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# **Intergenerational solidarity: The paradox of reciprocity imbalance in aging welfare states.**

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## **Abstract**

In this article a new theoretical framework is applied to a research field that is somewhat fragmented, namely that of intergenerational solidarity in aging societies. Inspired by utilitarian considerations many scholars tend to problematize the lack of reciprocity characterizing intergenerational exchanges. As some generations are longer old and more numerous they may receive excessive state-administered support of the younger generations, especially in a democratic setting. However, in reality there is limited empirical evidence of intergenerational conflict and theoretical explanations of this paradox are rare. An integrated and dynamical approach that incorporates Durkheim's solidarity theory, Honneth's intersubjective recognition theory, and the current work on reciprocal exchange is necessary in order to understand the survival of intergenerational solidarity in aging welfare states. According to this model reciprocal recognition leading to the empathization of exchanges is the driving force of intergenerational solidarity in a prefigurative and democratized culture where the status of the young has risen dramatically. Hence, we come to the paradoxical conclusion that attempts to preserve intergenerational solidarity by openly denouncing excessive transfers and trying to bypass them institutionally might be counterproductive because they may erode their empathic underpinnings.

## **Keywords**

Intergenerational solidarity; Recognition; Reciprocity; Empathy; Durkheim; Honneth

## **Introduction**

The last decennia we have seen a lot of scholarly attention for the concept of intergenerational solidarity (e.g. Turner 1989, 1998; Attias-Donfut 1991; Laslett and Fishkin 1992; Bengtson et al. 1993, 2002, 2010; Kohli 1999; Chauvel 2010). Based on this literature intergenerational solidarity can be defined both as the actual mutual support between generations and as an awareness and a sense that generations should do so. However, it is remarkable that research dealing with intergenerational solidarity in aging post-industrial societies, often one-sidedly focuses on the first component of the definition: the excessive public ‘transfers’ going from the smaller younger generations towards the larger older generations (e.g. Walker 1996; Hinrichs 2002; Van Parijs 2011). Furthermore, generations are generally conceived as birth-defined cohorts of variable sizes with conflicting stakes in relation to the provisions of the welfare state (Vincent 2005; White, 2013). This particular focus is usually explained by the fact that welfare states<sup>1</sup> are currently facing important challenges such as population aging, individualization, economic recession, and globalization which might endanger the reciprocity underlying intergenerational solidarity. However, this article will demonstrate that this perspective on generations and intergenerational exchange is myopic because it fails to appreciate the fact that generations are not only objects but also subjects that reflexively deal with ‘the diversity of ways time-related facts become meaningful and consequential as they combine with cross-cutting factors’ (White 2013: 230). We will present an alternative conceptual framework which explicitly acknowledges the multiplicity and interrelatedness of processes of intergenerational exchange and intersubjective verification of principles of system integration in a context of changing generational statuses.

The article begins with a specification of the basic assumptions underlying the current problematization of the solidarity of younger generations to older generations and explains why they should be broadened. Next it explains why it is insightful to see the issue of intergenerational solidarity from the point of both Durkheim and Honneth (Thijssen, 2012). Subsequently, we will evaluate the four pillars of the Durkheim-Honneth synthesis and explain how this evaluation challenges the simplified 'equity debate' as represented by Rawls-Machiavelli programs. Finally, we will give an overview of our main conclusions and discuss their repercussions in terms of social policies and institutional engineering.

### **Excessive intergenerational solidarity: the claim**

At first sight the current problematization of the solidarity of younger generations to older generations might come as a surprise because asymmetrical reciprocity between younger and older generations hardly is a new phenomenon<sup>2</sup> (Turner 1989). However, the specific contemporary claim is that if some generations are longer old or more numerous, the 'reciprocity imbalance' (Gouldner 1960) may become excessive and undermine the essence of intergenerational solidarity, namely the fact that generations support each other. This logic of excessiveness would appear to apply in particular to financial transfers within pensions systems based on repartition and in health care spending in aging democracies. Due to the importance of large numbers in aggregative democracy the budgetary asymmetry will not be recovered because the balance of power is shifting towards the elderly. Given that the older generations often have much higher turnout rates and that they have much to lose if the existing provisions would be curtailed (Campbell

2003) their political influence may even outstrip their actual numbers.

Furthermore, even if the voting behavior of the older generations is not systematically influenced by their own age-related self-interest, politicians will probably not risk to lose their support by affecting their vital interests in the presence of vigorous advocacy groups for the elderly (Goerres 2009).

Hence, some scholars propose the urgent adoption of policies that could reverse and control the excessively imbalanced state-administrated transfers between the young and the old (Kotlikoff 1992; Price 1997; Hinrichs 2002). Examples of such policies include the redesigning of pension and health care schemes (e.g. increasing pension age and drug reimbursement rate reductions), the adoption of new indicators in national accounts (generational accounting) and last but not least the installation of new political institutions (e.g. reserved parliamentary seats for younger generations). Van Parijs (2011) for example, advocates a 'Rawls-Machiavelli program' that adapts democratic institutions to the fact that younger generations are subjected to taxes and social security contributions whose revenues are disproportionally geared to the older generations. This program designs political institutions that promote a Rawlsian focus on the worst off generations in a Machiavellian way that bypasses the bounded rationality<sup>3</sup> of the younger generations, for according to survey studies they do not seem to be aware of the need for urgent reform programs (e.g. Irwin 1996; Brooks and Manza 2007).

