# Introduction

William Hogarth's morality series 'Industry and Idleness' (1747; plate 6) depicts a scene at an urban wedding and is entitled 'The industrious 'prentice out of his time and married to his master's daughter'. At the centre, a band of musicians is playing drums, bass and rough instruments outside the house. On the right-hand side, the apprentice ('Goodchild') is leaning out of the window and offering one of the musicians a coin, while a servant at the doorstep is dispensing food from a plate onto the apron of a woman who is kneeling before him. On the left-hand side, amidst the crowd of musicians, a crippled beggar is handing out a broadside ballad ('A new song'). Behind the musicians there are images of street houses and the monument that commemorates the Great Fire of London.[1]

Hogarth's engraving aptly invokes some of the themes and preoccupations of this study. It teems with the kind of gestures of giving that are unlikely to surface in written records – the apprentice who offers a coin, the servant handing out food at the door and the beggar who presents a song. These gestures of offering and largesse also involve an exchange: the apprentice is rewarding the drummers for their merrymaking, while his own new status as the head of a household is affirmed by the charitable act. The beggar does not simply stretch out an empty palm but rather offers a song in anticipation of alms in return. There is also a form of rapport and exchange between the servant and the woman – the servant offers food and the woman, on her knees, responds in a gesture of submission and gratitude. The entire scene takes place neither in the countryside nor at the gates of a large aristocratic house, but rather outside the more modest artisanal households of the metropolis. It is a thoroughly urban setting bursting with merrymaking and clamour,

[1] David Bindman, *Hogarth* (London, 1981), 167–78. For rough music as a feature of eighteenth-century weddings, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991), 469–70; Tim Hitchcock, 'Begging on the streets of eighteenth-century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 487–8.

where face-to-face gestures of giving unmediated by a local magistrate, church official or other civic institution were presumed to have been long gone.

An enduring aspect of historical studies of the shift from medieval to modern society has been the presumption of a decline over time in informal support systems and a rise in more calculating, selfish norms. Varied processes were associated with this decline – the Renaissance and the formation of a modern 'individualist' self; the Reformation and novel notions of salvation and sin; the expansion of markets, towns and the growing powers of the state. With regard to England, a unique role was attributed to the poor laws, the distinctive and pioneering Elizabethan legislation (1601) that established a public relief system based on the compulsory rates. This system, so it has been conjectured, gradually replaced the range of support and voluntary giving on the part of individuals, communities and the church, resulting in the gradual shift from private and religious giving to a public relief system based on the compulsory taxes under the supervision and control of an expanding and increasingly centralized state.[2]

Historical scholarship during the past decades has already indicated that varied elements of this large narrative have been misconceived.[3] Even studies of the emerging public relief system, which has remained central to our understanding of poverty and attitudes to the poor, now recognize the continued value of various forms of charitable giving and informal support.[4] Nevertheless, a thorough study and appreciation of

[2] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920; New York, 1958); Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (London, 1971), 259–97, 483–7; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971), 660–79; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1977), 651–6. For an examination of this literature in the context of a long-established paradigm of societal change going back to the nineteenth century, see Richard M. Smith, ' "Modernization" and the corporate medieval village community in England: some sceptical reflections', in A.R.H. Baker and Derek Gregory (eds.), *Explorations in Historical Geography* (Cambridge, 1984), 140–79.

[3] Major studies include John Walter, 'The social economy of dearth in early modern England', in John Walter and Roger Schofield (eds.), *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), 75–128; Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991), 149–98; Martin Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996). See also Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'The diversity of social capital in English communities 1300–1640 (with a glance at modern Nigeria)', in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2001), 121–52; Keith Wrightson, 'Mutualities and obligations: changing social relationships in early modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 139 (Oxford, 2006), 157–94.

