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Published on: 29 Oct 2013 - Social Science Research Network

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ON THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF GIFT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NON-IMPERIALIST ECONOMICS

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ON THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF GIFT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NON-IMPERIALIST ECONOMICS

Mario A. Cedrini¹ and Roberto Marchionatti²

Abstract

There is growing awareness of the need for interdisciplinary research on complex issues, but also of the obstacles that historical boundaries between social disciplines pose to such dialogue. It is increasingly recognized that the somewhat constitutive autonomy, the progressive autonomization, and finally the “imperialism” of economics have severely reduced the possibility of interdisciplinary discussion. This paper is to be considered as an introduction to a research programme on the foundations of a non-imperialist economics. It investigates gift exchange as a missed opportunity for economics. It aims at showing that, by refusing to tackle the complexity of the gift, economics has not only lost an opportunity to develop a method suitable for the analysis of complex problems, but has voluntarily chosen not to follow a path which would have prevented it from colonizing other disciplines. Reintroducing the concept of gift into the economic discourse may thus represent a required precondition to produce an innovating discourse on economics.

Keywords: economics imperialism, interdisciplinarity, gift, economic methodology, economic thought, complexity

JEL classes: A12, Z13, B1

October 2013

CESMEP Working Paper 3/2013
www.cesmep.unito.it

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1. Premise: The difficulties of economics, the unnecessary of economics imperialism and the need of a new theoretical framework

Economics is under severe pressure. The global crisis has only laid bare a marked degree of disunity among economists and growing difficulties the discipline encounters in interpreting real-world phenomena and behaviours of a complex nature. There is growing awareness of the need for interdisciplinary research on complex problems variously related to the globalization of production, markets and finance, but also of the obstacles that historical boundaries between social disciplines pose to such dialogue. It is increasingly recognized that the somewhat constitutive autonomy, the progressive autonomization, and finally the “imperialism” of economics (see Maki 2009, Fine and Milonakis 2009) have severely reduced the possibility of interdisciplinary discussion. Of course, economics imperialism has its supporters: Edward P. Lazear (2000) argues that the expanded scope of inquiry and sphere of influence of economics owes to its “rigorous language that allows complicated concepts to be written in relatively simple, abstract terms” (pp. 99-100), starting from the basic assumption of maximizing behaviour. While contiguous social disciplines identify issues, it is argued, economics provides “specific, well-reasoned answers” (p. 103). Although it may add to the “richness of description”, complexity “prevents the analyst from seeing what is essential” (p. 100): the comparative advantage of economics lies in forcing complexity within a “simple” scheme, which allows to remove (“strip away”) it from the analysis.

Although Lazear's imperialist stance is predominant among mainstream economists, a huge debate has developed around the issue since the heyday itself of economics imperialism, coinciding with Gary S. Becker's contributions on the “economic approach to human behaviour” (1976), nor has the topic lost topicality. Those same “paradigm shifts” (information-theoretic approaches, new institutional economics, and so on) which have damaged in recent decades the compactness of mainstream economics by a continuous process of correction and refinement have been described as keystones of the “new imperialism” of economics. The “social” (explained on the basis of methodological individualism) becomes a “rational response to informationally

imperfect market relations” (Fine 2000, p. 14). With such micro-foundations, “economics both takes the social seriously as something distinct from the economic, and provides a rationale for it” (ibid.). Economics imperialism has therefore not disappeared, but reformed itself, exactly by taking up the challenge of multidisciplinary. The recent influence of psychology on economics has been criticised, in fact, for the ultimately imperialist essence of the resulting selective appropriation and domestication of psychological concepts to advance economic explanations of non-economic phenomena (see Davis 2013). Development economics, to take another example, would testify the passage from the old imperialism of the Washington Consensus paradigm to the new, “information-theoretic” imperialism of the various Post Washington Consensus proposals (Fine 2002), and finally to the “social science imperialism under the leadership of economics” (Davis 2013, p. 119) of today's behavioural turn of the branch.