However, if the contemporary younger generations interpret intergenerational reciprocity rather broadly and do not feel deprived it may also be the result of a mode of thought that goes beyond instrumental rationality. In this respect, many

contemporary contributions to the generational inequity debate are biased because they exclusively focus on the imminent threat of a direct reciprocity imbalance between the younger and the older generations rather than on the reasons why intergenerational solidarity might survive in spite of decreasing reciprocity (Dumas and Turner 2010; North and Fiske 2012). The lack of direct reciprocity may not necessarily be an indication of generational injustice or the absence of solidarity because intergenerational relations are characterized by ambivalence (Lüscher and Pillemer 1998) as they involve multiple and interrelated dialectical processes of exchange and intersubjective verification (Bengtson et al. 2002; Molm 2003: 15). In this respect Honneth is undeniably right that theories of intergenerational justice give too much attention to legal entitlements granted by the state while neglecting ‘the web of routine and often only weakly institutionalized practices and customs that give us social confirmation’ (2014: 67). Moreover, this is a theoretical problem with important practical consequences because the absence of balanced direct reciprocity in intergenerational exchanges may be paradoxical. Through the attempt to secure solidarity by fiddling with one type of intergenerational exchange processes, the probability of realizing it might decrease because the interrelations with other exchange processes are neglected (Honneth 2012: 176). In sum, there is a clear need for a more comprehensive conceptual framework in order to fully apprehend the problematic of intergenerational solidarity.

We believe that such a framework is provided by the dialectical typology recently proposed by Thijssen (2012) which combines Durkheim’s solidarity theory founded in *The Division of Labor* (1984[1893]) and Honneth’s recognition theory

advanced in the *Struggle for Recognition* (1996) and recently also *Freedom's Right* (2014).

### **The Durheim-Honneth solidarity framework**

Thijssen's synthesis (2012) not only enables us to conceptualize the interrelated dialectical processes of exchange and intersubjective verification underlying intergenerational relationships but also sheds light on the blind spots of the excessive intergenerational solidarity claim. Proposals such as Van Parijs' Rawls-Machiavelli program are based on a narrow conception of reciprocity and rationality, as well as a restricted form of agency.

First, by focusing on one type of exchange, namely direct reciprocal exchange in which the young and the old bookend generations give benefits to one another: X gives Z and Z to X (Molm, Collett and Schaefer 2007), one ignores that intergenerational solidarity also involves generalized reciprocity whereby 'people reciprocate for what they have received only by providing something to a third party' (Moody 2008: 132). It is not a coincidence that both forms of reciprocity are closely linked with the two principles of system integration involved in Durkheim's solidarity theory. Direct reciprocal exchange can be linked to the complementary diversity in the division of labor (organic solidarity), while generalized reciprocity is typically a product of the imagined commonality of the family and the political community (mechanical solidarity). Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of birth-defined cohorts with conflicting stakes regarding welfare state provisions disregards both the mechanical commonality and the organic complementarity of members of different birth-defined cohorts. Different



generations have a lot in common: they are citizens belonging to the same democratic political community, they are members of the same family lineage and they are individuals undergoing a common aging process. These mechanical communalities should be taken into account even in post-industrial societies (Thijssen 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the reciprocity imbalance at macro level could also be offset by complementary exchanges at micro level. Accordingly the organic complementarities should not be restricted to state-administrated transfers.

Second, by focusing on instrumental motives, symbolic and expressive functions of intergenerational exchanges are largely disregarded. This is a direct consequence of the fact that the younger generations are usually cast as objects rather than subjects (White 2013: 2017). They do not rebel because they are not (yet) aware of their cause. Obviously, this objectivism disregards the younger generations' agency and social status. The only thing the younger generations seem to have in common is being young, or more accurately not being old. This is remarkable because the 'founding-father' of the norm of reciprocity, Alvin Gouldner, has convincingly argued that the norm of reciprocity may vary with the status of the generations (1960: 171 & 177). Generations are not only demarcated by economic exchange but also by 'political status that they confer upon one another' (Olson 2006: 101) and 'cultural competition for goods of distinction' (Turner 1989: 590). Due to democratization and rapid technological change a politico-cultural context is created that has led to a revalued social status of the younger birth-cohorts. In such a democratized context younger generational units may feel a need to verify the principles of system integration and reflexively assert their augmented status. The augmented status granted to the younger

generations allows them to expect from the older generations a behavior that enables them to fulfil their own aims, but it also has the character of a subtle duty (Honneth 2014: 125). *Noblesse oblige. Jeunesse oblige*. In this respect it is no surprise that nowadays expressive motives prove to be far more important than instrumental concerns in explaining entitlement judgments (Huo 2002).

Accordingly the reasons why intergenerational solidarity survives can be situated in the dialectical ‘processes in which individuals come to experience themselves as having a certain status, be it as a focus of concern, a responsible agent, or a valued contributor to shared projects’ (Honneth 1996: xii).

Third, it makes sense to combine Durkheim’s solidarity theory with Honneth’s recognition theory (Thijssen 2012). Both mechanical and organic solidarity can be conceived as syntheses of a moral dialectic of the general and the particular whereby general principles of system integration are agonistically verified. The first mechanical dialectic involves the interplay between group-based solidarity and compassionate solidarity, while the second organic dialectic involves the interplay between exchange-based solidarity, and empathic solidarity.

