

## Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory\*

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*This article offers to unravel lines of both continuity and change in Bourdieu's repeated return to the topic of the gift throughout his intellectual career. While this periodical revisiting of the gift may seem at first like mere repetition, a closer reading reveals three successive and cumulative phases in his gift theory, each adding a new layer of analytical and normative inflections. Emerging from these three phases is a trajectory marked by systematic theoretical consolidation but also growing dilemmas and inner tensions, even to the point of self-contradiction: starting from a critical debunking of the disinterested gift as sincere but obfuscating fiction, it culminates with a positive, prescriptive valorization of disinterestedness as something which needs be cultivated in our very own times. Challenging his vision, as it were, "from within," these inner tensions and developments amount to an intriguing, inverted case of Bourdieu's own idea of "double truth," all the more significant since it pertains to a topic that he defined as playing a paradigmatic function in his general theoretical approach.*

Bourdieu's writings display an impressive degree of theoretical coherence and cumulative continuity. Most of his central ideas on the economy of symbolic goods, habitus, symbolic violence and domination, and even the basic parameters of his relational approach to fields and social space, had already appeared by the early 1970s, and would punctuate his writings to the very end. Further contributing to this sense of solid, cumulative theoretical continuity, there is even an oft-noted tendency in his writing to what may seem like mere repetition and the insistent hammering of nearly identical formulations.

Admittedly, Bourdieu explicitly recommended that the social scientist should persistently return to a previous object of inquiry as part of a self-conscious, epistemological method of reflexive reexamination of one's relation to the object under study (*LP*: 1/*SP*: 7). One especially intriguing case of such repeated return to a same topic, however, is found in his writings on the gift. If it is intriguing, it is precisely because it entails significant developments that are neither acknowledged as such, nor accompanied by the sort of explicit, systematic self-reflexive critique he otherwise propounded. I shall analyze this recurring return to the gift, and search for both continuity and change in his treatment of that topic in the following texts, mainly: *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [1972] 1977 (*OTP*); *The Logic of Practice*

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[1980] 1990 (*LP*); *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* [1994] 1998 (*PR*); and *Pascalian Meditations* [1997] 2000 (*PM*).<sup>1</sup>

To some extent, as will be made clear in the first part of this article, Bourdieu's repeated revisits of the gift can be viewed as simply indicative of the very special, "paradigmatic" theoretical importance that he gave to that topic from the very start. Yet a closer scrutiny also makes it possible to distinguish, in the second part of the article, between three phases in his gift theory—dubbed here as "epistemic-critical," "synthetic-reactive," and "complex-evaluative." What emerges from these three phases, I submit, is a trajectory marked by inner tensions and unacknowledged developments, all the more significant, precisely in light of the cardinal, paradigmatic status that Bourdieu attributed to the gift in his general theoretical approach.

### THE GIFT'S "PARADIGMATIC" THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE

Considering the stream of commentaries on multiple aspects of Bourdieu's work, his treatment of the gift stands in a somewhat peculiar position. True, he did receive a fair amount of attention among scholars specifically engaged in research on the gift, as reflected by the inclusion of excerpts of his writings in two major collections of articles dedicated to the topic (Komter 1996; Schrift 1997). As a rule, however, his writings on the gift have usually been treated independently of the rest of his work. Research on the gift that refers to Bourdieu does not usually relate to other aspects of his work, and but for one important contribution (Evens 1999), discussions of more general theoretical aspects of his work seldom expand on his approach to the gift as such, and fail to scrutinize its very special status within the framework of his overall theory.

Yet the topic of the gift acquires a status in Bourdieu's writings that is quite unparalleled—but for one major exception<sup>2</sup>—in any other contemporary brand of general-sociological theorizing. Bourdieu's preoccupation with the gift at an early phase of his career while engaged in extensive ethnological fieldwork among the Kabyles in colonial Algeria need not be seen as particularly exceptional or surprising. In a sense, it may even be understood as pursuing the legacy of such giant French figures as Marcel Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, which Bourdieu explicitly acknowledges, in shaping the gift into a major area of anthropological research and theory. Yet it would be mistaken to attribute his early interest in the gift to a narrowly confined initial ethnological phase. Not only did his work remain all along shot through

<sup>1</sup>These are the main loci where Bourdieu addresses the gift *as such*, systematically and at length. References will be made both to the English and French original versions, which sometimes differ in number or order of presentation of chapters (e.g., *OTP*; *PR*). Texts where the gift is mentioned in only very brief and fleeting fashion (e.g., with just one or a few sentences) will be referred to occasionally, but not subjected to similarly exhaustive analysis. The analysis does not pertain either to texts that deal with themes that were perceived by Bourdieu as closely related (such as symbolic violence, the economy of symbolic goods, etc.), but where he does not address the gift at all, or mentions it in only very brief and fleeting fashion (see also fn. 35).

<sup>2</sup>The only exception is another current of contemporary French theory, little known still in the United States and otherwise very different, even antithetical to Bourdieu's, namely, the "gift paradigm" propounded by Alain Caillé and other collaborators in the framework of the journal *Revue du M.A.U.S.S.*—the acronym standing for the "Anti-Utilitarian Movement in Social Sciences" (e.g., Caillé 1989, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001; Godbout with Caillé 1992; Godbout 2000). Caillé promotes a multifaceted and contextualized conception of the gift, rooted in Marcel Mauss's work and his *Essai sur le Don* in particular (Mauss [1924] 1990), as a key element in a multidimensional theory of action meant to refute the foundational preeminence given to the economic aspects of action in rational choice theory and associated utilitarian assumptions. See also fn. 7.

with illustrations and insights based on his early fieldwork among the Kabyles, but it also never admitted of any sharp disciplinary distinction between ethnology (or anthropology, a term he hardly used) and sociology (Lahouri 2002; Lane 2000:86–139; Reed-Danahay 1995, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Far from setting the gift aside, moreover, he kept coming back to it at later stages of his work, when working in a more conventional sociological vein on various aspects of French education and culture. This persistence was only the more remarkable at a time when the gift attracted little attention among sociologists, and when one could hardly foresee the intense revival of interest it would trigger across the humanities and the social sciences throughout the 1990s.