[4] Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Early Modern England* (London, 1988), 169–73; Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Networks of care in Elizabethan English towns: the example of Hudleigh, Suffolk', in Peregrin Horden and Richard Smith (eds.), *The Locus of Care: Families,*

informal support in its varied manifestations are still encumbered by a set of conceptual and methodological approaches that have shaped the literature on these themes over the years. Much of the literature is still based upon persisting assumptions inherited from powerful traditions of thinking, both whiggish-neo-liberal and Marxist, which underpinned our understanding of the shift to modern society and indeed our perception of modernity itself. While encapsulating opposing views of historical processes, these traditions nevertheless shared some basic notions about social action and interaction in modern life. Modern society in these accounts witnessed the emergence of 'atomized' individuals acting in pursuit of material gain and self-interest, purportedly driven or conditioned by capitalist markets, class configurations and an emerging state system. According to both accounts, informal and face-to-face interactions retreated into the private domain (the nuclear family), so that interpersonal relations became peripheral to major processes of change, be they political, social or economic.[5] A persistent tendency towards the marginalization of personal interactions has pervaded the literature on social and economic change; hence the sense of diminishing value of voluntary and personal forms of giving under the impact – admittedly sometimes belated – of the Reformation, the poor laws and expanding markets. This is the case even in accounts that recognize the enduring force of some of these private and communal forms of giving and aid, as these modes of giving are then perceived as remnants of the past rather than as integral to the shift to modern society itself.[6]

There are also methodological obstacles to the study of informal forms of aid, first and foremost due to the nature of the evidence itself. These systems of offering remain intangible and their record is fragmented or sparse, so that systematic assessment remains problematic

*Communities, Institutions, and the Provision of Welfare since Antiquity* (London, 1998), 71–89; Joanna Innes, 'The "mixed economy of welfare" in early modern England: assessments of the options from Hale to Malthus (c.1683–1803)', in Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare*, 139–80; Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), chs. 1–2.

[5] Craig Muldrew, 'Interpreting the market: the ethics of credit and community relations in early modern England', *Social History*, 18 (1993), 163–83, esp. 163–9; Mark Granovetter, 'Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91 (1985), 481–510, esp. 483–7. Thanks to Tamar Parush for referring me to Granovetter's article.

[6] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), 53; Walter, 'The social economy', 75–128; Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990); Judith M. Bennett, 'Conviviality and charity in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), 18–41; Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1994), 139–42.

and fraught with difficulties. While some practices, notably charitable bequests, are amenable to measurement, many others that were based on unspoken assumptions and transactions, or on hidden networks and casual favours were far less likely to be documented. Where evidence is available and employed, statistically or otherwise, the scholarship leans towards compartmentalization and research is dominated by segregation between charity and philanthropy on the one hand, and other types of support systems on the other. The latter are also often divided into subfields of family and household, kinship, neighbourhoods or associations, each offering different perspectives and findings. While this division of labour is justifiable given the difficulties entailed in investigating the diverse systems and considering their distinctive figurations, it nonetheless remains the case that the historical understanding is fragmented and does not allow full appreciation of the dimensions of informal support, of transformations across domains and modes of operation, as well as of the role of informal support in society and culture at large, or of more precise processes of change over time.

This book addresses these issues and offers an assessment of the dimensions, chronology and dynamics that sustained informal support over the course of the period. It examines a wide spectrum of support systems within families and households, in neighbourhoods and amidst broader networks, in associations or practices of charitable giving to the poor. It explores forms of support that were based not only on personal contacts in durable, face-to-face interactions, but also in more indirect, looser and fleeting encounters, or those managed via intermediaries and the community or the public at large. The book examines practices that have remained unexplored in the literature or have been assigned only a marginal role in welfare provision (e.g., filial support to parents in old age, voluntary church collections, forms of giving amongst the poor, especially in urban neighbourhoods, or household charities). It explores forms of support that determined the quality of life and well-being – as opposed to sheer survival – of the recipients, and probes various forms of services, favours and social interactions that were sustained over time. The book closely studies cultural practices – gestures, rituals, discourses and forms of communication as well as the settings and arenas within which they took shape – and explores their impact upon the sustenance and cultivation of informal help. Focusing on the whole period from c. 1580 to c. 1740, the book provides a new perspective on the contours of change over time. Rather than indicating the demise of informal support systems, the book demonstrates that myriad forms of informal support were revitalized and expanded throughout.