Furthermore, both solidarity dialectics are linked by feed-back and feed-forward processes. The increased division of labor induced by a modernizing state context might stimulate organic solidarity to the extent that individuals will become more and more aware of their own individuality and will therefore be inclined to question the essentialism of static memberships such as generations and nations.

However, inspired by Durkheim’s ‘neo-corporations’ the moral individualism implied in the organic solidarity dialectic can also activate the inclusion in empathic communities, which could be new frameworks for mechanical solidarity. In *Professional ethics and civic morals* (2003[1957]) Durkheim

embeds this process of the mechanization of organic solidarity in a new contract of equity which is a subtle synthesis of a mechanical social contract and an organic consensual contract. Hence, in order to evaluate the equitability of the contemporary intergenerational contract one has to take into account both solidarity dialectics at once.

Table 1: A typology of solidarity

		Relationship between individuals with ...	
		a similar profile (Mechanical solidarity)	a different profile (Organic solidarity)
Profiles of the beneficiaries	What are they? (system integration) Structural principles	<p>1</p> <p>Group-based solidarity ‘You are a member of a group I identify with. I need to support my kind.’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Universalistic identification: ego and community (member)</li> <li>- Generalized reciprocity</li> </ul>	<p>3</p> <p>Exchange-based solidarity ‘You are an interesting exchange partner. I invest in you because this may help me in the future.’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Universalistic identification: ego and exchange (partner)</li> <li>- Serial reciprocity</li> </ul>
	Who are they? (social integration) Intersubjective verification	<p>2</p> <p>Compassionate solidarity ‘You are like me, but you don’t have what I have (and you need it). That makes me feel shameful.’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Particularistic identification: ego versus (generalized) other</li> <li>- Gift that cannot be repaid</li> </ul>	<p>4</p> <p>Empathic solidarity ‘You are not like me but nevertheless I understand and respect you.’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Particularistic identification: ego versus (significant) other</li> <li>- Non-conditional gift</li> </ul>

DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION

INDIVIDUALIZED ENCOUNTER

In case of the mechanical dialectic the principle of the likeness of group members and group cohesion is at stake (thesis) and verified in relation to a particular individuals occupying a marginal position vis a vis the group (antithesis). The perceived communalities of group members are conducive to social rights that guarantee every member of society a fair amount of essential goods regardless of achievement (Thijssen 2012:7-8). This is also true for generations as they ‘are destined to enjoy the same rights by the very fact of being born within the group’ (Durkheim 2003[1957]: 171). The generalized reciprocity involved in the instinctive alleviation of the needs of group members creates global mutual dependencies (Molm, Collett and Schaefer 2007). Through these dependencies individuals get used to regard themselves as part of a mechanical whole, which in turn strengthens the group cohesion. In group-based solidarity (pillar 1) the expressive value of exchange is more important than its instrumental benefits. In contributing to and working for the common good group members come to experience themselves as having a certain group status (Honneth 1996). This is also true for generations of group members. By risking to contribute excessively and unconditionally to the common good some generations become *more equal than others*. ‘The generations that initiate innovations do not garner the fruits, if there are any, because these come too late. They have only to provide the labor for them. However, they enjoy among the generations brought up under their supervision and control a prestige that nothing can supplant’ (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 186, 235). In this sense the so-called excessive solidarity from the younger generations towards the older generations may have a cultural meaning that is partially comparable with a potlatch whereby tribal members offer gifts that the recipients cannot afford or do not want to repay in order to consolidate the recognition of their politico-cultural status (de Certeau 1984: 27; Adloff 2006).

Then again it is more appropriate to see it as a manifestation of the dialectical relation between group-based and compassionate solidarity. The dialectical nature of mechanical solidarity reveals itself in its most purest way at the fringes of the group because marginal(ized) group members embody the imagined character of group communion in a painful way (Anderson 2006[1983]: 6). Particular encounters with perceived outsiders put the universality of the group to the test. The term 'retirement' ties in with this similarity-dissimilarity dialectic because it highlights the peripheral position of the retired elderly generations who used to be core members. Insofar as the oldest generations have literally 'spent' themselves and are no longer able to contribute to the common good (Turner 1989: 600), they might inspire compassionate solidarity (pillar 2) in the generations who still possess enough strength and energy to be professionally active. 'In the present state of our societies work is not only useful but *necessary*: indeed everyone *feels* this to be the case' (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 186). Consequently, inactive old generations 'are pitied rather than feared' (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 236). Hence, in Hegelian terms the position of the younger generations is therefore comparable with the slave who can become master by his work. This is the synthesis of the mechanical dialectic, linking the thesis of group-based solidarity to the antithesis of compassionate solidarity.