One main reason for this persistence is the very special, pivotal role that Bourdieu bestowed upon the gift in his overall approach, a point he underscored again and again. Far from constituting just one more topic, or social phenomenon, among many others, the gift touches to the very core of his theoretical vision, and plays a key role in it, one that he often addressed as that of a “canonical example,” or “paradigm.” Moreover, this paradigmatic significance of the gift is endowed with many facets. Thus, gift exchange is repeatedly addressed as paradigmatic of “the economy of symbolic goods” in general (e.g., *PR*: 98/*RP*: 184) and specifically, of the fundamental operation of social alchemy that transforms any type of capital into symbolic capital (e.g., *ETP*: 348 ff.; *OTP*: 192; *LP*: 110/*SP*: 188, 209–31). It also constitutes the “canonical” case for his idea of “double truth,” and the related need for a “bifocal” perspective that aims to transcend the traditional dichotomies of subjectivist versus objectivist points of view, that is, one that takes into account both the actor’s subjective understanding of her own actions and the sociologist’s external, objectivizing apprehension of the very same actions (e.g., *OTP*: 4ff/*ETP*: 337 ff; *LP*: 104/*SP*: 178; *PM*:/*MP*: 229). Further, the gift is held to exemplify all labor of “collective denial” and production of “sincere fiction,” or in other words, all operations underpinning the symbolic alchemy that produces a “reality that denies reality” (e.g. *OTP*: 194; *LP*: 110/*SP*: 188; 209).<sup>4</sup> Linking up to yet another key concept in Bourdieu’s oeuvre, it is also presented as paradigmatic of all symbolic violence, that is, “the gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is not possible,” and that he sees as characteristic of the mode of domination at work in the spontaneous, unorganized assent of subjects to play a “game” that is in fact imposed upon them as an external constraint (e.g., *OTP*: 192–97; *LP*: 125ff/*SP*: 216 ff.).<sup>5</sup> Last, and on an even more general and fundamental level, the gift is seen as paradigmatic of key features of social practice as such. It is paradigmatic of the “orchestrated improvisation,” and “sense of the game,” which Bourdieu deems

<sup>3</sup>As confirmed by the very title of his first book, *Sociologie de l’Algérie* (1958), and related articles published in journals specializing in the sociology of work, Bourdieu’s early work on Algeria can hardly be labeled as “only” ethnological or anthropological in any and unduly narrow use of these words. Moreover, he was involved in more usual sociological research on various aspects of French society in the early 1960s already, on such topics as schooling and education, photography, banks, and museums. Simultaneously, he kept engaging throughout the 1960s in studies of what he called traditional or peasant societies, both in Algeria and his native region of Béarn in France. To that extent, he may be seen in the lineage of a French sociological tradition of “detour” through the anthropological study of archaic or exotic societies, one also extended in his case, to research on his own, native society (Richman 2002).

<sup>4</sup>Bourdieu underscores the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift as what allows this denial, or camouflage of reality to take place. This labor of collective denial tends to dissolve with the advent of market economy, where self-interest becomes openly exposed and legitimate rather than a hidden reality.

<sup>5</sup>E.g.: “The gift, generosity, conspicuous distribution—the extreme case of which is the potlatch—are operations of social alchemy which may be observed whenever the direct application of overt physical or economic violence is negatively sanctioned, and which tend to bring about the transmutation of economic capital into symbolic capital” (*OTP*: 192).

pervasive in much, if not all, social practice (e.g., *LP*: 103ff./*SP*: 176ff.). But it is also paradigmatic of the “economic” character of all practices (including but not limited to those—like the gift—that claim to be disinterested or at least noneconomic), to the extent that all are oriented in a sense, even when not consciously and intentionally, toward the maximization of some form of profit, be it economic or symbolic (e.g., *OTP*: 177ff./*ETP*: 348 ff.; *LP*: 122ff./*SP*: 209ff.).

I shall not dwell here on the many well-known, and to my mind well-founded criticisms of Bourdieu’s approach as actually leaning—despite his own claims to the contrary—in an economistic, materialistic, and structuralist direction (e.g., Alexander 1995; Evens 1999; Jenkins 1992; Sewell 1992; Smith 2004).<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu’s disclaimers and protestations to what he often dismissed as sheer misreadings of his writings notwithstanding, it is not surprising that his brand of theory should be resisted by theoretical perspectives inclined to allow more autonomy and authenticity to the realm of human agency and meaning-making in general, and to values and ideals of “disinterestedness” in particular. So do also reject his approach, a fortiori, theorists who not only argue for the capacity, or even propensity, of human beings for generosity and disinterestedness, but also underscore the fundamental, constitutive, and creative importance (rather than marginal incidence) of such human propensities for the very fabric and potential transformation of social life.<sup>7</sup>

My point, though, is neither to reiterate nor add to these criticisms but rather call attention to inner tensions, uncertainties, and developments in Bourdieu’s own writings with regard to the pivotal topic of the gift. Paradoxical as this may sound, this should not be taken to understate the very real continuity that otherwise can be traced in his writings in that respect. Not only are all the various facets of the gift’s paradigmatic significance already deployed in the *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique (ETP/OTP)*, arguably Bourdieu’s first treatise of general theoretical import, but they are also reiterated in precisely the same or very similar terms throughout subsequent writings as well; and all throughout, the argument repeatedly affirms the gift’s special theoretical status as *exemplary* of and fundamental to Bourdieu’s vision of the social world.<sup>8</sup>

Yet alongside these very central and powerful topoi, we shall also see emerge a different set of issues, uncertainties, and tensions in what amounts to a three-phase development. To be more precise, it is a three-layered, “cumulative” development, in the sense that Bourdieu never repudiates what he wrote in earlier phases, but rather fine-tunes his argument with each revisiting of the subject, adding new themes and layers of analysis, and modifying the relative weight or emphasis each receives. No less significant, one can perceive a change in tone, the sense of ever-growing

<sup>6</sup>There have been also many attempts by now to either deny or correct for these biases by theorists sympathetic to his work but trying to make it less rigid and dogmatic, sometimes by mutual fructification with other theorists (see Corcuff 2003; Dalton 2004; Frère 2004; Myles 2004; Potter 2000).

<sup>7</sup>Critiques of Bourdieu from such corners, however, do not necessarily entail a total denial of the “economistic” aspects of either social action in general or of the gift in particular. What is rather rejected, in the framework of such currents as the new French pragmatic sociology promoted by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in particular (see, e.g., Boltanski 1990; Boltanski and Thévenot 1991, 1999) or Caillé’s enlarged gift paradigm and the M.A.U.S.S. (see fn. 2) for example, is the foundational preeminence given to economizing action, coupled as it is in Bourdieu’s vision with the axiom of the latter’s necessary contribution, consciously or not, to the reproduction of structures of domination, and with the promotion of a pervasive hermeneutics of suspicion as the only true and superior scientific method. See Boltanski (1990:213–20) partaking, precisely, of a discussion of the gift and counter-gift.

<sup>8</sup>At no point, however, does Bourdieu present the gift as itself foundational to social life. In that respect, he diverges from those (not all) theorists of the gift who see the gift, in the wake of Mauss, as a (or even for some the) fundamental and universal foundation of social life as such. It needs be noted, however, that he himself never took an explicit stance on that issue.

complexities, and if not an explicit “change of mind,” at least a growing undercurrent of conceptual as well as practical, and eventually even political, dilemmas.

