtain compliance in the factory or office. Moreover, in capitalism it works as well as in another fundamental market: that of credit (Bowles-Gintis, 1993). Hence, *power as hegemonic capacity arises, on the main capitalistic markets, from asymmetrical gift*. More generally, asymmetrical gift establishes itself on the market when the purchaser offers the seller a contract including a contingent renewal: he proposes a price, and binds himself to proceed trading until he assesses the quality of the supplied goods/services as adequate. This is the horizon of credible threat or of the "stick": the powerful suitor can interrupt the exchange. Nevertheless, the threat is credible as long as the seller

takes a special advantage from the exchange, namely *as long as that exchange includes a gift*. The supplement of contingent renewal is enforcement rent: the seller receives a remuneration that exceeds market price, so that he is driven to offer a higher level of quality. This is the horizon of the "carrot": the weak suitor binds himself to second the powerful suitor's requests, because he has benefited from a gift that other weak subjects have not benefited from. Economic power develops and reproduces itself on both horizons of capitalistic mercantile trade. Going back to the theoretical scheme of Figure 1 (§2), we could briefly express as it follows: both mercantile pre-capitalistic and capitalistic economies, mix criteria (1), (2) and (3). However, the peculiarity of capitalistic mercantile trades lies in the presence of asymmetrical gift.

6. *Hau* as non-returnable gift

In the famous interpretation of Mauss, *hau* is, for maori people, a spiritual power that binds one that accepts a gift to return it. It is a form of fetishism that, by giving goods a personality, identifies them with the donor. Hence, when fetish-goods circulate, «everybody spiritually becomes part of anybody else» (Mauss, 1923-24, p.176). «The fundamental issues in Mauss's analysis of the gift is to determine how people relate to things and, through things, relate to each other» (Yan, 2005, p.249). From Malinowski to Firth to Sahlins, *hau* tends to coincide with the principle of reciprocity: the obligation of returning the received goods becomes, in the trader's mind, the need of passing the spirit back to the donor. Other anthropologists have, instead, stated that *hau* evokes the goods' inalienability. In particular, «Weiner argues that there is a close connection among the *hau*, the person and valuables (*taonga*) such as cloaks, fine mets, and shells; because of this connection, valuables gain their own identity and become inalienable possessions; hence the obligation of return» (Yan, 2002, p.68). According to Weiner (1992) an asset carries its donor's identity, only if it actually cannot be donated. On the other hand, an asset is inalienable if, instead of being left in one other's hands, it has only been lent: it has been transferred for some of its usage rights, but never for its possession. In order for the loan not to become a real detachment, the debt related

to the loan needs to be non-returnable. *Hau* is, then, an inalienable gift because it is non-returnable, by expressing the keeping-while-giving paradox, namely the one related to an asset that is given and not completely transferred, and is not completely transferred because the other, as cannot return it, might accept it but not own it. The main category of assets that, in contemporary economic systems, circulates according to the logic of *hau* is that of "common". Commons, indeed, are «all the gifts that we inherit or collectively create» (Barnes, 2006, p.14), or rather they are non-produced, shared and free assets. Firstly, unlike economic goods or reproducible inputs, common does not go through a production process. We shall think about environment, water, landscapes, natural resources, cultural goods, information and knowledge. Either they are gift that ecosystem gives to a human society, as in the case of oil fields or habitats, or they are collective creations, as in the case of languages or the internet. In other terms, either they are low-entropy energy-matter heritages for human purposes (as Georgescu-Roegen states), or they are evolutionary paths whose results are non-completely intentional outcomes of personal contributions (Menger e Hayek call them "spontaneous orders"). Common is never generated from a (planned, intentional) production process: nobody can produce a river or a forest, neither a gained and spread knowledge nor a respected institutional rule. Secondly, this rigorous non-deliverability grants common the feature of sharing: as, indeed, nobody can be assigned to the burden and responsibility related to its existence, it is presented as a good with widespread ownership, namely is benefited from members of a society, not from mutually separated individuals. Lastly, its non-reproducibility makes it free: we can, obviously, calculate in many ways the cost that takes an ecosystem to nourish a water-bearing stratum, or that borne by a society in order to elaborate and keep a language alive; however, the single water consumer, or the single speaker, do not have to shoulder expenses in order to receive those commons as such. On the other hand, as it happens for any kind of good or resource, a common's fruition is not generally for free. Let's assume, for instance, that a potable water course is available, or that a technical language develops and establishes in our community: they are commons, but if anybody desired to use water or the language, s/he will have to bear personal costs related to root canal treatment or to learning.