In case of the organic dialectic the principle of different positions in the division of labor and complementary exchange is at stake (thesis) and verified in relation to particular individuals who no longer have desirable exchange goods at their disposal (antithesis). Exchange-based solidarity (pillar 3) is the initial impetus of the organic dialectic. In contrast to group-based solidarity that springs from internalized societal obligations, exchange-based solidarity involves a rational

investment on the part of self-conscious subjects (Thijssen 2012: 10). It is the product of direct exchanges, both at micro and macro level, but not necessarily of equivalent homogenizable goods *hic et nunc*. As Young (1997) has argued genuine recognition of differences presupposes a certain degree of asymmetry in the exchange, both in terms of temporality and in terms of position. This is especially true for intergenerational exchange because ‘serial reciprocity’ is involved here. If the younger generations expect a return for their support to the older generations, often this expectation will be directed towards future generations. Furthermore, Durkheim points out that this investment logic also is a sacred collective product, which he called the belief in the dignity of the individual (1984[1893]). The distinct functions that individuals fulfill in the division of labor make them interesting to each other, not only as trading partners but ultimately also as fellow individuals. It is not difficult to see the similarity to Honneth’s concept of recognition as social solidarity, which is based on the principle of mutual and unconditional respect (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 188). The fact that someone is able to immerse oneself in another, to empathize with another, *transforms ex-change relationships in in-change relationships* in which the primary good that is exchanged is mutual recognition. This in-change relationship reminds us of the Maori term *hau* which links the gift inextricably with the giver, even if the gift is passed on (Mauss 2002[1950]; Moody 2008). Empathic solidarity (pillar 4) is antithetical to exchange-based solidarity because the thesis that complementary differences create support is linked to the expectation that intersubjective encounters create empathy that leads to the detection of misrecognized differences. ‘Empathic extension is always a nonconditional gift, freely given, without consideration of reciprocity on behalf of the other, either in the moment or in the future’ (Rifkin 2010: 431). This is also

true for intergenerational exchanges. Even if the younger and the older generations have decreasing instrumental value as ‘material’ exchange partner in the division of labor, they increasingly have an expressive potential for mutual recognition. Inspired by Margaret Mead (1970) this context can be defined as a prefigurative culture in which the young are recognized as an important role model, while in most of human history the postfigurative culture, in which the elder were the edifying example, used to be the dominant model. Once again, in this situation a Hegelian synthesis implying a universal recognition of the particular is possible.

In the following sections we will evaluate both the mechanical and the organic dialectics by looking at a number of contemporary challenges and empirical findings. Contrary to the messengers of intergenerational doom we focus hereby on the reasons why intergenerational solidarity might survive in spite of decreasing reciprocity. We start with the mechanical dialectic combining group-based and compassionate solidarity and next move on to the organic dialectic combining exchange-based and emphatic solidarity.

### **Evaluating the mechanical dialectic of group-based and compassionate solidarity**

#### **The group-based thesis: democracy and sociability**

The mechanical fact that group members share a set of rights and duties, which are guarded and regulated by group norms and pressure, still is an important basis

for the emergence of solidarity. This is also the case in broader group contexts, such as welfare states, whereby group norms and peer pressure are legally and institutionally embedded. The modern citizen has transferred his status duties of solidarity to the state, as it were, so that solidarity has, in a sense, become a collective responsibility. Furthermore, this transfer is legitimated by a democratic ideology that grants equal civil and political rights to all citizens equally (Marshall 1977). We show solidarity because we are compelled to, assuming ‘that civil and political participation rights can only be realized if subjects have disposal over a certain standard of living they cannot always establish by themselves’ (Honneth 2012: 182).

Because the vulnerability of old age is a fate that many citizens share it made sense to conceive of a state-administrated collective insurance. The institutionalized solidarity in the welfare state thus exhibits basic similarities with the mutual assistance found among members of primitive societies or hordes. However, it speaks for itself that this instinctive and duty-based solidarity is becoming increasingly less self-evident in today’s individualized and negotiated society where subjects are compelled to responsibility instead of obedience. ‘Network capitalism is colonizing spheres of action that were previously distant from utility, thereby introducing the principles of achievement and exchange into the field of asymmetric reciprocity structured by solidarity’ (Honneth 2012: 180). This is also true for welfare state politics where citizens have declining faith in the (political) authorities who are responsible for the shaping of social security. However, because we see at the same time an increasing support for democratic values, especially among the young generations (Inglehart 1999) this political disaffection may not necessarily strain the instinctive compliance engendered by the democratic social



contract. As was already argued by Durkheim the advance of individual conscience is not inversely proportional to that of the instinctive identification with the conscience collective. 'The instinct, the product of experience accumulated over generations, has too great powers of resistance to vanish by the mere fact that it has arrived at consciousness' (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 284).

In this respect it is understandable that the problematisation of the unbalanced direct reciprocity in the existing state-administrated intergenerational exchanges does not resonate with the younger generations. This is true especially for remedial measures that adapt democratic institutions to the fact that younger generations are subjected to taxes and social security contributions whose revenues are disproportionally geared to the older generations. It could even be argued that generational discourses are in itself at odds with a democratic ideology. After all, 'by spreading differences across time and negating it within each slice, the generational perspective evokes a vertical ordering of society that seems to imply an unequal distribution of authority' (White 2013: 239). In this sense, the core of the modern conscience collective is the democratic belief in the necessity to recognize group boundaries and overlook them. Accordingly, the generational contract (Bengtson and Achenbaum 1993) is an inseparable part from a more encompassing democratic social contract.