### PHASE ONE: THE EPISTEMIC AND CRITICAL BASELINE

As noted earlier, it is in the *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique (ETP)* that the gift first emerges as a topic of special importance. Since the argument is fully reproduced in *Outline of a Theory of Practice (OTP)*—the (not altogether identical) translation of the *Esquisse*—and in the relevant sections of *The Logic of Practice (LP: 98–134; SP: 167–231)*, these three texts (i.e., *ETP*, *OTP*, *LP*) will be addressed here together as forming the first phase in Bourdieu's gift theory and the baseline of comparison with later texts.<sup>9</sup>

These early texts address gift exchange both empirically—mainly as entailing a kind of challenge-riposte sequence typically at work in the competitive system of honor among the Kabyles<sup>10</sup>—and theoretically, as a convenient illustration of Bourdieu's take on major issues of epistemology and general theory. The key feature of gift exchange in that regard is its mix of subjective freedom and objective constraint, rules and improvisation, game and strategy. As such, it aptly exemplifies the need to transcend the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. In his view, this also implies transcending the opposition between two classic stances with specific regard to gift exchange, those of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, held as respectively representative of the “subjective” versus “objective,” or as Bourdieu also formulates it, “phenomenological” versus “structuralist” perspectives.<sup>11</sup> The position Bourdieu advocates, by contrast, is one better able to encompass what he sees as two contradictory aspects, or opposing “truths” of gift exchange—the gift as experienced, or at least, meant to be experienced, and as seen from outside—thereby also contributing, more generally, to the elaboration of a more adequate scientific theory of practice.

Far from limiting itself to a detached discussion of matters of epistemic theory, however, Bourdieu's argument quickly takes on a critical and debunking tone. This emerges first in his famed interpretation of the time lag between the gift and counter-gift as playing a crucial part in enabling the coexistence of the two contradictory “truths” by making it possible to sustain the fiction of spontaneous, disinterested giving while repressing the actual truth of exchange and its ultimate basis in economic capital (*OTP: 4–9/ETP: 337–48; LP: 98–111/SP: 167–89*). Thus, rather than framed as two equally valid “truths,” one is actually invalidated as “fiction” relatively to the other, which it also contributes to dissimulate.

The same critical thrust will accompany Bourdieu's discussion of the additional facets of the gift's paradigmatic significance all throughout the relevant sections

<sup>9</sup>The argument as first laid out in *ETP* is reproduced but also enlarged in *LP/SP* to include a section on “modes of domination” that had already been added to the English version of *ETP (OTP)*. The English version of this section appeared in fact before the French version (as Ch. 8 in *LP/SP*); *OTP* also differs from *ETP* in form and order of presentation.

<sup>10</sup>The texts on the Kabyles, already written in the early and mid 1960s, were later gathered for publication in *ETP* as well as incorporated, if not in precisely the same form and order of presentation, in *OTP*. See esp. the first text on “the sense of honor,” written in 1960 (*ETP: 31–5; 41; 59* esp.; partly incorporated in *OTP: 10–16*).

<sup>11</sup>Bourdieu thus endorses Lévi-Strauss's critique of Mauss as overly “phenomenological” and attentive to the “internal” (native) subjective point of view.” This reading of Mauss, however, is itself rather one-sided and debatable. As brilliantly underscored by Bruno Karsenti in particular (Karsenti 1994, 1997), Mauss's argument is far from purely “phenomenological”; in fact it can even be shown to display a combination of subjectivizing and objectivizing features, or agency and structure, antedating the “synthetic” stance that Bourdieu wanted to promote (and that many feel he did not actually implement). See also Caillé (2004).

of the *OTP/ETP*. Be it with reference to the economy of symbolic goods, the transmutation of economic into symbolic capital, collective denial, symbolic violence, or symbolic domination, the critical argument is not only systematically pursued but also—and significantly, since this will change in subsequent phases—dealt with the same sustained tone of self-assured theoretical certainty.

One area that may seem to receive a different treatment is the entire range of small, “ordinary” gift exchanges, borrowings, and other minor transactions of the kind especially current among women, partaking of a broader argument concerning “matrimonial strategies and social reproduction” (*OTP*: 7–8; 58–71/*ETP*: 162–86; 343–44; *LP*: 191/*SP*: 318). What receives attention here is the part played by such small gifts in binding friendships and ensuring the continuity of interpersonal relations, and the entailed contrast, as construed by the Kabyles themselves, with the more solemn, “extraordinary” gifts by men at more festive, ceremonial occasions. More generally, Bourdieu views women as structurally predisposed to be less concerned with symbolic profits, freer to pursue material profits, and therefore closer to the “economic” truth of exchange than men. This does not prevent Bourdieu, however, from encompassing this range of “ordinary,” kin- or neighbor-based modes of gift exchange—in a later section and without any further reference to gender differentiation—within the one same critical analysis of “the institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition which is the basis of gift exchange” (*OTP*: 171/*ETP*: 349).

Finally, the critical animus is again salient in the way Bourdieu extends his analysis of the gift into the context of modern societies. Weaving in some basic macro societal evolutionary ideas, he stresses the development of a fictive ideology of pure, autonomous, strictly cultural or aesthetic “disinterested” interests, as the historical product of capitalism, and by opposition to a restricted definition of material interests (*OTP*: 177/*ETP*: 361). Furthermore, it is worth noting his equally critical interpretation of modern forms of the gift such as foundations and corporate philanthropy, berated as symptomatic of “a return to forms of symbolic violence again based on dissimulation of the mechanisms of reproduction through the conversion of economic into symbolic capital,” and as a “private form of legitimacy-giving redistribution through which the efficacy of the mechanisms of reproduction is exerted” (*OTP*: 196; *LP*: 133; *SP*: 230).

Bourdieu’s argumentation in this first phase therefore is markedly and systematically critical—in the tightly intertwined epistemic-scientific and normative-prescriptive senses of that term. Significantly, it often clearly resonates with Marxian accents and terminology.<sup>12</sup> In short, the gift emerges from this first phase as not only theoretically important and paradigmatic, but also consistently cast (but for a brief digression with regard to women’s “ordinary,” small gifts) in pejorative terms, as part and parcel of all those social “evils” and masking mechanisms (however partly rooted in “sincere” and shared fictions), which it is the task of a good, debunking, critical scientific sociology to oppose in the hope of attaining a better, truer, and just social world.

<sup>12</sup>For example: “the ‘idolatry of nature,’ which makes it impossible to think of nature as a raw material or, consequently, to see human activity as labor, i.e., as man’s struggle against nature, tends, together with the systematic emphasis on the symbolic aspect of the activities and relations of production, to prevent the economy from being grasped as an economy, i.e., as a system governed by the laws of interested calculation, competition, or exploitation” (*OTP*: 171–72/*ETP*: 348). Or again: “Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical ‘economic’ capital, produces its proper effect in as much, and only in as much, as it conceals the fact that it originates in ‘material’ forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects” (*OTP*: 183/*ETP*: 376).

## PHASE TWO: SYSTEM CONSOLIDATION AND "REACTIVE" DILEMMAS.

Following this first, outright "critical" phase, however, Bourdieu's gift's theory evolved into a second phase, characterized by the systematic consolidation of his overall theory, yet also a tone that was less starkly self-assured and critical. Marked by the need to refine his position in reaction to critiques of his work as well as concrete developments in his proximate institutional surroundings, his writing also begins to manifest burgeoning theoretical and practical dilemmas.

