Social Solidarity and the Gift

AAFKE E. KOMTER
Utrecht University

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Introduction

> More profound insights into the nature of solidarity and trust can be expected from applying the theory of the gift to ourselves.
>
> (Mary Douglas 1990: xv)

Is there a similarity between giving a birthday present and doing volunteer work? Between donating blood and being a union member? In short: what do gifts and social solidarity have in common? Giving to a beggar or to charity is an act of solidarity. When we are giving care or help to our elderly parents, we are demonstrating social solidarity; at the same time we are giving a (nonmaterial) gift to another person. The term solidarity, apart from its ideological use, for instance in the socialist and communist jargon, and apart from its normative commonsense use by humanitarian organizations, political parties, or the church, has traditionally been used in a descriptive and analytic way, with the sociological approach of Emile Durkheim providing the first scientific attempt at theory development.

Solidarity derives from the Latin *solidare* – to make firm, to combine parts to form a strong whole. In contrast to the term solidarity, the word gift has an agonistic origin: the German *Gift* came from the Greek *dosis* and Latin *dos*, which had replaced the former *venenum* because of the need for a euphemism. Whereas solidarity is an abstract concept that remains abstract even in its most common uses (one dictionary explanation of solidarity is, for instance, a feeling of togetherness and willingness to take

the consequences of that), gift giving is often associated with concrete and material objects exchanged on certain occasions between people having a certain type of relationship to each other. This difference in abstraction level may be one explanation of the fact that the scientific histories of the concepts of solidarity and the gift have remained separate to a large extent. Also the concept of solidarity may take very concrete shape, as the preceding example demonstrates. Inversely, the concept of the gift does not exclusively indicate certain material acts but has a wealth of cultural, social, and psychological meanings as well, all referring to the abstract, symbolic functions of gift giving. Despite their differing etymological and scientific histories, both concepts are clearly related in their most fundamental and characteristic manifestations and functions. Giving gifts is an act that creates and maintains social ties by making people feel mutually obliged to give in return. Similarly, social solidarity is regarded as the glue that keeps people together, whether by mutually identifying and sharing certain norms and values, or by contributing to some common good, or both.

As Mary Douglas argues in her foreword to the translation of Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (1990 [1923]), the theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity. Both theories – or, better, theoretical traditions – have as their main subject the way social ties come into existence and are maintained, in brief, "the problem of social order," as Talcott Parsons called it. Given their common subject matter it is surprising that both sets of theories do not seem to have influenced each other in any significant way. On the one hand, there is the anthropological and sociological tradition of thinking about the gift and reciprocity, with authors such as Malinowski, Simmel, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Gouldner, and Sahlins. On the other hand stands the sociological tradition of theories on solidarity and social order, in particular the work of Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons. Where there is some influence, it tends to take the form of a critical stance, for example, Gouldner's criticism of the functionalist approach within social theory, or Mauss's radicalization of Durkheim's views on the basis of social order.

Not immediately clear are how the theory of the gift and that of solidarity relate to each other, what the similarities and the differences are, and in which respects they may complete or enrich each other. Also, with regard to empirical research both traditions are rather unconnected. The bulk of empirical studies on gift giving are from non-Western societies, although in recent years some "westernization" of the research has taken place. Empirical research into solidarity has been scarce; its main focus is on attitudes toward certain forms of solidarity (e.g., state support of the socially weak, distribution of health care in view of risky life-styles). Besides some national surveys about volunteer work and money donations, and the research done within the Dutch tradition of theoretical sociology (mainly inspired by rational choice theory), there have been very few attempts to research concrete instances of solidary behavior.