Complementary, one might also refer to subsidiary group memberships whose significance derives from the primary life sphere, notably the family. While there is ipso facto a certain tension between the particularity of the family and the universality of group contexts such as the state, emotional communities and neo-tribes similar to the family still provide a solid communal context for mechanical

solidarity to flourish. 'Without the intersubjective recognition, which the instincts attain in the interior of the family, the development of a second nature, of a socially shared fund of habits and attitudes, would be quite impossible' (Honneth 2010: 58). The family sphere is the primary foundation for the sociability that according to Durkheim also guarantees group-based solidarity in modern societies. Despite the demise of a number of familial functions (Popenoe 1993), there is after all still quite a lot of evidence of intergenerational solidarity within the family (Silverstein et al. 2010). The provision of care and assistance still is characterized primarily by a philanthropic particularism, a preference for relatives above all other needy persons in one's environment (Komter 2005: 139-142). It is therefore not necessarily true that transfers within the framework of the welfare state are increasingly repressing expressions of intergenerational solidarity within the family. For one thing, *inter vivos* transfers between relatives would appear not to be in decline (Kohli 1999).

An often-cited reason for the survival of family-based intergenerational solidarity is sense of duty. Because parents have brought it into the world, it is a child's duty to assist its parents if they require help. The parents ensured the biological existence of the child, so now it is up to the child to ensure the continued existence of the parents. Hence, group-based intergenerational solidarity sometimes involves generalized direct reciprocity to the extent that particular individual members of different generations also directly exchange resources with each other. In many (pre)modern societies, children are a kind of insurance for the parents' old age. Laslett (1992: 27) has pointed out that this particular bilateral procreative contract may constitute a crucial element in the survival of intergenerational mechanic solidarity. Women in particular tend to regard it as

their duty to care for older relatives (Finch and Mason 1993). We can, however, not deny that due to phenomena such as population ageing, increasing mobility, rising divorce rates and the pluralization of family forms even filial status duties have become less compulsory than they used to be in the traditional patriarchal family.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the contemporary partnership family model is more than a procreative contractual context. Due to the feminization of the labor market and significant changes in socialization patterns, it has become an egalitarian context in which individuals 'learn what it means to see the other as an irreplaceable individual' (Honneth 2010: 64). It is also a context where the boundaries between generations become blurred because over time they learn to see each other as past and future stages of a common life (Honneth 2014: 171). In this respect the group-based solidarity engendered by both the universal democratic social contract and the particular procreative familial contract are fed by sociability and processes of intersubjective recognition.

### **The compassionate antithesis: crowding in and working out**

Solidarity does not only spring from institutional principles or instrumental considerations, but is explicitly rooted in distinct feelings related to the intersubjective verification of these principles (Honneth 1996; Bengtson et al. 2002). In this respect, both compassionate and group-based solidarity are specific manifestations of the same mechanical dialectic. However, unlike in the case of group-based solidarity, compassionate solidarity does not require reciprocity. On the contrary, compassionate solidarity is based on the impossibility of reciprocity.

Feelings of compassion, be it religiously inspired or not, have always been an important motive for interpersonal charity and a catalyst for the expansion of welfare state regulations. As the etymology of the word compassion (com ‘together’ + pati ‘to suffer’) suggests, it is associated with communality and it is not an enjoyable intersubjective sensation. In a sense, the institutionalized social security of the welfare state was designed to avoid such sensations and to crowd out compassionate solidarity. Paradoxically, compassionate solidarity in itself often has a crowding in effect because ultimately it may lead to a more encompassing group-based solidarity. This is the agonistic logic, whereby unrecognized individuals activate and sustain a struggle for recognition or ‘the capacity for boundary-dissolving merging with the other’ (Honneth 1996: 105).

Huddy et al. (2001: 468) indicate, for example, that public support for pensions systems depends upon the situation in which the retired persons find themselves: ‘Program support depends centrally on continuing stereotypes of older people as helpless and needy’. However, compassion depends also on the structural context in which one finds oneself. Rousseau already argued in his second *Discourse* (1754) that certain hierarchical societal structures, such as a caste system, stand in the way of compassion. Alternatively, Tocqueville (2002[1889]: 588) emphasized that democratic structures contribute to feelings of compassion: ‘those tendencies to pity which are engendered by the equality of conditions’. Democratic citizenship is a hegemonic and universalistic status that tends to absorb and decompose traditional ascriptive status duties connected with birth or origin (Honneth 2012: 184). A key element of the democratic citizenship status is the universal readiness and ability to cooperate, through their own activities, in the creation of the common good (Honneth 2010: 78). To the extent that the readiness

and ability is hampered for the older generations they are to be pitied. In the inability of the older generations the democratic values are put to the test.