The inadequacy of economics to its “imperial” tasks in the times of a major global crisis has appeared with enough clarity to stimulate insistent calls for interdisciplinary and more suitable perspectives for treating complex social issues. Non-mainstream economists have therefore put forward a number of proposals to construct new theoretical frameworks pro-actively promoting trans-disciplinarity. Renewed debate on one of the founders of economics, Alfred Marshall, has demonstrated his epistemological and methodological legacy on the issue of complexity, and in particular his contribution to the project of integrating physics and biology simultaneously into economics (see Barkley Rosser 2010, Cassata and Marchionatti 2011). On a different level, Herbert Gintis' (2007) attempt to unify the structurally different models of human behaviour adopted in the various behavioural disciplines may represent a historical watershed. Gintis finds in “both mathematical models and common methodological principles for gathering empirical data on human behavior and human nature” (p. 15) the preconditions for constructing such framework, using an evolutionary perspective and game theory as the analytical tools for attaining this result. In Gintis' view, the contribution of each discipline to the understanding of human behaviour must be “suitably qualified and deepened by the contribution of the

others” (ibid.): economists should openly acknowledge the biological-evolutionary roots of the concept of preference consistency, and avoid considering preferences as purely self-regarding.

Recent laboratory and field research (see, respectively, Fehr and Gächter 2000, Henrich et al. 2005) have in effect demonstrated, Gintis argues, that sociological theory has *rightly* insisted on the relevance of cooperation and reciprocity, which economics has traditionally denied. The proposed new encompassing framework may however be subject to criticism: after all, economics imperialism itself is “a special case of the more general methodological norm of explanatory unification” (Maki 2009, p. 5) which proposals of this kind legitimately aspire to attain. For sure, these latter are a direct challenge to those forms of “economics expansionism ... where economics presents itself hegemonically as being in possession of superior theories and methods, thereby excluding rival theories and approaches from consideration” (ibid., p. 24). Yet the dynamics itself of the recent “internal revision” of economics suggests that the risk of various forms of “economics-plus-other social sciences” imperialism (economics being influenced by other social sciences but strongly defending its constitutive autonomy) may be nevertheless high. The use of game theory as “the universal lexicon of life” (Gintis 2007, p. 8), for instance, may impose the dominion of the strategic dimension of social life.

To sum up, the possibility to re-unify behavioural sciences necessarily passes through a substantial relaxation of the pugilistic habitus of economics in its relation with other social sciences. If economics imperialism has truly been the main obstacle to the required democratic exchange between social disciplines, then the solution must necessarily come from enhanced understanding of the historical origins of such imperialistic attitude and the removal of its deep roots. Without this, any attempt to foster new patterns of transdisciplinarity risks being an easy victim of the presumedly invincible comparative advantage of economics. After Robbins' (1932) famous definition of the discipline as the study of human behaviour as a relation between ends and scarce means that have alternative uses, in fact, the refusal to make assertive *a priori* hypotheses about human behaviour other than the requirement that they behave

consistently – as though they were maximizing something, this “something” to be named after empirical observations of human behaviour (see Binmore 2005) – exerted an almost irresistible appeal to social scientists.

This paper is to be considered as an introduction to a research programme on the foundations of a non-imperialist economics. It adopts a “history of ideas” approach, also as a challenge to mainstream economists' perception of how economists should think. Blaug's 2001 dictum “No history of ideas, please, we're economists” is a perfect illustration of the seductive power of economics as conceived by supporters of its imperialism. The discipline, they argue, must rest on deductive models; it must show consistency with standard principles and incorporate high doses of mathematics, to be econometrically tested and directly applied to the real world, regardless of varying times and institutional contexts. This research program wants conversely to trace back the origins of economic imperialism to the very birth of economics as a separate discipline with Adam Smith. The “back to the origins” approach required for removing the hard core of economics imperialism is of a twofold nature, for in returning to the dawn of the discipline, that is to Smith's concepts of invisible hand and human natural propensity to barter and exchange, the research directly addresses the problem of the *historicity* – rather than *naturality* – of market exchange. In so doing, we explore a territory of social science that evidently resist economic treatment in neoclassical terms, namely the interpretation of archaic societies and in particular, the related concept of gift (see Marchionatti 2012).

The relevance of the gift to the construction of a non-imperialist economics does not owe uniquely to its temporal primacy. The general topic of concern and respect for others, write Kolm and Ythier (2006, p. 5) in introducing the *Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity*, has become “the frontier of economics”, but it is in truth “its oldest concern and tradition”. The Handbook shows how far economics has progressed in this regard in the last third of the 20th century. Still, its aim is to show that studies on this issue have “proved that the general concepts and methods of economic analysis can be very helpful for the study of altruism, giving, and reciprocity, provided that the relevant motives, sentiments, and types of relations are adequately

considered" (ibid.). The historical trajectory of economics witnesses therefore a return of interest for the foundations of unselfish behaviour, but only a little portion of recent studies in this now huge literature show adequate awareness of the legacy of the "imperialist" essence of pioneering analyses in the 1960s. In general, and more importantly, in treating gift-giving by adopting a perspective of methodological individualism, economics has long been concerned with the second term only, "giving", seeing it as a (not so) special case of altruism, and taken the term "gift" as the thing which is given.