During the past decade several scholarly works on the respective themes of the gift and of solidarity have appeared. In *L'esprit du don* (1992), for instance, Jacques Godbout analyzes the continuity between the "archaic" and the modern gift. Between the various types of gift – "normal" gifts, Christmas gifts, blood or organ donation, giving help to unknown people – there are interesting similarities connecting them to the gifts given in archaic society. Outside the sphere of the market, our society is still firmly rooted in a system of gift exchange. It is impossible to think of a society without gifts being circulated: gifts still create and maintain social bonds, thereby continually contributing to the revitalization of society. Some years later Maurice Godelier published *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999 [1996]) in which he reopens the anthropological debate on the meanings and functions of gift giving for the constitution of social ties and community. Returning to the classical works by Marcel Mauss and others, he tries to disentangle the enigmas that kept surrounding the gift in the eyes of many anthropologists. Drawing on the work of the late Annette Weiner, he shows that a certain category of objects can be given and kept simultaneously. Particularly objects deriving their meaning from birth, death, ancestors, or sacred powers, and which are therefore associated

with human as well as cultural reproduction, are given as well as kept at the same time: their ownership is inalienable in the end, while the right of usage may be passed on to others. Another interesting publication is *The Sociology of Giving* (1999) by the German sociologist-anthropologist Helmuth Berking. Like Godbout he compares present-day giving with gift exchange in "traditional" societies and also arrives at the conclusion that giving and taking are elementary activities upon which the building of community still rests. In addition to examining the motives, occasions, and emotional norms of gift giving, he explores the historical, symbolic, and linguistic roots of the moral vocabulary related to gift giving. The concepts of hospitality, sacrifice, and gratitude are important elements in this vocabulary.

A recent publication is the interdisciplinary collection of essays edited by Mark Osteen, *The Question of the Gift* (2002). The volume comprises contributions from anthropology, literary criticism, economics, philosophy, and classics and poses questions such as: what is the role of noncommercial gift exchange in creating communities, how do people deal with objects outside the sphere of consumption, what is the relationship between gifts and commodities, to what extent are artworks gifts, is a really free gift possible or desirable? Important elements in the book are the concepts of power and reciprocity, and ample attention is given to the ethical foundations of kinship, generosity, and gratitude. Osteen feels that a too strong emphasis on (calculating) reciprocity and the implicitly economic assumptions of classical gift theory underestimate the spontaneous and sometimes altruistic character of the gift. He thus takes a stance that is contrary to Mauss's classical view that in the end every gift is based on the principle of *do ut des* (I give so that you give in return). Remarkably the book's index does not contain any reference to solidarity; although Durkheim does figure in the book a number of times, his theory on social solidarity is not mentioned.

Recent publications on solidarity are of a somewhat different nature: more conceptual and theoretical, and frequently inspired by political,

social, and moral philosophy. Their point of departure is often normative: what future is left for solidarity, how can we conceptualize it in such a way that it fits our modernized society? A German collection of essays edited by Kurt Bayertz (1998), for instance, examines the moral and historical context of solidarity, in addition to offering perspectives from psychology and biology. Solidarity is also analyzed as a social norm and a civil right. Chapters on international solidarity and solidarity in the (post)modern society are included in the volume as well. In another German study that is mainly conceptual as well, Rainer Zoll (2000) discusses the juridical and French origins of the concept. He traces the conceptual history of solidarity and attempts to draw up the balance of contemporary social solidarity, in particular worker solidarity, and some new forms of solidarity in our society. He agrees with Habermas's normative conception of solidarity as tied to justice. In Zoll's view a critical test for a new conception of solidarity would be the way it would deal with our relationship to strangers.

In the Netherlands some studies have appeared that exhibit the same theoretical and conceptual concern as the German publications. The volume edited by de Wit and Manschot (1999), for instance, offers a critical reconstruction of the traditional ways of conceptualizing solidarity. The authors reflect upon how the ethical components of solidarity can still be of value to our modern democratic societies. They present theoretical arguments that connect solidarity to cosmopolitism, tolerance, and the acceptance of cultural minorities. From the perspective of the law Dorien Pessers (1999) offers an interesting analysis of the concept of reciprocity, which she considers an essential aspect of solidarity. In her interdisciplinary study she examines what this concept might mean for the various domains of law.

