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SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND THE GIFT

This book brings together two traditions of thinking about social ties: sociological theory on solidarity and anthropological theory on gift exchange. The purpose of the book is to explore how both theoretical traditions may complete and enrich each other, and how they may illuminate transformations in solidarity. The main argument, supported by empirical illustrations, is that a theory of solidarity should incorporate some of the core insights from anthropological gift theory. The book presents a theoretical model covering both positive and negative – selective and excluding – aspects and consequences of solidarity. It is concluded that over the past century solidarity has undergone a fundamental transformation, from Durkheim’s “organic” solidarity to a type of solidarity that can be called “segmented”: separate, autonomous social segments connecting with other segments, no longer out of necessity and mutual dependency but on the basis of individual choice. Solidarity has, thereby, become more noncommittal.

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Preface

This book is the result of more than ten years of research and teaching about the themes of the gift and solidarity. It all started in 1992 when, in conversations with anthropologist Willy Jansen, I was put on the track of the gift literature. This was followed by an invitation from the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary to conduct a study into gift giving in the Netherlands, together with the sociologist Kees Schuyt. The theme proved not only interesting because of its interdisciplinarity and theoretical richness but also surprisingly mundane and amusing. Suddenly it was less sinking to be asked about “your work”: everybody gives gifts to others, and everybody has something to tell about totally wrong gifts received or about dubious motives to give a gift to another person. During the second half of the 1990s a remarkable development occurred in the political tide in Holland: after having led a hidden existence during several decades, the themes of solidarity and social cohesion suddenly came to be exposed in full daylight. A broadly felt concern about the current state of social cohesion and solidarity in our society gave rise to extensive political and public debate. Policy documents were written and plans were made to counter the perceived threat of a dissolving community and diminished citizenship. Both the Dutch government and the Dutch Council of Scientific Research reserved money for research in the field of social cohesion and solidarity.

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From the beginning the connection between my previous research theme of the gift and that of cohesion and solidarity had been clear to me. For had the classical anthropologists not convincingly argued that gifts confirm social ties and that the theory of the gift is a theory on human solidarity? Extension of my former theme to that of cohesion and solidarity was therefore a logical step. In my teaching I started to incorporate the classical and modern theories on social solidarity, and as of 2001 I became a co-researcher in a large-scale study about family solidarity, the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, financed by the Dutch Council of Scientific Research. One question, however, had become more and more pressing over the years: why are there so few theoretical connections and crosswise references between the gift theory and theories on solidarity, when it is clear as sunlight that both concern the coming into being and the maintenance of social community? This question is central to this book.

During a couple of delightful holidays in a Breton seaside hamlet the job has been accomplished. This would not have been possible without the help of a number of colleagues and other people who offered their views and suggestions for improvement. I want to thank Jack Burgers, Louk Hagendoorn, Mirjam van Leer, Maarten Prak, and Wilma Vollebergh for their critical reading of former versions of Chapters 8 and 9. I am also grateful to Godfried Engbersen for his help in finding a suitable terminology to describe the transformation of solidarity since the late nineteenth century. The anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press have been an enormous help, and I appreciate their careful reading and invaluable suggestions. Finally, I am very grateful to Paul Verhey for his interest, patience, and continuous friendship, both in the Breton hamlet and elsewhere.



Several of the chapters of this book have been published previously. They have been brought together here with the explicit purpose of creating one

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coherent whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Here follows the acknowledgment of the origins of the various chapters. A former version of Chapter 1 has been published as “Heirlooms, Nikes and bribes: Towards a sociology of things,” *Sociology* 35 (2001): 59–75. A former, Dutch version of Chapter 2 has been published as “De psychologie van de gift. Over geven, vergeven en vergif” [The psychology of the gift: About giving, forgiving and poison], *Psychologie & Maatschappij* 65 (1993): 306–319. A slightly different version of Chapter 3 has been published as “Gratitude and gift exchange,” in R. Emmons and M. McCullough (eds.), *The Psychology of Gratitude* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 195–212. A former version of Chapter 4 has been published as “Women, gifts and power,” in A. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), pp. 119–132. A former, Dutch version of Chapter 5 has been published as chapter 2 in A. Komter, J. Burgers, and G. Engbersen, *Het cement van de samenleving. Een verkennende studie naar solidariteit en cohesie* [The cement of society: An exploratory study of solidarity and cohesion] (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), pp. 26–42. Parts of Chapter 6 have been published as “The disguised rationality of solidarity,” *Journal of Mathematical Sociology* 25 (2001): 385–401; and as “Reciprocity as a principle of exclusion: Gift giving in the Netherlands,” *Sociology* 30 (1996): 299–316. Parts of Chapter 7 have been published in A. Komter and W. Vollebergh, “Solidarity in Dutch families: Family ties under strain?” *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2) (2002): 171–189. Chapters 8 and 9 have served as the basis of my inaugural speech “Solidarity and sacrifice,” Utrecht University, January 2003.