Signs of a development in Bourdieu's treatment of the gift have in fact been detected earlier. While developing his own "gift paradigm"—in many ways antagonistic to Bourdieu's—Alain Caillé identified a significant turning point in Bourdieu's writing circa the late 1980s, discernible in *Choses dites* (Bourdieu 1987) as well as in two lectures delivered at the University of Lyons in December 1988 under the title "Intérêt et désintéressement" [hereafter *UL88*]<sup>13</sup> (Caillé 1994:242–48). The "second" Bourdieu, as Caillé sees it, is keen to counter what he sees as economic misreadings of his writings. To this effect, he offers to replace his earlier use of the notion of "interest," which lent itself to reductionist and economic "misinterpretations," by that of "illusio," which combined with the idea of a multiplicity of social fields—each with its own, distinctive "illusio," and relatively autonomous internal dynamics—avoids endowing the economic field, in the narrow sense, with any special primacy. In addition, Caillé notes an increasing preoccupation with the issue of disinterestedness as, in Bourdieu's own words, "an absolutely capital question." In sum, however, Caillé concludes that there is little real, axiomatic change actually taking place: ultimate causal primacy is still given to economic interest, and "disinterestedness" is still conceived as only and merely illusory. The frame of analysis pretty much remains that of a zero sum game ("rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée"): disinterested giving is bound to return in the shape of symbolic capital and thus also, ultimately, of social and economic capital (Caillé 1994:244).

While fully concurring with and building upon the above assessment, I wish here to further underscore the many signs of defensiveness and "preoccupation" as they affect Bourdieu's revisiting of the gift at this stage of his writings. Indeed, it further confirms the gift's special theoretical status that this is the arena that Bourdieu turns to when striving to convince his readers of his opposition to sheer material reductionism as well as any "cynical" utilitarian understanding of human action as governed by the conscious calculation of interests (*PR*: 79–85/*UL88/RP*: 153–61); but by extension, it also extends a very same defensive, self-justifying tone to his stance on the gift itself.

Yet rather than only expressing the defensive, "reactive" need to defend his work from misinterpretations, Bourdieu's revisiting of the gift at this stage also stems from his own characteristic quest for theoretical consistency, which leads him to bring his treatment of the gift in line with new developments in his work at large and thereby consolidate his overall theory. The most relevant feature of the *UL88* lectures, in this regard, is that they forge a systematic theoretical link between Bourdieu's ideas on the gift (and more generally, the economy of symbolic goods, of which the gift is held as paradigmatic) and other key concepts, mainly habitus and fields, that now

<sup>13</sup>These lectures were published later as Ch. 5 in *Raisons Pratiques* (1994) (corresponding to Ch. 4 in *PR* under the title: "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?") and need be distinguished from a later set of lectures given in the same setting in 1994 (*UL94*), even if brought to publication together and in the same volume.

loom increasingly large in his writings.<sup>14</sup> The result is a new focus on the social conditions that make disinterestedness possible, by generating adequate internal predispositions (a generous habitus) and by providing for a corresponding structure of rewards (mainly symbolic capital), sustaining and sustained by an adequate rapport habitus-field in reference to specific social universes (for example, the world of the aristocracy).<sup>15</sup>

It is also the very same argument that Bourdieu resorts to, positioning himself again in a reactive mode, to oppose the fallacies of what he labels the “philosophy of consciousness” in general, and Derrida’s treatment of the gift in particular. Contra Derrida, for whom “the gift is the figure of the impossible,”<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu proffers that disinterestedness is indeed sociologically possible; not as a matter of conscious choice or deliberation, but rather as a sort of spontaneous, automatic, or irresistible practice, limited to social agents informed by a habitus of generous dispositions, and in the context of social structures making it plausible and worthwhile for many actors (rather than only a few outstanding virtuosi) to behave in a generous, disinterested fashion. He also criticizes the philosophy of consciousness for inevitably leading to suspect all disinterested behavior of a hidden intent to maximize some sort of profit (*PR*: 86/*RP*: 161); strikingly thus, this critique of Derrida is also a way of distancing himself from the implications of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a posture of which (mistakenly in his eyes) he himself is often taken to be a major exponent.<sup>17</sup>

Bourdieu’s treatment of the gift in this phase, moreover, betrays signs of theoretical strain and dilemmas that go beyond the combination of defensive, reactive self-justification on the one hand and system consolidation on the other that I have just described. What transpires at times in the *UL88* is his own sense of having been overly reductionist in earlier writings—rather than just protesting being “misread” by others as such, or only objecting to the reductionist implications of other approaches.<sup>18</sup> Also noteworthy is Bourdieu’s brief and little noticed introduction to Brigitte Mazon’s study on the part played by American foundations in establishing the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, published in the very same year (Mazon 1988:i–v). This finds Bourdieu striking a complex stance, a sort of “balancing act,” somewhat in tension with some of his own theoretical premises.

The focus of these few pages is a dilemma, practical and institutional as well as ideological: the need, for the new research institution, to free itself from the

<sup>14</sup>While the notion of *habitus* was already very present in *ETP/OTP*, it had only been explicitly connected to the gift in a very brief and indirect fashion, as facilitating shared expectations and thus a greater (if never full) predictability of gift exchange (*OTP*: 9/*ETP*: 346). As for the idea of a field, which had already appeared in the mid 1960s (with regard to intellectual fields specifically) (Bourdieu 1966), it still had not received any weight in the *ETP/OTP*, and thus had not yet been connected in any way to Bourdieu’s treatment of the gift.

<sup>15</sup>“If disinterestedness is sociologically possible, it can be so only through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded” (*PR*: 88/*RP*: 164).

<sup>16</sup>In Derrida’s view, which has triggered a wealth of debates, the gift does not really exist since it loses its disinterested dimension from the very moment the donor perceives it or represents it (even if only to himself or herself) as such.

<sup>17</sup>The notion of hermeneutics of suspicion refers to modes of interpretations that systematically suspect any claim to action for the sake of a universal, public, or altruistic interest as in fact rooted in and masking particular interests (Ricoeur 1969; Boltanski 1990).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. the following phrasings: “there must exist a form of interest that one can describe, for the sake of communication, and *at the risk of falling into a reductionist vision*, as interest in disinterestedness” (*PR*: 85; *UL88*: 160, italics mine); and then, within parentheses: “(culture, disinterestedness, the pure, Kantian morality, Kantian aesthetics etc., everything which I objectified, *perhaps somewhat crudely*, at the end of Distinction)” (*PR*: 90, italics mine). The French original version leaves even less place to uncertainty, since it does not say “perhaps” but “at times”: “tout ce que j’ai objectivé, *parfois* un peu rudement, à la fin de la Distinction” (*UL88/RP*: 166, italics mine).

constraining confines of the extant, conservative university structures without becoming overly dependent upon and controlled by the foreign foundations that made its very emergence and newly found autonomy possible. In a critical vein, Bourdieu takes it as indubitable that the sponsorship of the great foundations, first the Rockefeller Foundation then the Ford Foundation, was accompanied by ulterior political motives (“arrières-pensées”): namely, the anticipation of transplanting in France a kind of social sciences (quantitative, empirical, nonhistorical) that was basically conceived as a form of social control and meant to counteract the effect of critical traditions, in particular Marxism. In this juncture, Bourdieu stresses the need to maintain the new institution’s autonomy, and resist any potentially intrusive control of donors with their own, particular agendas.