Moreover, as commons are free and shared assets whom a society takes benefit from to reach its purposes, it is important to shape the concrete borders of the institutional structure within whom they are placed: for instance, fruition of the internet is different in Calabria and in Guandong, as technological-legal-political modalities for accessing it change. However, whatever the property rights and other institutional rules are, the theoretical point reports that it is never the common itself to be subject to propriety (or to privatization), but rather the supply of the services that it can generate. Hence, either accessing water through the tap of our own apartment, or accessing a certain provider, require specific institutional rules; though, it is not water or the internet as commons to be institutionalized, but rather the social path of their fruition. A further feature of common concerns the fact that it is used, regenerated, and valued within a *local society*. That descends from its economic properties: common, unlike private goods, is little excludable and, unlike public goods, is highly deductible (Platteau, 2008). The high excludability suggests that its consumption from one individual reduces the possibilities of consumption for one other individual. This entails that it is not managed, used and valued, as it happens with public goods, in extended societies, but rather mainly within limited communities, namely, as we would rather express, within "local societies". Local societies might not coincide with limited communities, because they are not only based on subjects' spatial proximity. Next to geographical proximity, it is necessary to highlight *cognitive proximity*, if subject share the same foundations of knowledge; *organizational proximity*, if they are all subject to a hierarchical control; *social proximity*, if their members have friendship relations; and *institutional proximity*, if they all operate within the same institutions (Boschma, 2005). The common denominator to these modalities is that they all express a relational proximity where subjects' (individuals or groups) interaction can independently flow from their physical contiguity.

Based on this theoretical scheme, we can define common as a *non-produced, shared and free asset for a society endowed with relational proximity*. Therefore, commons are the most relevant inalienable goods in Weiner's sense: nobody creates them on his own, and can only contribute to their preservation/valorization; everybody can access (by bearing some costs) their services, but nobody can

permanently take possession of them at the others' expenses². If we interpret *hau* as the theoretical form of gift that cannot be returned, this is mainly referred to commons.

7. The four figures of gift: yesterday and today

«The appropriate classification of goods (as exchangeable or not, as gifts or commodities, and so on) is often subject of conflict. Objects or relationships may move back and forth across boundaries in response to technological change, the mobilization of interested groups, or the efforts of moral entrepreneurs» (Fourcade-Healy, 2007, p.301). We could add, to these reasons, another one of similar importance: several basic concepts of social sciences have polythetic feature, namely they are not referable to a single meaning root. Attempting to find the common key of the several meanings of, let's say, the terms "house", "history" or "science", is a vain endeavour. In §1 we have shown similar difficulties related to the term "gift". It is, instead, necessary to provide definitions of such concepts that assume their polysemy, instead of hiding or removing it.

Serial likenesses among gift systems

A	<i>p, q, r</i>
B	<i>r, s, t</i>
C	<i>t, u, v</i>

Fonte: adapted by Needham (1975)

Figure 5

The first theoretical point is that this polysemy is often structured in sequences of partial similarity: amongst *kula* and *potlatch*, *dan* and *hau*, although common features to all of them are missing, there are some elements that match, for instance, the first to the third figure, some other that match the third to the second figure, and so on. «These phenomena do not have in common something that allows us to use the same term for all, however they are tied to each other in

many different ways. [...] There is a complicate net of similarities that overlap and cross one another» (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp.46-47). Figure 5 is a simplified representation of "gift" as a polythetic concept. According to Rodney Needham (1975, pp.350-51), whom molded the term "polythetic", «a paradigm case was presented by the concept of "descent", a notion which in both descriptive and comparative studies had led, I contended, to typological confusion. I proposed therefore the disintegration of this speciously univocal notion, in favour of formal criteria that represented logical possibilities. The result was the discrimination of six elementary modes in which rights could be transmitted from one generation to the next».

In this essay we have attempted, in relation to gift, the same theoretical operation that Needham suggests in relation to descent. We have focused on four ideal-typical forms of gift, and theoretically interpreted them under relevant contemporary phenomena.

As David Graeber (2011, p.508) noticed: «Starting in the 1990s, anthropology has moved away from grand questions of theory; indeed, it largely stopped generating theory of any sort» (Graeber, 2011, p.508). Ours was a modest and temporary attempt to proceed against the tide.

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