Insofar as pensioners have literally 'spent' themselves and can therefore no longer be professionally active, they understandably inspire compassionate solidarity in the group who still possessed enough strength and energy to work. For that matter, the term 'retirement' ties in with this very notion because it highlights the peripheral position of the retiree. However, survey results show that younger pensioners in particular are by no means ready to retire (Boeri et al. 2001). On the contrary, they want to and can remain active and are increasingly looking to experience a second youth. In this sense traditional disengagement theories which argue that with ageing people voluntarily relinquish certain social roles is evidently incorrect (Turner 1989). One might even wonder whether this has ever been the case as is exemplified in a dramatic way by Goya's or Rubens' paintings of Saturn devouring his son. Saturn fearing to lose his own power status decides to eat his filial competitor. But allegedly contemporary Saturns do not eat their sons but instead enslave them. If this is true, there is apparently less room for compassionate solidarity as members of the younger generations making up the working population may actually become envious of the leisured retired as the greater vitality of the old makes them more visible. Indeed, the most visible elderly person, though not necessarily the most representative, is the still relatively young and vital senior citizen. By contrast, heavily care-dependent elderly persons are increasingly often not cared for at home but in specialized rest and nursing homes, so that in general they have become less visible. However, despite the limited public visibility of the fragile elderly they often remain an important reference point and object of compassion in the family context. In this

respect Honneth stresses the importance of the historically unique reversal of the elementary functions of the various family members: 'By becoming the 'parents' of their parents, adult children symbolize the cycle of life at the level of human sociality' (2014: 172). Moreover, with respect to the younger elderly it is important to keep in mind that intergenerational relations are not only demarcated by economic and political practices but also by 'a cultural competition for goods of distinction' (Turner 1989: 590). Even if the older generations want to work and are still able to work, there is often no longer place for them on the labor market. Consequently, in contemporary society where 'the market appears as an unavoidable authority for evaluating achievement' (Honneth 2012: 185), older generations that are denied access to the labor market are often still devaluated to a marginal position. In spite of the fact that some elderly might compensate their marginal position on the labor market with vigorous activity on the consumption and leisure market, their status and prestige remains low because they are no longer able to contribute to the common good. In sum, in this context it is perfectly plausible that the younger generations are like Hegelian slaves who feel compassion with their masters, the older generations.

## **Evaluating the organic dialectic of exchange-based and emphatic solidarity**

### **The exchange-based thesis: holistic rationality**

As Durkheim made already abundantly clear, in increasingly differentiated and individualized societies, mechanical forms of solidarity are often replaced with relationships of organic solidarity whereby solidarity is no longer regarded as a social duty but rather as a product of reciprocal exchange processes that is

exteriorized in a proliferation of bilateral consensual contracts. ‘Do ut des.’ From this instrumental point of view, it would appear to be quite problematic that, under our social security systems, the young, professionally active generations are usually the providers of assistance while the older, professionally inactive generations tend to be the recipients. However, this imbalance could be illusive if looked at over time and across relational spheres (Honneth, 2014).

For one thing, the reasoning takes no account of other public transfers that were exchanged when the non-working older ‘recipients’ were still younger working ‘contributors’. First, one could consider pensions as a form of compensation for the cost of public education. Today’s pensions claimants could then be seen to have contributed during their working careers to the cost of schooling for the younger generations. And the youngsters, for their part, could be seen to redeem that educational debt in the form of pensions contributions from the moment they become wage earners. The average educational attainment level has undoubtedly risen over the past decades. However, while the cost of education per student has grown rather explosively, the number of students has, at the same time, decreased as a result of declining birth rates. Moreover, some argue that the added cost associated with population aging is only partially offset by a comparable growth in the educational budget because the utility of education also has devalued (Chauvel 2010).

Second, it could be asserted that the unprecedented wealth in which the younger generations grow up is the fruit of the labor of previous generations. Again though, certain questions arise. Despite the wealth and affluence experienced today, our post-industrial is increasingly becoming an ‘empire of scarcity’

because growing wealth has gone hand in hand with the development of new social risks and an inflation of needs. Nowadays, youngsters forming a family of their own often have to work excessively hard just to achieve the level of wealth they were accustomed to in the parental home. Although labor productivity is still increasing, so that average per capita working time has declined substantially, the average working time per household has undeniably increased. The two-earner household has become the norm, which can be problematic for deviating household types. Furthermore, increasing labor productivity is often achieved through the levers of flexibility and reorganization. Some argue that one would appear increasingly to have reached the limits of human ability: 'Even among the financially comfortable the generation gap in malaise (psychological disorders) has widened steadily' (Putnam 2000: 263). Moreover, if increasing welfare is a gift from the older generations to the younger and the future generations, it would appear to be a poisoned one. The growing welfare has, at least in part, come at the cost of the exhaustion of natural resources. Last but not least, the consolidation of welfare growth is, to an extent, artificial, in the sense that the public authorities often have accumulated substantial debt in order to attain it.

Obviously a reciprocity imbalance at macro level could also be offset by complementary exchanges at micro level. After all, as Durkheim already pointed out in 1893, modern organic solidarity is the product of individual differences, more specifically in terms of their respective positions in the division of labor. Often the non-working older generations have more leisure time, more income from assets and more life experience than youngsters. On the other hand, generally the younger generations are more vital and they have a larger earned



income. Clearly such differences in exchange goods are conducive to a level of complementariness when it comes to exchange relationships.

First, because of their greater vitality, the retired older generations are for example better able to provide informal care for the working generations. After all, many pensioners provide care for their grandchildren or they help out with other household chores. If those in work have to purchase such services, they will suffer a substantial loss of income. This form of solidary behavior, too, ties in perfectly with the investment logic that constitutes the foundation of exchange-based solidarity. One makes available whatever one possesses in abundance at a given moment (earned income) and one receives in return something that one possesses far less of (time). The professionally active make a financial contribution to the pensions of those who are no longer active. In return, some are able to lay claim to care time that is made available by the old. Importantly, however, this informal assistance is in any case voluntary and thus more precarious.