## Gift giving and reciprocity

The varied systems of support examined here are evoked and considered as forms of gifts, that is, modes of giving that possessed the kind of properties generally associated with gift relations and exchange. Current theoretical analyses and the literature on gifts owe a great debt to Marcel Mauss's groundbreaking and still viable 'Essai sur le don' (1923–24), despite the many years that have passed since it was published.[7] In the 'Essai', Mauss offered a broad and richly textured analysis of customs of gift giving in a range of archaic societies – Polynesia, Melanesia and northwest America – to which he also appended a discussion of gifts in some major legal systems (Roman, Indian and German). Despite the fact that the book discussed diverse customs and practices of gift offering, its analysis nevertheless generated some basic insights into the power and role of gifts in the creation and sustenance of binding commitments and social ties. Mauss tended to view the latter as inherent to many societies and human interactions: 'In this we have found one of the human foundations on which our societies are built.'[8]

In Mauss's account, gift giving entails an exchange rather than a unilateral offering. This exchange is distinctive and sharply contrasts with market exchange that is mediated by money and price. Unlike market transactions that are instantaneous and anonymous, the gift mode of exchange implies durable interactions and binding obligations. Gift giving is characterized by three fundamental components:

1 Gift giving creates reciprocities and obligations to give and reciprocate in return.
2 The giving and reciprocation are separated by the passing of time, which implies prolongation and durability of the exchange, as well as a measure of uncertainty (even volatility) regarding the timing and nature of reciprocation.
3 Gifts are exchanged within social relations that become enmeshed in the cycle of offering and reciprocation, thus acting as powerful inducements, rewards and motives for repeated and ongoing exchange. Gift giving is tied up in these relations and drives – power and status, social compacts and alliances – no less than it relates to the gift itself.

[7] Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les société archaïques', *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris, 1950), 145–279; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, intro. Mary Douglas (New York, 1990; London, 2002).

[8] Mauss, *The Gift*, 5. For a concise and perceptive recent discussion of the 'Essai', see Ilana F. Silber, 'Prologue: sortilèges et paradoxes du don', *Revue du M.A.U.S.S.* 27 (2006), 35–56.

Over the years since it was published, the 'Essai' has been subjected to criticisms and objections that pointed to various omissions, but also to excesses that were implied in its claims. Some critics pointed out Mauss's failure to consider gift giving in the domains of kinship, relations between the genders or family economies. Others highlighted functions of gift offering – in peace making, for example – which he had overlooked or only alluded to vaguely.[9] Mauss's relative neglect of religious offering and the discourses that informed these types of gifts have also been denoted and discussed.[10] Still other critics regarded Mauss's model as overly broad and opaque; they cited his notion of the 'spirit' of the gift (which implied that when offering a gift a person gave himself away – 'by giving one is giving oneself') or his even more ambiguous conception of the gift as a 'total' fact. The latter implied that gift giving embraced almost all spheres of human activity, from economic, political and family institutions to moral forces or aesthetic objects.[11] Doubts were cast upon Mauss's claim to have discovered the 'most basic foundations' of social behaviour, that is, his intuition that the gift was a generic, universal phenomenon that traversed societies and cultures. Critics delineated the instability and wide spectrum of gifts ranging from rigorously enforced obligations to customary favours and more altruistic acts, as well as evil, negotiated and subversive gestures.[12] Some discussions of Mauss indeed concluded that this great variety of relations and human transactions eluded any single categorization, whether in a given cultural context or across time.[13]

[9] Claud Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949, trans. 1969); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1978), 185–230; Annett Weiner, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange* (Austin, 1976).

[10] Jonathan Parry, 'The gift, the Indian gift, and the "Indian Gift" ', *Man*, 21 (1986), 453–73; I. F. Silber. 'Beyond purity and danger: gift-giving in the monotheistic religions', in Antoon Vadevelde (ed.), *Gifts and Interests* (Leuven, 2000), 115–32.

[11] Mauss, *The Gift*, 59, 100–2; Claud Lévi-Strauss, 'Selections from *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*', in Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York and London, 1997), 45–69.

[12] Jonathan Parry, 'On the moral perils of exchange', in Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds.), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge, 1989), 64–93; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The work of time', in Aafke E. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam, 1996), 135–47; Ilana F. Silber, 'Prologue', and her 'Modern philanthropy: reassessing the viability of a Maussian perspective', in Wendy James and Nick Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute* (New York, 1998), 134–50; Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange* (Gottingen, 2003), esp. the introduction, 10–18; E. P. Thompson, 'Folklore, anthropology, and social history', *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 255–8.

