



# Marcel Hénaff, philosopher and anthropologist

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## OUR DEBTS

### MARCEL HÉNAFF, PHILOSOPHER AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

*Francesco Fistetti*

I met Marcel Hénaff in person in October 2007 during the national conference “The Teacher’s Work – Wages, Justice and Gift,” organized in Bari by the CISL (Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions). I was immediately struck by his kindness, his “gracious” side, in the sense of the term he uses in his research to designate the unilateral or unreturned gift, revealing a spontaneous generosity very close to the *kharis* of the Greeks and the *gratia* of the Latins. Our scholarly exchanges went back a few years, when I had reworked the classical *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction in light of the gift paradigm in my book *Comunità* (2004). His book, *Le prix de la vérité* (2002), had made a deep impression on me. It is a monument of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, which should interest all those who share Marcel Mauss’ suggestion that ‘there are no social sciences but a science of societies’. It is also an instructive example of the epistemological and hermeneutical attitude that should be held towards the contemporary galaxy of post-structuralisms and post-colonialisms, and, more generally, of all deconstructionist and postmodernist postures.

### THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN RATIONALISM

Hénaff’s approach has a particular mark, because his toolbox is very large, including not only the classical disciplines (from the history of religions and theology to literature – classical tragedy, the novel, poetry, theater etc.), but also linguistics, semiology, architecture, and the history of science. In his research he combines the ancient and the modern, philological rigor and the art of interpretation, historical documentation and the richest conceptual tools drawn from the human and social sciences. The studies of ancient Greece (M. Finley, G. Loyd, L. Gernet, E. Havelock, F. Hartog, J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet, P. Veyne, etc.) are put in dialogue and interaction not only

with the classics of modern thought, but also with linguistics (É. Benveniste), semiotics (C. S. Peirce), and ethology (K. Lorenz). In my opinion, though, the long-term lesson that Hénaff has given us has to do with the central role that both anthropology in its French-speaking version (from Mauss to Lévi-Strauss) and – however strange this might sound – the history of philosophy (from ancient Greece to the Frankfurt School and the philosophical constellations of the twentieth century) must play in the construction of a general social science. The specificity of his work is to combine philosophy and anthropology not as a scholarly curiosity, but as a necessary step to reconstruct the history of Western rationality in its transformations and crucial turning points. This happy hybridization, which can be traced back to Mauss himself, clarifies Marcel’s “encyclopedic” conception of Western rationality, in which the tight connection between modern anthropology as the science of “other” societies and Western philosophy (from Plato to Heidegger), because of the way it overdetermines our political and practical reflection, produces a precious epistemological gain. In short, if anthropology (from Mauss to Lévi-Strauss) teaches us that societies are not only socio-economic formations but also symbolic constructions, we can consider that Western philosophical speculation is essentially a self-reflexive exercise with respect to the challenges of living in society. From this perspective, contemporary theories of society – from Bourdieu to Giddens, from Freitag to Latour, from Parsons to Luhmann, from Weber to Habermas – developed “by articulating and integrating concepts at a level of generality that transcends the concepts of the various disciplines” (Caillé, Chaniel, Dufoix and Vandenberghe, 2018, p. 29). But beyond this work of complexification and beyond the national traditions underlying these theories, which are blending and merging with each other in the “axial age” of globalization, Marcel suggests to add the symbolic dimension to this “transversal” and “transdisciplinary” reading of the constitution of contemporary theories of society. In other words, the theories of society are structurally theories of rationality in the broadest sense of the term, within a tradition that goes back to the *logos* of the Greeks.