Significantly, however, he does not resort to the critical interpretation of philanthropic foundations that he had advocated in the first phase of his gift theory—as being symptomatic of “a return to forms of symbolic violence again based on dissimulation of the mechanisms of reproduction through the conversion of economic into symbolic capital.” Moreover, he refuses to take sides either with those who refused to accept the foundations’ financial help on ideological and anti-American grounds, or with those who rushed to accept the funds precisely because they embraced contrary ideological premises, and welcomed importing the American model to France. Nor does he ever deny the positive and innovative role that can be played by philanthropic foundations: on the contrary, in the case at hand, finding an external source of financing did make it possible to establish a novel institution that was able to extirpate itself from a sclerotic university establishment. Finally, it is worth noting that the heroes who emerge from his account are all those (on the French side) who strove to preserve the intellectual autonomy and innovative character of the new academic institution, precisely the kind of autonomous disinterested symbolic interest that Bourdieu is otherwise so keen to denounce as a fictive ideology.<sup>19</sup>

Summing up this phase, the analytical or normative dilemmas surfacing in these writings need be understood, to no small extent, in the context of Bourdieu’s reaction to critiques of his work and other specific developments in his intellectual and institutional environment. At no point, however, are they allowed to truly challenge the epistemic-critical paradigmatic theory of the gift as it had been advanced in the first phase, nor to undermine the thrust at theoretical synthesis and consolidation otherwise found to be a dominant feature of this second phase.

### PHASE THREE: PHENOMENOLOGICAL COMPLEXITIES AND EVALUATIVE REVERSAL

A third and last phase emerges in the mid 1990s with another set of two lectures that Bourdieu delivered at the University of Lyons in 1994 (*UL94*) and published as Chapter 6 of *Raisons Pratiques* in the same year (*PR*: 92–126/*RP*: 177–213).

Here, again, one encounters Bourdieu’s sustained drive for theoretical synthesis and consistency. Thus, he opens his Lyons lectures by arguing for what I would call a “unitary” approach to the gift, capable of theorizing all expressions of the gift and related phenomena with one set of conceptual tools, valid for both precapitalist

<sup>19</sup>Whatever dilemmas were entailed, Bourdieu is quick to praise the ingenuity of those in charge on the side of the French recipient institution in overcoming them (and relating to the donor foundations in a combination of suspicious and pragmatic, even manipulative fashion), but does not take any pains to equally praise the generosity, or any other feature, of the American foundations.

and capitalist societies (*PR*: 92; *UL94/RP*: 177).<sup>20</sup> Besides brief references to gift exchange in honor societies, gender relations, intergenerational family exchanges, and the arts as well as, once again, philanthropy (*mécénat*)—on which Bourdieu even mentions he had conducted some recent research<sup>21</sup>—these pages also entail a rather detailed discussion of the “economy of offerings” (*l'économie de l'offrande*) in religious-ecclesiastic settings.<sup>22</sup> In congruence with the argument developed in the second phase, a common feature of these variegated phenomena is the fact that they are able to create the objective conditions for social actors “to bear an interest, paradoxically, in disinterestedness” (*PR*: 93; *UL94/RP*: 178). Moreover, the revisiting of the gift in this text is explicitly presented as part and parcel of Bourdieu's continuing exploration of the economy of symbolic goods more generally.

Yet combined with this systematic consolidation of his ideas in general, we also register a continuing, and even growing current set of difficulties and complexities. Rather than neatly serving his theory at large as it did in the initial phase, the gift emerges in *UL94* as a complex and thorny social phenomenon; notwithstanding the determined intent to conceptualize it in a unitary fashion, it also remains enigmatic, immensely difficult to pin down and conceptualize.<sup>23</sup> Here again, Bourdieu repeatedly hints at his concern that he be misapprehended as overly “cynical,” and seems preoccupied as ever with how best to account for the gift's double truth without falling into the trap of universal suspicion and reductionism.<sup>24</sup> The idea of double truth, with its entailed processes of “symbolic alchemy” and “symbolic transfiguration of economic capital,” very much remains an abiding source of preoccupation. In fact, Bourdieu's vocabulary now points to an even more complex world of elusiveness and mystery, brimming with terms such as “ambiguities” (a word that especially abounds in these pages), “taboos,” “secrets,” “silences,” “duplicities,” “euphemisms” (i.e., verbal transfigurations that say and not say, or deny at the same time)—all relating to facets of the gift and gift interactions that are not entirely ignored by the actors and yet are still, as it were, “suppressed.”<sup>25</sup>

True, notions of self and collective deception, repression (“refoulement”), mystification, structural hypocrisy, symbolic violence, negation of the economy, domination and exploitation are all still there conveying an indefatigable critical impetus.<sup>26</sup> Yet by

<sup>20</sup>Mistakenly, since this has clearly been done by Mauss already, Bourdieu presents this pooling together of these many different phenomena as a new perspective never developed by any one else before: “these phenomenally different social universes, which have never been brought together as such” (*PR*: 93; *UL94/RP*: 178).

<sup>21</sup>The term “*mécénat*” rather relates to the private financial sponsoring of the arts and culture in particular, in modern societies. To my knowledge, the specific research Bourdieu mentions having conducted on the operation of *mécénat* in modern societies was never, or not yet, brought to publication.

<sup>22</sup>“I would like to show that with the same instruments, one can analyze phenomena as different as exchanges of honor in a precapitalist society, or, in societies like our own, the action of foundations such as the Ford Foundation or the Fondation de France, exchanges between generations within a family, transactions in markets of cultural or religious goods, and so forth” (*PR*: 92; *UL94/RP*: 177).

<sup>23</sup>The word “difficult” recurs several times in these pages, mainly in connection with the need to unveil truths that are normally to be left implicit, while avoiding destroying something essential to the phenomena at hand in the process; and here specifically, unmasking the aspect of exchange in gift exchange and yet avoiding reducing gift exchange to just “any other act of credit” (*PR*: 94–96 esp.; *UL94/RP*: 180–81 esp.).

<sup>24</sup>This emerges, for example, in his discussion of the gift's “objective” truth as “a truth which the sociologist unveils, but at the risk of describing as cynical calculation an act which claims to be disinterested and which must be taken as such, in its lived truth” (*PR*: 95, italics mine). The French version says “an act which *wants* [rather than *claims*] itself disinterested” (*UL94/RP*: 180).