[13] Algazi et al., 'Introduction: doing things with gifts', in *Negotiating the Gift*, 15.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the book has continued to have great impact and to inspire numerous ways of thinking about acts of giving and exchange, which in themselves attest to the viability and inventiveness of Mauss's insights. The book proved compelling in its ability to capture a crucial dimension of human interaction that might configure in varied social, political, religious, economic or even intellectual contexts. It was elaborated upon and discussed not only by anthropologists and sociologists, but also by economists, psychologists, literary critics and philosophers.[14] There have been closer examinations of the notion of the 'total' gift and of the symbolic interaction that it entailed as well as the role of gifts in interpersonal interaction – friendship and affection, caring and love – especially in modern contexts.[15] Historians, too, have become alert to the importance of gifts in different contexts, and the past decade has witnessed several important contributions that offered more contextualized analyses of gifts. Given the traditional engagement of the literature on gifts with 'small-scale' societies, it is perhaps not surprising that initial contributions were produced by medievalists, who shed light upon the role of gift relations in charitable donations to monasteries and religious institutions, but also their figurations in kinship, politics and social relations.[16] For the early modern period, Natalie Davis's incisive account demonstrated the role that gifts continued to play in an era of expanding markets, print culture and religious change in particular. In the sixteenth century as well elite patronage was pervaded with gift giving.[17] There have also been a

[14] For some of these contributions, see Komter (ed.), *The Gift*, esp. part II; Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift*; Helmuth Berking, *Sociology of Giving* (London, 1999); L.-A. Gérard-Varet, S.-C. Kolm and J. Mercier Ythier (eds.), *The Economics of Reciprocity, Giving and Altruism* (London, 2000).

[15] David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London, 1988); Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief and Other Currencies* (Princeton, 1994), 71–118; James and Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*.

[16] For an overview of this literature, see Arnoud-Jan A. Bijsterveld, 'The medieval gift as agent of social bonding and political power: a comparative approach', in Esther Cohen and Mayke B. De Jong (eds.), *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2001), 123–56. See also Martha Howell, 'Fixing movables: gifts by testament in late medieval Douai', *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), 3–45; Jane Fair Bestor, 'Marriage transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), 7–46; Valentine Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2000); Algazi et al. (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift*.

[17] Natalie Z. Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-century France* (Madison, 2000); Linda L. Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 1990); Felicity Heal, 'Reciprocity and exchange in the late medieval household', in Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds.), *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-century England* (Minneapolis, 1996), 179–98; Heal, 'Food gifts, the household and the politics of exchange in early modern England', *Past and Present*, (forthcoming).

number of significant studies of gift giving in modern contexts, yet overall, historical studies that fully address issues of gift giving in the early modern and modern era, and, crucially, their mutations over time remain few and far between.[18]

In our examination of varied modes of support, the abundance of the extensive literature on gifts is not just granted and acknowledged, but also applied selectively and elaborated to fit the distinctive configurations and historical issues that pertain to this study. All types of support are studied as forms of gifts that were structured by social interactions, reciprocities and obligations. Yet, in investigating the dynamics and contents of these interactions no single mode of exchange is taken for granted. Rather, varied forms of reciprocal exchange – in families, communities, associations and so on – are explored and delineated as the investigation proceeds. The analysis incorporates diverse modes of offering and exchange and underlines their intense personalized form, elaborating upon a wide range of giving, favours, services and donations, as well as the social relations that were at play. It not only delineates the broad contours of informal support systems, but also closely examines case studies that illumine dynamics of exchange, including 'bad' gifts and gift relations subverted or gone astray. The book further pursues a set of distinctive practices that encouraged and emboldened patterns of support and exchange during this period, including more specific forms of gift giving (New Year's gifts, for example), feasting and commensality, practices of appeal as well as commemoration of giving and support. The special role of Protestantism in elaborating and communicating the value of gifts is considered and explored.

The book also addresses more directly transformation across time and the impact of markets as well as state policies and institutions on informal forms of support. For Mauss, gift exchange contrasted with a market mode of transaction, and as such it was incompatible with market institutions and mechanisms. This implied that as markets expanded, so these systems of gift giving diminished in importance, if they survived at all.[19] This contention echoes the kind of analyses referred to above when addressing the transition to modern society; it was also replicated

I am grateful to Felicity Heal for allowing me to consult and refer to this article before publication.

[18] James G. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London and New York, 1995); Avner Offer, 'Between the gift and the market: the economy of regard', *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), 450–76; Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2004).