Of course, Hénaff does not propose a reductionism à la Hegel (who reduces the evolution of rationality to the History of the Spirit), and even less a dated model in which philosophy has primacy over the human sciences (or sciences in general), which are relegated to an inferior status. Hence, Marcel’s double working method. First, he interrogates the long-winded philosophical questions that are tacitly lodged or have become sedimented in the social sci-

ences, because they are the tail side – the unthought-of side – of specific concepts. In fact, the conceptual production of the humanities and social sciences is always irrigated not only by ideological beliefs, but also by philosophical categories, as well as metaphysical and theological ideas. This is what makes social relations symbolic relations. As Marshall Sahlins recently pointed out (*ibid.*, p. 42):

“As cultural forms, human social relations are themselves symbolically constituted [...]. This is not a matter of ideology, except that, because they are meaningfully constructed and ordered, all socio-cultural phenomena are ‘ideological’.”

The metaphysical questions behind the *anthropos*, the *polis*, *philia*, *agôn*, reciprocity, etc. are crucial questions which obsess all social sciences. An important clause must be added: these philosophical notions are cultural values which themselves form the coherent symbolic universe of “Western rationalism” (Weber) with its claim of universality. It suffices to have a vague knowledge of the sociological tradition (Durkheim/Simmel/Weber) to understand how philosophical reflection has determined the genesis of its paradigms and the construction of its systems. The same could be said of modern economics, from Adam Smith to Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, and the ordo-liberalism of Walter Eucken, Wilhem Röpke, and Alfred Müller-Armack. With the difference that in this history, the figure of the *homo economicus* has entirely confiscated the rationality of man as a “political” and “speaking animal” (according to Aristotle’s famous definitions). As Arendt liked to say, these are key concepts of our cultural tradition that are perpetually renewed, especially once “the thread of tradition is broken.” However, the project of rereading Western philosophy (and its history) in the light of Maussian anthropology has almost never been carried out.

This retroaction of anthropology and the gift paradigm in particular on philosophy produces surprising knowledge effects. In Hénaff’s hands, Mauss’s anthropology, which is always filtered through Lévi-Strauss, becomes an extraordinary historical and analytical operator. It provides the prism through which: 1) Western ethnocentrism is subjected to a radical critique by the discovery that *homo economicus* embodies neither natural nor absolute rationality; 2) Western philosophy, for its part, discovers that its fundamental structure since its origins – that is the structure of the history of metaphysics from

Plato to Heidegger –, contains the vocabulary of the gift. A vocabulary that has been forgotten but which nevertheless remains active in the subterranean strata of our culture and which continues to act as the bedrock (the “rock,” as Mauss would say) of life in society and, therefore, of all theories of society.

## THE GIFT OF BEING

A single example suffices to explain the novel results that an anthropological perspective as practiced by Hénaff can bring to the study of philosophy and the latter’s relations with the humanities and social sciences. It is Anaximander’s famous fragment IX:

“Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they give to each other justice and recompense for their injustice, according to ordinance of Time [*kata tou kronou taxin*].”

Marcel’s interpretation of Anaximander’s language extolls the vocabulary of the gift/counter-gift relation at work in the cosmic order and that of social relations. All beings must accept the order of time (*tou kronou cabs*), wait for their turn, and cede to others when the time comes. The highest form of social bond is reciprocal obligation, either positive (gift) or negative (vindictive justice). While Heidegger incorporates this fragment in *The Word of Anaximander* in the framework of the *Seinsfrage* (the ontological difference between being and being-as-such) to suggest that the initial enunciation of being – the gift of being – has been forgotten and erased, Hénaff makes us see that the question of reciprocity or of reciprocal ritual exchange is the reverse side of the question of the gift of Being. The original question of the history of metaphysics is thus the question of the gift or, better, the question of giving, or donation. However, what Heidegger does not understand is that the debt of which Anaximander’s fragment speaks is the debt of retaliation, the “agonistic debt, which is brought about by a failure to fulfill the obligation of reciprocity” (Hénaff, 2002, p. 306). In Anaximander’s text, the theme of vindictory justice resounds; that is to say, the theme of the right to retaliate modelled on the networks of the gift and marked by a ritually coded management of time. At the origins of Western thought, this obligation is so imper-

ative that, as in all traditional cultures, Ancient Greece extends it to all living beings, to nature, and to the universe.