A British study by Turner and Rojek (2001), finally, attempts to clarify how (post)modern society deals with the principles of scarcity, on the one hand, and solidarity, on the other. This study not only offers an overview of existing social scientific theories on solidarity but also

presents a normative view on the way solidarity might be given shape in a modern society.

In the present book I attempt to bring together two rather unrelated traditions of social scientific thinking about social ties: sociological theory on solidarity and anthropological theory on the cultural and social meanings of gift exchange. The purpose is to explore how both theoretical traditions may complete and enrich each other, and how these combined insights may illuminate manifestations of contemporary solidarity. The book's main argument is that a theory of solidarity could gain significantly from incorporating some of the core insights from the theoretical and empirical work on the gift. This theoretical argument is supported by empirical illustrations drawn from research on gift giving and on various forms of solidarity.

The book consists of three parts. The focus of Part I is on the sociocultural, social-psychological, and gendered meanings of gift exchange. Chapter 1 starts at the most concrete level by investigating the trajectories of things that pass between people and the different types of meaning things become invested with as a consequence of their circulation between people. In turn, these meanings can explain how things come to play a role in gift exchange and, by that means, in creating social ties. We are strongly inclined to regard things as mute and inert. In many anthropological and sociological writings "mute" commodities are opposed to gifts, which are supposed to have a "spirit" and to have rich symbolic and social meanings. However, things also have "social lives" that bestow them with symbolic value. While things derive their symbolic meaning from exchange, the continuation of exchange is guaranteed by means of the symbolic meanings of things. This chapter investigates the social meanings of things by distinguishing four fundamental models of people's relationships to each other and to things; these models have

affection, power, equality, and utility as their respective bases. Empirical research data on gift giving are used to illustrate the models.

The different patterns of giving and receiving and the meanings of things-as-gifts are further explored in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Chapter 2 presents some empirical data on social and psychological patterns of giving and receiving. Dutch research shows a strong relationship between giving and receiving: doing well has its reward. Apparently the principle of reciprocity also applies to Western society. In addition to its social and cultural meanings the theme of the gift has great social-psychological significance. The main psychological functions of gift giving are, first, the creation of a moral bond between giver and recipient and, second, the maintenance (or disturbance) of this bond. Gifts as "tie signs" disclose the nature of the tie between giver and recipient. They reveal how we perceive the recipient while at the same time showing something about our own identity. In gift giving a range of psychological motives may be involved, varying from the desire to express love, gratitude, and friendship, to motives related to insecurity and anxiety, and to the conscious or unconscious need to offend, insult, or exploit another person. Gifts may be deceptive insofar as their manifest and latent intentions do not coincide. Empirical illustrations of offensive and embarrassing gifts are also presented. Participants in reciprocal gift exchange are involved in a psychological balance of debt, which should never be in complete equilibrium. Someone has to remain in debt toward the other, but both parties may have different ideas on the magnitude of the debt and on how long it can last. The debt balance is therefore a source of relational risks.

Gratitude is the subject of Chapter 3. According to anthropologists one of the main characteristics of the gift is that it should "move": gifts should be given and reciprocated. If a gift is kept too long, the recipient will develop a bad reputation. Gifts are not inactive but possess something of the original giver. This "spirit of the gift" wants to return to its place of origin; only then is the gift cycle completed and can a new cycle be

set in motion. Gifts can only bear fruit if people show their gratitude in a proper way through passing the gift along. Gratitude may also be considered from a psychological point of view – as a moral virtue, a personality characteristic, or asset. It is something one has to learn, and some people are better equipped to learn it than others. The quality of the earliest contact with the primary caring figure seems to be at the basis of the capacity to feel and to express gratitude. A sociological view stresses gratitude as part of the chain of reciprocity, or "the moral memory of mankind," as Simmel called it. As such, gratitude fulfills important cohesive functions for society. A culture or society deprived of all acts of gratitude will inevitably break down. Issues of power and dependence may complicate gratitude. Only in more or less balanced relationships can gratitude unfold the best of its powers.