[19] Mauss, *The Gift*, 91–100. For a critique of this aspect of Mauss's work, see Groebner, *Liquid Assets*, 7–10; Silber, 'Modern philanthropy', 135–9.

in major economic accounts of the shift, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from a pre-capitalist economy which was immersed in social relationships and reciprocity, to capitalist economies governed solely by considerations of money and profit. Historical accounts of the development of modern financial systems were also based on similar assumptions regarding the incompatibility between a pre-capitalist mode of personal credit that supported non-productive activities, and modern credit institutions which from the nineteenth century onwards made large-scale investment and economic growth possible.[20]

The analysis here elaborates upon the distinctive features of gift relations that were apparent in informal support and contrasted with market exchange based solely on money and pricing. This distinctiveness notwithstanding, the book also explores the ways in which informal support and more formal institutions interacted. It investigates the impact, implications and feedback of markets and of an expanding state apparatus on varied forms of informal support. It demonstrates that gift giving, support and the personal interactions underlying them penetrated and at times became enmeshed or identified with market transactions and state policies. Rather than invoking decline, the book elucidates processes of change through the notion of *boundaries* which were inherent to informal support systems, and which were also reinforced by market expansion and the increasing powers of the state. Within these boundaries, however, varied forms of informal support and gift exchange persisted, shifted and multiplied. The latter were at times made possible, if not directly induced, through policies, arenas and forces generated by the state and an expanding market for commodities or by growing urban populations and the patterns of economy, culture and networks created in their midst.

## Formal/informal, voluntary/involuntary

The set of practices examined here is deliberately broad, although no attempt is made to cover all forms of giving and support. Thus, for example, there is little on marital relations and the types of support which flowed between husbands and wives; nor does the book systematically address gendered forms of gift giving and support. Overall, the

[20] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, 1944), 46. For the literature on the history of financial transactions, see Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, 'Information and economic history: how the credit market in old regime Paris forces us to rethink the transition to capitalism', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 69–94, esp. 69–70. See also Muldrew, 'Interpreting the market', 163–9; Finn, *The Character of Credit*, 17.

selection of practices is inclusive and loosely structured by the varied contexts and social spaces that are relevant to the early modern era, and within which recurring practices of support and help can be observed.

Designating these support practices as 'informal' or 'voluntary' poses a certain difficulty, especially once it is conceded that many of them entailed binding commitments and were structured by social interactions that sometimes left little leeway for choice or autonomous action. Like all forms of gifts, practices of support were in this sense neither wholly informal nor always voluntary. Thus, in aristocratic hospitality during the Christmas season, the gifts offered by tenants were enforced as a form of return for the landlord's generosity and largesse, which traditionally had been rather precisely calculated to match the tenant's offering. This form of enforced obligation to offer a gift remained a central feature of tenant feasts that were typical of gentry hospitality throughout the period.[21] In practices of aid to the poor, as well, the boundaries between 'voluntary' giving and the relief offered through the emerging system based on the compulsory rates were also fluid. The officials appointed to administer the system were initially known as 'collectors' for the poor, a designation that had been associated with traditional, voluntary offering to the impoverished. In many parochial records, the money gathered from the rates continued to be referred to as 'collections' and was lumped together with all other recorded parochial income, including the 'voluntary' collections and benevolences for the poor. Even when the money raised through the rates began to be recorded separately, it continued to be designated 'collections' or as the money 'collected' from the parishioners. Differentiation between voluntary support and the involuntary rates remained imprecise, and both types of giving were considered 'obligatory' collections for the poor.[22]

Nevertheless, distinctions were still made, and while boundaries were sometimes blurred, the distinctiveness of these modes of operation – informal giving vs market transactions, voluntary handouts vs the compulsory taxes – was increasingly acknowledged and became part of common parlance and record keeping as the period progressed. Account books were here instrumental in affecting a more rigorous formulation of the bifurcation between voluntary giving or gifts, on the one hand,

[21] Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, 74–5. For the lack of distinction between rents in kind and tenants gifts, see also her 'Reciprocity and exchange', 183; and 'Food gifts' (forthcoming).

[22] For examples see the accounts of the overseers of the poor in St. Dunstan in the West, London, for the years 1633–87. GL, MS 2999/1, no fols. See also Hindle, *On the Parish?* 228, 230; McIntosh, 'Networks of care', 72.