<sup>25</sup>The emblematic image in this text is that of the bishops' laughter when themselves applying “objectivizing” language to the church's activities (e.g., market notions such as “customers,” “offer and demand,” “selling” (*PR*: 113; *RP*: 203).

<sup>26</sup>In sort of a last minute reminder of objectivist determinism, the last sentence of this text does remind us that no real rupture in the economy of symbolic goods (and entailed beliefs and dispositions) could

and large, there is a relative retreat of the Marxian accents that were so pronounced in the early texts and it seems that just invoking an asymmetric double truth, where one is “simply” fictive and obfuscates the other, no longer suffices. The increasingly salient and difficult question posed in this text is rather how to best address duality, ambiguity, and even fuzziness (“le flou,” “l’indéterminé”) as constitutive, “intrinsic” features of all economies of symbolic goods, which seem to challenge the sociologist’s analysis, no matter how properly geared to a “bifocal” perspective she may be.<sup>27</sup>

Bourdieu’s last written treatment of the gift is a postscript of some 10 pages to a chapter on “Symbolic Violence and Political Struggles” in his book *Pascalian Meditations*, entitled “The Twofold Truth of the Gift” (*PM*: 191–201/*MP*: 229–40). Notwithstanding continuing signs of the same self-conscious concern at being overly “reductionist” or “cynical,”<sup>28</sup> this brief exposition aims to reiterate the main traits of Bourdieu’s approach to the gift, and shows no hint of repudiating nor reconsidering any of its basic points. Yet compared with previous texts, his writing alludes now to a richer understanding of the idea of the gift’s double truth, and to more subtleties and ambiguities in the subjective experience itself. The “objective truth” of the gift now remains in fact quite close to surface consciousness, pervasively present and always potentially there to be made explicit, even if it is not “good form” to do so, and is usually not done.<sup>29</sup> The gift, from a subjective point of view, now notes Bourdieu, is at times “experienced” or “intended” to entail the refusal of selfish calculation and exaltation of disinterestedness, thus alluding to a distinction between two types of subjective orientations (experiencing something vs. wishing it to be), which other theoretical approaches would see as pregnant with far reaching implications.<sup>30</sup> While these are only fleeting allusions, they do suggest more shades and complexities in

take place ultimately just as the result of a change in consciousness and “without a prior or concomitant transformation of the objective structures of which they are the product and which they can survive” (*PR*: 122; *RP*: 213).

<sup>27</sup>Bourdieu’s analysis of the entailed patterns of shared knowledge (and shared denial of knowledge) may even be read as veering closer to Schütz’s style of social phenomenology; we are reminded here of Berger and Luckman’s collective stocks of knowledge and structures of plausibility, and of their famed exploration of the subjective vs. objective underpinnings of the “social construction of reality”—even if these are terms that Bourdieu never uses and would most probably resist (Endress 2005; Myles 2004; Throop and Murphy 2002).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. for such signs: “This leads to the question of the dual truth of the gift and of the social conditions that make possible what can be described (*somewhat inadequately*) as an individual and collective self-deception” (*PM*: 191/*MP*: 229, *italics mine*). And again: “the gift as a generous act is only possible for social agents who have acquired . . . generous dispositions adjusted to the objective structures of an economy capable of providing rewards (not only in the form of counter gifts) and recognition, in other words, a *market* [*italics in text*], *if such an apparently reductive term is permitted* [*italics mine*]” (*PM*: 193/*MP*: 230–31).

<sup>29</sup>True enough, he did occasionally hint, in earlier texts, to a feeling of unease with the word “subjective” or even “phenomenological”: “the truth that can hardly be called subjective, since it represents the collective and even official definition of the subjective experience of exchange.” (e.g., *LP*: 104/*SP*: 178)—pointing thus to his own unduly conflating, and undertheorizing of what are very different, sometimes even opposed layers of experience (subjective vs. official), however mutually interacting they may be. He also sometimes did note that the objective reality was not always entirely suppressed, and somehow managed to reach circumscribed expression (e.g., in some Kabyles proverbs). None of this, however, came close to his new treatment of such repressed dimensions as being now constantly and pervasively very near consciousness and part of the gift’s subjective experience, of which he writes that: “it never entirely excludes awareness of the logic of exchange or even confession of the repressed impulses and, intermittently, the denunciation of another, denied, truth of generous exchange—its constraining and costly character” (*PM*: 191/*MP*: 229, *italics mine*).

<sup>30</sup>Cf. in the second sentence of the “post scriptum” (translated as a “case study” in the English version): “it is experienced (*or intended*) as a refusal of self-interest and egoistic calculation, and an exaltation of gratuitous, unrequited generosity” (*PM*: 191/*MP*: 229, *italics mine*).

the subjective experience of gift interactions than previous phases of his writings and confirm a trend already sensed in the *UL94* lectures.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the more striking novelty of this text is the shift, in its very final paragraph, to a positive and prescriptive valorization of disinterestedness. While initially framed as paradigmatic of, and grouped together with, a range of social phenomena and mystifying ideologies to be unmasked and opposed, disinterested giving now emerges as something that has been unduly suppressed by neo-liberalism and that needs to be cultivated once again. In a characteristic move of theoretical consistency, Bourdieu brings this idea fully in line with the argument that he had deployed in the previous phase in opposition to Derrida, when he had made the case that disinterestedness is sociologically possible where there are social conditions capable of nurturing and rewarding the dispositions that make actors durably “interested in disinterestedness.” Thus he now writes: “The exaltation of individual and economic success that came with the expansion of neo liberalism led to forget the necessity of investing collectively in institutions that produce the economic and social conditions for virtue, or in other words, that make the civic virtues of disinterested giving and devotion, as a gift to the group, encouraged and rewarded by the group” (*PM*: 201/*MP*: 240). But he also gives it a political and prescriptive twist, now also encouraging his readers to ponder “the political question of the means that need be put into action in order to create universes in which, like in gift economies, actors and groups would have interest in disinterestedness and generosity, or better, could acquire a durable disposition of respect for these universally respected forms of respect of the universal” (*MP*: 201–02; *PM*: 240).<sup>32</sup>

What surfaces at the very end of this last text, therefore, is a positive normative stance that not only contradicts Bourdieu’s longstanding pejorative normative critique of the gift, but also fails to spell out the entailed contradiction. Nor does Bourdieu propose to pursue any of the possible analytical and normative implications of such a stance, be it for his gift theory as such or any of the other social phenomena of which the gift was deemed to be theoretically paradigmatic.

## ELEMENTS OF CONTEXTUAL AND INTERNAL THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

How then are we to account, if at all, for the combination of continuities and developments that emerged from Bourdieu’s iterative returns to the gift? In line with his own inclinations, we may wish first to aim for a contextual form of explanation. And even though nothing obliges us to read his texts only through his own precise methods of contextual analysis, there may be even place for a field-relational interpretation, that is, one that would try to trace changes in his writings to his changing position, and position-taking, within the fields of intellectual reception and production in which he was himself implicated, with their related intellectual, institutional, and political struggles (Robbins 2007). While far from mustering the biographical

<sup>31</sup>This tends to confirm, to my mind, the need for a more complex and multilayered phenomenology than allowed for in Bourdieu’s approach (see also fn. 28), one better equipped to grapple with the range of states of consciousness between “doxa” and reflexivity (Myles 2004), as well as better able to attend to the gift as an open, underdetermined space of ethical labor and intersubjective self-fashioning (Evans 1999:22–30).