In Chapter 4 the gendered meanings of gift giving are discussed. Although Malinowski recognizes that women have a prominent role in certain ceremonial actions, he does not mention any active female part in gift exchange; all his examples are from men. Lévi-Strauss discusses the practice occurring in many non-Western societies of exchanging women as "the supreme gift." The exchange of women as marriage partners is supposed to be at the base of systems of kinship relations and thereby forms the structural fundament of culture and society as such. More recent work of Strathern and Weiner suggests that women's role in gift giving is not restricted to being merely the object of exchange but that they have an important and autonomous part in gift exchange. Empirical studies in Western society demonstrate that women, far from being passive and insignificant, play a prominent role in gift exchange: they not only give more gifts than men – material as well as nonmaterial ones – but they are also the greatest recipients. Women's gift giving seems to be caught in a paradox. On the one hand, gift exchange is a powerful means of creating social relationships and affirming ties; on the other, by giving too much, women incur the risk of losing their own identities, given their unequal societal and economic power compared with that of men.

In Part II the theories on gift giving and solidarity are brought together and their strengths and weaknesses compared. Chapter 5 examines how the theory of the gift can be connected to that of human solidarity. Classical sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons highlight the affective, normative, and instrumental foundations of social ties and solidarity: people come to share norms regulating their interactions and transactions, but they also develop functional relations based on more instrumental and self-interested concerns. In the work of classical anthropologists like Malinowski and Mauss, in addition to these motives, still others come to the fore, for instance, giving based on feelings of mutual obligation. Lévi-Strauss argues that power and prestige may also be a driving force behind gift giving. In classical sociological and anthropological theories on social ties, generosity and self-interest are not necessarily opposites. In more modern theories, such as Hechter's, Mayhew's, or Etzioni's, this insight seems to have been lost. By combining sociological and anthropological theory, four main motives behind both exchange processes and solidarity come to the fore: affection, power, reciprocity, and self-interest or utility. These motives correspond to the models presented in Chapter 1. Yet another element connects the theories of solidarity and the gift, although it has received less attention in sociology than in anthropology: the ritual aspects inherent in the interaction processes that generate solidarity and reciprocal obligation.

The fact that solidarity may also have more negative and excluding aspects is addressed in Chapter 6. This chapter presents some empirical data derived from Dutch research on giving money to charity, giving time to volunteer work, and giving informal care to other people. In the Netherlands during the past decade the amount of money given each year to charity continues to rise. Since 1980 the portion of the Dutch population active in some form of volunteer work amounts to about one-third. Giving care offers the same pattern: since the 1970s those giving informal care to other people total about one-third. However, some inherent failures are connected to these positive manifestations of solidarity.

For instance, research on gift giving shows that those who give many gifts (material as well as nonmaterial) also receive many gifts in return, but those who do not give much themselves – often because their social and material conditions do not allow them to do so – are also the poorest receivers. Informal giving mainly benefits those who already receive much; those who need it most receive the least. Solidarity may thus act as "a principle of exclusion." Solidarity appears to be selective in yet another way: those who offer care prefer their own family members and nearest relations over other persons in need of care. Those who do not have many family relations or near relatives are therefore at a disadvantage.