In his book *Le don des philosophes* (Hénaff, 2012), Marcel finds the *Leitmotiv* of the history of Western philosophy in the question of donation and that of the gift. From Plato and Aristotle to Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Ricœur, and Marion (to name only a few), the gift is the true object of philosophical practice. It is impossible to reconstruct the whole argument of the book, but it is important to emphasize its main thesis: if the donation of being is the beginning (*arché*) of Western philosophy, anthropology shows that the passage from the donation of the phenomenon (of the manifestation of Being) as “given” to the social and institutional practices of the gift is the limit that philosophy cannot cross by its own means. The interrogation on the donation of being remains in the register of the Husserlian *Gegebenheit* (the given), of the Heideggerian *es gibt*, of Derrida’s *il y a* (and for whom the gift is another name for Being) or of Marion’s *étant donné* (being given). Philosophical interrogation alone cannot go into the phenomenology of the gift as a social practice regulated by historically determined institutions. Hence Marcel’s project to bring into dialogue philosophical reflection and social sciences.

“The only possible approach – he writes – is that of a hermeneutics (or of any well-constituted discipline of interpretation) developed on the basis of objective knowledge concerning this practice.”

Hénaff, 2012, p. 194

Empirical knowledge or “scholarly inquiry” is, therefore, required for the philosopher who wants to understand his time and the world in which he lives. Cultural symbolisms are codes of behavior and systems of rules that are “singular, local, and non-deductible”; and, above all, “they reveal formal patterns that are everywhere recognizable” (*ibid.*, p. 195). Incidentally, it is not a coincidence if the last chapter of this important book is entitled “Philosophy and Anthropology. With Lefort and Descombes.”

## A STRUCTURALIST READING

It is not possible here to discuss Hénaff's dialogue with Lefort and Descombes from the standpoint of the original relationship they had with Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*. But what we must admit is that this dialogue is strongly marked by Lévi-Strauss' reading of the essay in his "Introduction" to Mauss's writings (Lévi-Strauss, 1950). In his book, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: le passeur de sens* (Hénaff, 2008a), Marcel expresses his theoretical debt to Lévi-Strauss. Hence the great importance he attaches to the "formal models" underlying the symbolisms governing social relations. Hénaff shares the structuralist reading of Mauss' encyclopedic project of a "*novum organum* of the social sciences of the twentieth century," and he agrees with the central thesis of the author of the *Structures élémentaires de la parenté* that Mauss does not grasp the unity of the three moments of the gift: giving/receiving/returning the gift. Mauss sees these gestures separately as "three obligations: to give, to receive, to return the gift," and, consequently, they would remain "fragments" or "scattered members" (Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. 38). In short, Mauss does not succeed in reaching down to the original structure of reciprocity hidden in "the discrete operations in which social life is broken down": it is this structure which for Lévi-Strauss constitutes "the primitive phenomenon" and which he calls *exchange* (*ibid.*). Moreover, Mauss confers an illusory unity to the three operations of the gift by adding an "additional quantity" to the three moments, namely the Maori's *hau*.

What is important to note here is that, in *Le don des philosophes*, Marcel continues Lévi-Strauss' approach, but he makes an adjustment that is not negligible. What Lévi-Strauss calls "exchange," Hénaff asserts, "is the totality of a relation which must from the outset be understood as integrating the moments and elements that make it up: the fact of giving back is already involved in the receiving that follows the giving, which constitutes the 'structure, of which experience offers only the fragments'" (*ibid.*, p. 260). The adjustment resides in the fact that the "structure" that Marcel refers to in this text leaves aside the "logic of the relations" that inspired Lévi-Strauss, *that is the symbolic logic of language* which he borrowed from both the formalism of phonology and the structural linguistics of N. S. Troubetzkoi, as well as the discovery of the "unconscious mechanisms" of Freudian psychoanalysis. To escape the narrow rationalism of Lévi-Strauss, which is very close to Whitehead's and Russell's program of the *Principia mathematica*, Marcel turns to Wittgenstein's theory of "language games," in particular in its interactionist version in Goffman and with continuous reference to C.S. Peirce's