<sup>32</sup>As I only discovered as this article was going into press, this paradoxical turn has also been sensed by Philippe Chaniel, who notes that Bourdieu laments a situation where the gift is now “loosing its *true* meaning” (“sens véritable,” italics mine), and being increasingly constructed as either utterly interested rational strategy or impossible ethical prowess (Chaniel 2008:19).

and other information necessary for a thorough contextualizing analysis, I do wish to advance a few limited, tentative remarks in this vein.

To begin with, the “reactive” aspects of Bourdieu’s writings in the second phase certainly confirm the validity of a contextualized interpretation. We thus noted his explicit concern to refute critical misinterpretations of his work and to oppose Derrida’s position. In this respect, moreover, we need underscore that he constructs his intellectual field of reference in a very selective and agonistic fashion, by choosing to respond chiefly to the (intellectually prestigious) writings of Derrida, and referring to none of the many new studies on the gift produced by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists throughout the 1980s.<sup>33</sup> This selective engagement with a philosophical opponent confirms the importance of his own rupture with philosophy and resistance to its dominance on the French intellectual scene, as related in his own attempt at a “reflexive auto-analysis” (Bourdieu [2002] 2004b:94–116, 2004c). At the same time, paradoxically, it also maintains philosophy’s status as the most significant, dialogical “other,” while reproducing Bourdieu’s recurrent failure to relate to relevant contributions in other disciplines, including his own.<sup>34</sup> Some “silences,” moreover, may be more “contextually” significant than others. For example, there is no explicit reference to either Boltanski’s nor Caillé’s relevant writings (see fns. 2 and 7). Yet it is not unfounded to think that these were the kind of “misreadings” of his work (whatever the many differences between the two) that his writings were concerned with in the late 1980s—besides being emerging contending currents in French sociology at a time when he had already reached a domineering position in that field. On a more practical and institutional front, in this same phase, we also noted the impact of developments in his proximate organizational environment (i.e., the financial help of American foundations). And even if this is a context he never explicitly refers to, we may want to take into account the highly debated emergence and even public state promotion of corporate business “mécénat” in France in the late 1980s, which may help explain his lasting concern with philanthropy, adumbrated in the first phase already.

As for the third and last phase, it may not be incidental that it also corresponds to Bourdieu’s growing shift, over the last decade or so of his career, to more active and publicized forms of personal political involvement, however in line with his earlier moral and political outlook (Kauppi 2000; Poupeau and Discepolo 2002; Swartz 2003; Wacquant 2005). If only as a result of his militant opposition to neo liberalism, specifically, these years could not but facilitate enlisting and valorizing anti “economic” (in the restricted sense of that term) and “antimarket” energies—including those of generous, disinterested giving—in the principled struggle against the expansion of market forces and neo liberal policies.<sup>35</sup>

These are only brought here as very partial and hypothetical elements of a fuller contextual interpretation, which in any case can hardly be expected to ever yield a total and hermetic explanation. As Bourdieu himself would admit, moreover, any

<sup>33</sup>This is all the more significant in light of Bourdieu’s explicit references to the work of the prominent medievalist, Georges Duby, in particular, in the first phase (*OTP*: 232, n. 10; *LP*: 131/*SP*: 227).

<sup>34</sup>Bourdieu was most probably more intensely aware of Boltanski, of course, who had worked in close collaboration with him for several years before breaking away in the mid 1970s, and eventually establishing the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale with Laurent Thévenot at the E.H.E.S.S in 1984.

<sup>35</sup>On the other hand, his marked preference for a reinvigorated (if also deeply modified and reconceptualized) part of the state in that struggle might have prevented a fuller articulation of his ideal of a “civic gift to the group,” which he left utterly general and undefined. We can only surmise that he would not have wanted this ideal to veer too close to American versions of voluntary philanthropy that he held in distrust.

such contextual analysis would need to be combined with a more internal study of the texts themselves (Robbins 2007:89). Turning now to a more internal and textual perspective indeed,<sup>36</sup> we need remember that inner tensions, and contrasting statements over the course of an intellectual life span, are far from exceptional in the world of sociological theory. Enough to recall the debates concerning the significance of major divergences between early and later writings in the case of Marx, Durkheim, or even Parsons, to realize that such inner contradictions are not only hard to avoid (“nobody is ever fully consistent”), but perhaps even rooted in the tendency to moderate, or counterbalance, earlier positions via a process of self-correction or maturation that is not necessarily conscious or explicitly acknowledged (Alexander 1982a:300ff.). Some inner developments and contradictions, moreover, have inspired creative debates and processes of “paradigm revision”—be they overt or not—eventually stimulating the articulation of new theoretical currents (Alexander 1982:299–370, 1983a:128–35, 1983b:277–88).

Yet another way of understanding Bourdieu’s trajectory with regard to the gift, from an “internal” textual-theoretical perspective, may be to see it as another example of the tension that often arises, more specifically, between a descriptive-analytical and a prescriptive, normative mode of sociological writing. While this is not the place to discuss Bourdieu’s relation to Marcel Mauss,<sup>37</sup> readers steeped in the classic *Essai sur le don* cannot but be reminded of a similar shift, in the *Essai*’s conclusion, to a moral and prescriptive mode of argumentation, with its attendant ethicopolitical and even utopian accents. The similarity is even more striking if one remembers that the very first pages of the *Essai* also addressed the gift as a fiction and social lie. In Bourdieu’s case, though, it is the critical view that is reiterated and remains dominant all throughout, while allowing a prescriptive, positive image of the gift effectively to pierce through very briefly and only at the conclusion of his last explicit statement on the gift.

The tension between the descriptive-analytical and prescriptive, normative aspects of a theoretical position is present in many works and touches on a dilemma that is central to sociology as a discipline; yet it becomes distinctively sharp in the case of sociological works identified as “critical,” where diagnoses of “things as they are” tend to focus on the bleaker aspects of social life and expose the structures of domination and mechanisms of power underpinning them, while wishing for (“things as they should be”) a social fabric possibly untainted by these very same social evils. Implied in any determined, critical assault against the obfuscating and distorting power of ruling ideologies is the appeal to a more authentic alternative, an imagined ideal, against which the debased state of things is measured (Corcuff 2002; Evans 1999:23–24; Graeber 2001:29–30). The entailed contradiction, however, becomes even

<sup>36</sup>Ideally, this should entail searching for corresponding strains and changes in the entirety of Bourdieu’s writings. It would seem especially interesting to examine writings where Bourdieu dealt with the closely related issue of “disinterestedness” but without explicitly addressing the gift, e.g., in reference to science, bureaucracy, or the state (e.g., Bourdieu [1997] 2004). Also worth noting is the absence of references to either the gift or disinterestedness in *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Bourdieu [2000] 2005), contrasting with the steady reference to various types and notions of economy in all discussions of the gift, and perhaps even more surprising given the inclusion of a chapter entitled “Principles of an Economic Anthropology.”