Second, a similar logic can be observed regarding intergenerational financial transfers. Although in most countries children are legally entitled to a share of their parents' inheritance, there is obviously no guarantee that eventually there will be a substantial inheritance to divide. Because the older generations live longer many will need all their savings to live on. Moreover, rising life expectancy implies that heirs inherit later in life, which means that inheritances can hardly be considered to be a direct 'compensation' for the excessive public 'transfers' going from the smaller younger generations towards the larger older generations.

Third, there are also clear indications that experience and wisdom are becoming increasingly less useful as currencies of exchange for the elderly. An inspiring essay in this respect is Margaret Mead's *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* (1970). Mead distinguishes between three types of cultures: postfigurative, cofigurative and prefigurative culture. In each of these cultures, a different age group serves as the primary point of reference. In a postfigurative culture, which was the dominant type during almost the entire history of humankind, the past provides by far the most important point of reference. Hence, it is logical that the older generations, who have accumulated wisdom and are most experienced, should be the primary guides. It is nevertheless clear that a cyclical postfigurative culture assumes a social status quo that is diametrically opposed to abruptly changing contexts, such as may be occasioned by the introduction of new technologies and large scale migration. In this contexts people tend to look at their peers as their guides. Consequently, the postfigurative culture could temporarily transform in a cofigurative culture. According to Mead a cofigurative culture was dominant in the turbulent 1960s. 'Do not trust anyone older than 30' was one of the mantra's of the student protests in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> As the older generations grew up in an entirely different social context than the younger generations, they hold different values and opinions, and are no longer able to assist them in their actions and behaviors. Mead argues that the third type, i.e. prefigurative culture, is the societal model of the future. In a prefigurative culture, everyone focuses on the young, because the latter are better equipped to face the challenges of the future in a society changing at the speed of light. Accordingly, the younger generations serve as the ultimate role model. Hence, the older generations lose an important function, namely that of the edifying example and the embodiment of wisdom. It is striking how prophetic the analysis of Mead was,

because thirty years on many social scientists have observed shifts that tie in very closely with her prefigurative vision of the future. ‘There have always been those who have celebrated youth as opposed to old age. Yet it has been only in the relatively recent past, ..., that the social emphasis (it has been called an obsession) has come to be placed so starkly on the advantages of youngness and the disadvantages of age.’ (Price 1997: 9). In sum, even if the younger and the older generations have decreasing instrumental value as ‘material’ exchange partner in the division of labor, they increasingly have an expressive potential for mutual recognition.

### **The empathic antithesis: encounter and inchange**

Durkheim starts from a simple organic thesis: complementary differences breed exchange-based solidarity. But while people often tend to focus exclusively on this thesis, it actually is no more than a point of departure of an intricate dialectical process. The exchange relationships that are driven by utilitarian considerations may initially produce a fairly robust solidarity. But after a while people will observe that if reciprocal exchange relationships are left unbridled, some end up to be individuals with socially far less desirable qualities; as it is the case for the older generations with their devaluated wisdom. However, instrumental exchanges do not develop in an emotional vacuum. Once again it is crucial to relate the division of labor as a universalistic force of system integration to particularistic emotions connected with social encounters across divisions of labor. While the thesis of exchange-based solidarity is based on the recognition principle proclaiming the utility of differences, the antithesis of emphatic

solidarity is based on the intersubjective verification of that principle, in terms of misrecognized differences. Even instrumental encounters imply intersubjective contact which is usually a fruitful breeding ground for mutual empathy, the recognition of singularity. Despite the fact that different generations may have a decreasing instrumental value as exchange partner, they increasingly have an expressive potential for mutual recognition. Although they are different, they esteem and respect each other. Durkheim already pointed out that the negotiated contractual exchanges in which benefits typically flow bilaterally, gradually transform in contracts of equity with genuine reciprocal exchange in the sense of co-operation in an expanded time frame. It is this kind of reciprocal exchange that produces the moral underpinnings for a mutual belief in the dignity of the individual. 'The economic services that the division of labor can render are insignificant compared with the moral effect that it produces, and its true function is to create between two or more people a feeling of solidarity.' (Durkheim 1984 [1893]: 17).

Recent experimental research has indeed confirmed that reciprocal exchanges are often embedded in emotional ties that create expressive value above and beyond the instrumental value of the exchange. Ultimately, exchange partners tend to prefer the act of reciprocity and cooperation over profit. 'The process of exchange can affect the subjective strength of the conflicting and cohesive aspects of exchange relations, independent of the objective structure of outcomes' (Molm 2003). Inspired by the work of Honneth we would call this socio-emotional antithesis empathic solidarity. 'It is only to the degree to which I actively bear responsibility for another person's ability to develop qualities that are not my own that our shared goals can be realized' (Honneth 2007: 261). The dialectical