logic of triadic relations. The latter is characterized by a specific property that can be formulated as follows: any relation of exchange of objects between persons refers to a norm of exchange or, as one might say, it is a “relation according to a law” (*ibid.*, p. 76). In this respect, Hénaff takes advantage of Vincent Descombes’ criticism of Russell’s dyadic logic, according to which the gift relation – A gives B and C receives B – would be the simple transfer of a good from one partner to the other. On the contrary, the gift relation implies a relation between the partners through the good exchanged (Descombes, 1996, chap. 17). This valorization of the trivalent logic of Peirce leads Marcel to correct, at least in part, the heavy formalism of Lévi-Strauss and to foreground the historicity or the shifting dialectic of the struggle between human groups that Lefort opposed to Lévi-Strauss in 1951 as a keystone for understanding the constitution of the social bond (Lefort, 1978). The cycle of the gift – giving/receiving/returning the gift – is like a “game structure” and “a principle of alternance that is analogous to any game involving partners.” This is why entering a game entails the obligation to reply.

That the relation of the gift is a triadic relation and that the latter is bound by a law means exactly that it is, according to Mauss’ formula, a “total social fact”; or, to say it again with Marcel’s words, that it is: 1) an “unbreakable structure”; 2) an “intentional” relation; and 3) a relation that forms a “convention” between the partners (Hénaff, 2012, pp. 77-78). Mauss knows perfectly well that the cycle of the gift is a social practice in which “the reply belongs to the game as such, or, let us say, to the *dispositif* of rules that must be accepted for the game to be possible” (*ibid.*). He knows perfectly well, therefore, that the ceremonial gift “is to be understood as a risky wager, a challenge even; it consists in *offering* in order to *seduce* and finally to bind” (*ibid.*, p. 79). Marcel believes, however, that “Mauss did not perceive this point” (*ibid.*, p. 78) and that it must be amended by Peirce’s logic of triadic relations and Wittgenstein’s theory of language games as forms of life (*Lebensformen*).

## MARCEL AND MAUSS

We touch here on a decisive point of contention in Hénaff’s approach to Mauss’ *Essay*. Marcel Hénaff devoted most of his research to the rigorous elaboration of the notion of the ceremonial gift and, in this undertaking, he followed a method of ideal-typical identification of the forms of the gift

inspired by Max Weber. It would take too long to reconstruct the differentiation between the three forms of the gift – gracious, supportive and ceremonial – which he supports with an extraordinary wealth of historical analysis. What is important to note is that the ceremonial gift seen as an institutional procedure of alliance and reciprocal recognition between human groups and, therefore, as a place where the “public sphere emerges,” is entirely convergent with the *Essay on the gift* [as the MAUSS has argued recurrently, *editors’ note*]. It is not coincidental if Marcel has drawn attention to the status of the public space of the contemporary city, to its transformations, as well as to the growing risks in the era of globalization, of a disintegration of the places of participative life and, consequently, to the ways in which to rebuild a “common world” (Hénaff, 2008b). *Public recognition*, he insists, comes through the exchange of precious goods which are “the pledges and the substitutes of the donors: literally, symbols” (Hénaff, 2014, p. 203). However, with respect to Mauss, he follows Lévi-Strauss on this crucial point since the first expression of this public recognition is the exogamous alliance, which for him remains the “rule of the gift par excellence.” In this respect, the debate within the *Revue du MAUSS*, as Alain [Caillé] recalls in his homage to Marcel [cf. *Revue du MAUSS*, n° 56, 2020, *editors’ note*], was very lively – yet always theoretically fruitful and humanly respectful of the diversity of mutual points of view. As one can see, the questions that remain open are numerous. Death brutally interrupted a dialogue that Marcel continued until his last day with the friends of the MAUSS. It is up to us to show the value of his remarkable scientific and human heritage.

*Translation by François Gauthier*

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