<sup>37</sup>Bourdieu often refers to Mauss, if not without ambiguities, that would deserve a more detailed discussion than I can allow here. While opposing what he defined (problematically in my mind) as Mauss’s “subjectivist” position on the gift, as mentioned above, he also failed to acknowledge important continuities with him on that topic in other respects. On many other issues, however, he clearly very much identified with and expressed much admiration for Mauss. See Bourdieu (2004a) (based on a lecture delivered in 1997), where the topic of the gift, however, does not arise.

more blatant when critical sociologists turn embattled, like Bourdieu did, take on an active political stance in “real” life rather than remain confined to the written world of academic research, and find themselves paradoxically appealing to the very same noble motives and elevated values that they had otherwise debunked as obfuscating or manipulative ideological instruments of domination.<sup>38</sup>

Yet there is also something else at work that might have made the inner tension and self-contradiction even more threatening and more difficult to acknowledge in Bourdieu's case. If he did not explicitly acknowledge, and perhaps even actively avoided admitting, the trajectory he underwent with regard to the gift, it is precisely because of the gift's canonical, all-paradigmatic importance in his overall general sociological theory as such. The gift, in brief, is a fundamental cornerstone in a rich and complex theoretical edifice. Allowing himself to truly revise his stance on the gift, in consequence, would have meant undermining the very foundations of his theory at large.

From such a perspective, I would argue, it is tempting to interpret the ambiguities of Bourdieu's theoretical trajectory, using his very own terminology, as a fascinating case of “double truth,” or even better, “inverted” double truth. In this inverted situation, it is the critical and objectivizing scientific stance that appears to obfuscate the subjective reality of disinterestedness and generosity, allowing the latter to emerge to the surface of consciousness only in a fleeting, marginal, and circumscribed fashion.<sup>39</sup> In which case, the repeated signs of defensiveness, self-conscious justification, dilemmas, and inner contradictions that we saw emerging in his writings may themselves be seen as “euphemisms” in his own sense: that is, both saying and not saying what was, from his own initial critical sociological stance, the unspeakable.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Rather than mere repetition, Bourdieu's repeated revisiting of the gift has been shown thus to combine a steady thrust for theoretical consolidation, on the one hand, with contradictory tensions and developments on the other. This resulted in a three-phase, cumulative trajectory, in which each phase added a new layer of complexities and inner tensions that were never explicitly acknowledged or theorized. Challenging his vision, as it were, “from within,” these inner tensions and developments were also shown to partly reflect a combination of contextual influences and internal-theoretical constraints that helped explain their manifestation but also conspired to prevent them from reaching a fuller conceptualization.

Yet I would not want to overstate the overall “logic” of this trajectory, nor even claim any tight relation between the analytical and the normative aspects of these

<sup>38</sup>Exacerbated by what has been suggestively analyzed as a longstanding moral outlook rooted in French Republican values of equality, this is precisely the position in which Bourdieu found himself when increasingly drawn to embody a new variant of the figure of the intellectual engagé as “self-appointed watchdog of public virtue” (Kauppi 2000:18).

<sup>39</sup>The idea of scientific truth functioning in Bourdieu's oeuvre in tension with other “underlying” or suppressed forces is not alien to his very close commentator, Loïc Wacquant, who explained, albeit in a different context, that: “Doing social science was always for him an indirect way of doing politics: what changed over time is the dosage of those two elements and the degree of *scientific sublimation* of his political pulsions” (italics mine) (Wacquant 2004:5). The entailed tensions, at any rate, validate the need for a “biocritical,” pragmatic style of hermeneutics (Shalin 2007), even though they differ from the kind of ambivalences and misalignments typically targeted, as yet, by that approach.

<sup>40</sup>Perhaps relevant is Bourdieu's own account of a feature of his intellectual style, which he saw related to a “cleft habitus,” as one ever trying to “reconcile contraries” (2004b:112). Such a deep-seated disposition, however creative in many ways, might make it even more difficult to acknowledge tensions that may not be truly reconcilable within his frame of analysis.

developments as they manifested themselves within each stage. Admittedly, the ambiguities and contradictions that emerged on the normative level might have been nurtured by a growing sense of analytical dilemmas and complexities; but they also signaled a gradual separation of the epistemic and evaluative dimensions relatively to their tight coupling in the initial, critical phase.

Reaching now much beyond the limits of this article, it would be important to also position Bourdieu's approach in the context of the current efflorescence of research on the gift in general, and of more flexible and differentiating approaches to gift analysis in particular.<sup>41</sup> The point is, precisely, that Bourdieu did not, and arguably could not, elaborate a differentiated enough perspective on giving, one that might have accommodated both the gift as symbolic violence and mode of domination (his initial and critical emphasis) and the gift as a tool of individual commitment to the collective good as he later propounded. As reflected in his vocabulary—which refers in the singular to *the* gift, or gift exchange, or gift economy—he remains throughout within the frame of a basically unitary, general theory of the gift, striving steadily for a unified, synthetic, and paradigmatic conceptualization of all gift phenomena,<sup>42</sup> and by extension, of all economies of symbolic goods. As such, his approach is now increasingly challenged by more flexible, differentiating, and contextualizing approaches that search for new ways to conceptualize the rich complexity and diversity of gift processes across as well as within historical and cultural settings.<sup>43</sup> In that sense, the unacknowledged developments and untheorized “euphemisms” of his theoretical trajectory may be taken to confirm the ever paradoxical and diverse features of gift processes themselves, and to their puzzling capacity to challenge any overly tight and unitary theoretical net.

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<sup>41</sup>Studies pointing in that sense already emerged in the mid 1980s; since he never explicitly related, as noted above, to any of the many new studies by historians, anthropologists, and sociologists that flourished then and throughout the 1990s, we shall never know for sure how he would have reacted to them, if at all.

<sup>42</sup>As noted earlier, Bourdieu did take note of gender differences, and their overlapping with the distinction between “ordinary” versus “extraordinary” exchanges among the Kabyles. He also sometimes hints at differences between gift interactions in asymmetric, hierarchical vs. symmetric settings (e.g., *PM*:199; *MP*: 238). Also worth mentioning, are his brief references to the “gift of self” and of one's body in *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu [1998] 2001:109). None of these brief references was ever developed into a fundamental theorizing nor cultural contextualization of the diversity of gift processes, nor brought to bear on his more general theorization of the gift as paradigmatic of the economy of symbolic goods.

<sup>43</sup>See for example, Algazi, Groebner, and Jussen (2003); Caillé (2000, 2004); Komter (2005); Osteen (2002); Parry (1986); Silber (1995); Vandeveldt (2000); Davies (2000). For a systematic discussion of such trends, see Silber (2007).

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