reversal is crucial to understand that organic solidarity must be understood as synthesis of both exchange-based and empathic solidarity. ‘Solidarity constitutes a necessary counterpoint to the principle of justice inasmuch as it furnishes the affective impulses of reciprocal recognition in a particularistic manner.’ (Honneth 2007: 125). This seems to be especially true in a prefigurative socio-cultural context where status differences are reduced and power relations are becoming more equal because of a transfer of social status and authority from the older generations to the younger. Empirical research indeed has convincingly demonstrated that an equal power-distribution reduces the risk of conflict and non-reciprocation (Molm et al. 2007; Hoa 2002). Moreover, generational conflicts, in the sense of clashing interests and communication breakdowns, are becoming less and less common, while intergenerational *inter vivos* transfers between family members seem to be on the rise (Kohli 1999). Both in terms of time and in terms of money the older generations contribute more to the younger generations in their families than they receive (Litwin et al. 2008). Moreover, there seems to exist a positive correlation between the public transfers older generations receive and the private interfamilial transfers they give (Reil-Held 2006). At first sight this detour system, seems to be inefficient. However, scholars proposing the urgent adoption of institutional reforms that could reverse the ‘excessive’ public transfers going from the younger to the older generations are probably underestimating the regulatory power of empathy. Because, empathic solidarity involves an understanding of the specific needs of significant others, the detour might prove to be more efficient.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that an integrative and dialectical theoretical framework is necessary to understand the survival of intergenerational solidarity in post-industrial societies in spite of apparent reciprocity imbalance at system level. Notably, Thijssen's (2012) conceptual synthesis of the solidarity theories of Durkheim and Honneth leads to a better understanding of the interrelation between the reciprocity of intergenerational exchange and cultural status. Moreover, the integrative theory also provides more thorough theoretical underpinnings for the multidimensional empirical indicators that currently dominate a field that is often defined as data rich but theory poor (Bengtson et al. 2002).

In the case of mechanical dialectic it is the marginal retiree that generates the compassionate solidarity necessary for a struggle of recognition that ultimately often leads to more capacious group identities and the survival of generous old age provisions. Moreover, antithetically it can be argued that the recognition of political status, by the capability of laboriously and even excessively contributing to the common good, might be an important impetus for the younger generations to overlook group boundaries and differences with the older generations, especially given the pervasiveness of the democratic ethos. In the case of the organic dialectic it is the empathy associated with repetitious encounters with particular members of older generations in a more equal power-distribution that ultimately leads to more flexible criteria of reciprocity. While instrumental considerations such as a financial quid pro quo today seem detrimental for intergenerational solidarity it is perhaps reduced by the fact that members of

different generations tend to share more feelings and interests. This is largely due to the dominance of prefigurative cultural patterns. Youth culture has become the norm, also for the older generations. Consequently, status differences decrease and this context is conducive to feelings of empathy and intergenerational solidarity.

In sum, the willingness to show intergenerational solidarity and to redistribute between generations seems to depend largely on the fact that younger and older generations recognize each other as cooperative members of a democratized and prefigurative civil society. Nevertheless, some argue that this form of recognition cannot and ought not balance out the gradually increasing asymmetrical intergenerational reciprocity at state level. Hence, Van Parijs e.g. proposes to alter our democratic institutions in order to reduce the weight of the older generations to protect the interests of the younger generations. However, well intended these measures might be, they may be counterproductive because they hamper intergenerational encounter by essentializing generational memberships and they endanger the democratic and prefigurative ethos which is the bearer of both compassionate and empathic bases of intergenerational solidarity. In this respect, indirect policies such as stimulating kangaroo housing, facilitating intergenerational consultative processes, reducing seniority-based remuneration systems and last but not least fighting youth employment might turn out to be more powerful measures because they stimulate intergenerational encounter and uphold the status of the younger generations as the vanguard of progress.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We realize that demographic constellations and welfare state architectures differ considerably. Nevertheless, we think it is possible to discern general mechanisms and challenges that are common to all welfare states.

<sup>2</sup> Socio-historical research of the welfare state has demonstrated quite clearly that since the industrialization of the late nineteenth century many old people suffered abject misery (De Swaan 1988: 180). Old age changed from a prospect of life to a risk of life and accordingly the reciprocity of public financial transfers in social security programs has always declined for the older generations (Komter 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The bounded rationality is generally explained by three factors. First, because historically population aging has been so sudden and unprecedented that there has not yet been enough time to take account of the transformation (Laslett 1995). Second, it is hard to determine precisely how large the *quid* and the *quo* are for a specific individual, let alone for a specific generation. As contributions and allowances are spread out strongly over time and may vary considerably as a result of small technocratic interventions on the part of different governments, the cost price of solidarity is still largely masked, even behind a ripped up veil of ignorance (Honneth 2012: 186). Third, most individuals are noticeably conservative when weighing costs against benefits, and are therefore averse to risks and especially losses (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky 1982). People attach larger value to losses in comparison with the status quo than to similar gains. The dismantlement of the present system of state-administered intergenerational solidarity would after all constitute a leap into the unknown.

<sup>4</sup> In this respect the Durkheim-Honneth perspective also offers a useful framework to integrate contemporary theories of reciprocity in social exchange (e.g. Molm,



Collet and Sheaffer 2007) and theories of family solidarity (e.g. Bengtson et al. 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, there are still considerable national differences (Silverstein et al. 2010) which shows that family structures are not unrelated to state structures (White 1994: 946).

<sup>6</sup> Mead probably overestimates the uniqueness of the 1960's because it can easily be argued that cofigurative tendencies are also present in many other 'revolutionary contexts' (Turner 1989: 302). Traces of co- and prefigurative culture were already present in the era of rapid industrialization of the late nineteenth century (Price 1997).

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