Traditionally the family has been considered one of the most important cornerstones of a harmonious and solidary society. Therefore family solidarity is the focus of Chapter 7. The combined demographic developments of the growing number of old and very old people and the decreasing number of young people have caused an increasing concern about family solidarity. Changed relationships between genders have contributed to this concern as well. Several theoretical dimensions of family solidarity are distinguished, and some empirical data on attitudes, feelings, and motives related to family solidarity are presented, as well as data on the amount of care provided to elderly family members. Family solidarity does not exist in a social void. The macrolevel of welfare state provisions is influencing the microlevel of informal care within the family, and vice versa, as some empirical findings have indicated. While intergenerational care is still provided on a large scale, particularly by women, the motives underlying it seem to be based on a kind of "prescribed altruism." Family solidarity is not necessarily or exclusively something positive, as is shown is Chapter 6. Both the provider and the recipient may experience it as a burden. Moreover, family solidarity cannot be isolated from the ambivalent nature of family ties in general.

Part III addresses some changes in contemporary solidarity and attempts to draw up the balance from the foregoing chapters. In Chapter 8 some broad societal changes supposedly having an impact on solidarity

are briefly sketched: individualization, diversification, and globalization. Cultural critics often cherish a rather gloomy picture of the consequences of these developments for the mutual concern and social commitment of contemporary citizens. On the one hand, due to the individualization process social ties would have become more transitory and citizens would feel less committed to politics and societal concerns. A new personality type more self-reliant than ever before would have come into existence. On the other hand, the increased cultural and religious pluriformity and the growing multiculturalism in Western societies are assumed to have created much insecurity. Globalization is believed to create new opportunities while at the same time generating new social inequality. To counterbalance the views of these cultural critics, Chapter 8 presents also a more factual, empirically based overview of contemporary solidarity. Some traditional forms of solidarity have declined, others have been maintained, and also new manifestations of global and local solidarity have made their appearance. Civil solidarity as expressed in public behavior toward fellow citizens and the public space itself seems to have declined.

Chapter 9, finally, combines the insights derived from the previous chapters in a theoretical model with various dimensions of solidarity. One of these is the continuum of gift and sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice is hardly encountered in sociological theories on solidarity. Nevertheless, sacrifice is a characteristic aspect of some forms of solidarity. In anthropological theories gift and sacrifice are conceived as two manifestations of one underlying dimension. In the first case what is given is kept intact; in the second it is "sacrificed" (destroyed, burned, slaughtered, killed, and the like). In the theoretical model that is presented, the gift manifestation of the supposed solidarity dimension relies on mutual recognition, dependency, and reciprocity, whereas the sacrifice manifestation more often involves denial of personal autonomy and "otherness." Solidarity in small-scale social units is more likely to exhibit characteristics of the gift, whereas large-scale group solidarity is modeled more on sacrifice.

With the help of this model it becomes possible to understand under which conditions solidarity will have positive or negative consequences for those involved. Finally, an attempt is made to characterize the essence of the transformation that solidarity has undergone in the course of the past century: from Durkheim's "organic" solidarity toward a solidarity that could be called "segmented," because the former mutual dependency of individuals and groups for the fulfillment of their needs is increasingly being replaced by autonomously operating segments that are showing solidarity on a voluntary and self-chosen basis.

Two final remarks are in order here, the first one about my use of concepts. It is obvious that the concept of solidarity harbors a multitude of dimensions and covers a range of phenomena of a very different nature: from giving to a beggar to organized worker solidarity, from offering help to your neighbor to walking in a silent march, from doing volunteer work to global networking. I deliberately refrain from attempts to give a full-blown definition of the concept that includes some aspects and leaves others out – which is what definitions amount to – because it renders every attempt contestable by necessity. I therefore decided to include those dimensions and manifestations of solidarity that are habitually accepted as such. The gift seems to be a less contested concept, although one might give some thought to what counts as a gift and why. This is done in Chapter 2. In the remainder of this book "gifts" refer to material as well as a nonmaterial gifts, like help or care.

Finally, my approach is analytical rather than normative. The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 9 is meant as a tool to understand why solidarity takes different forms and what these are, and why it may have different consequences for the well-being of the individuals and groups involved. It is not meant as a signpost for future solidarity. That is the domain of social and moral philosophy, which is outside the scope of the present work.