Most mainstream economics, in truth, has interpreted such practices on a par with market transactions, and submitted the concept of gift to the discipline of the *homo oeconomicus*. Conversely, the anthropological-sociological literature has considered gift-giving as the foundation of a radically different sociality from the one underlying the contested economicist paradigm of "rational fools" – as Sen (1977) famously defined the agents of rational choice theory. This paper argues that economics has refused to address the complexity of the gift, by tacitly establishing the universality of economics on the hypothesis that the primitive man is already a *homo oeconomicus*. The final aim of the research programme here outlined is to evaluate the possibility that, in so doing, economists have *de facto* chosen not to follow a path which, in negative, would have prevented them from colonizing other disciplines, and which, in positive, could have contributed to establish fruitful collaboration between social sciences in the effort to master social complexity. The reintroduction of the concepts of gift and gift exchange into the economic discourse can therefore encourage an innovating discourse on economics, finding in the rediscovery of the methodological approach to social complexity developed by Marshall and Keynes a most important premise for a possible anti-imperialist turn.

The *pars destruens* of the article corresponds to Sections 2 and 3. The former retraces the historical origins of economic imperialism, and critically discusses the mainstream economic approach to non-market and primitive societies. The latter examines the extremely limited contribution offered by economists on the concept of gift, and the discipline's failure to participate in the outstanding interdisciplinary debate organized

around this issue throughout the Twentieth century. Section 4 outlines the *pars construens*. We first suggest a methodological premise on the Marshall-Keynes approach to social complexity as the possible basis for a non-imperialist economics. We then highlight the central role played by the gift in organizing a most important transdisciplinary debate on the socio-political foundations of modern societies. Finally, we speculate on the legacy of both Marcel Mauss' pioneering study and the literature it has inspired for a rediscovery of the gift in today's economic discourse, and possibly a redefinition of economics on non-imperialist bases. Briefly revisiting Keynes's international economics and diplomacy in the light of the "political anthropology" of the gift, Section 5 throws light on the political essence of Keynes's late plans of global reform, thereby providing a concrete illustration of the still-to-be-explored potential offered by a rediscovery of the concept of gift in today's economic discourse. Section 6 summarizes the highlights and ultimate goals of the proposed research programme.

2. The historical origins of economics imperialism, or the construction of the stereotype of "primitive societies"

Primitive societies with which anthropologists are chiefly concerned are considered, in Western thought, to be the furthest from modern market societies, or "the others" *par excellence*. Economists' interpretation of such societies since Adam Smith offers a significant example of a case of "decreasing returns" of economic imperialism (see Marchionatti 2008 and 2012). A common model underlies virtually all accounts of savage societies offered by economic theory over time. The model finds the fundamental characteristic of primitive societies in economic backwardness: they would be subjected to an iron logic of necessary material dependence. Hence the necessary corollaries of limited needs and absence of predictable surplus. The former implies that the state of general poverty and insecurity is not eliminable: this forcedly imposes a strong ethics of redistribution and a condition of socio-economic equality. The latter, namely absence of surplus, impedes both economic development and the foundation of a state. Institutional conditions prevent the transformation of "saving" into "investment" and the development of market system in the rare cases where the

formation of surplus is possible. From all this follows that self-sufficiency is the only viable strategy. Market exchange is simply absent or very limited, due to restricted needs and lack of reasonably stable surplus.

A sort of postulate of the economic literature, this crucial assumption of primitive wretchedness – in whose absence the economic interpretation would not hold any longer – is contradicted by the available anthropological and ethnographic evidence. In the late Sixties, anthropologists provided convincing criticisms of the traditional concept of subsistence economy: research fields found evidence of only intermittent subsistence quest, of adequate dietary intake and available technology, of under-use of resources (Lee 1968, 1969; Sahlins 1972). New quantitative data have then confirmed that hunter-gatherers economies were characterized by abundance of leisure time and consequent limited work effort (see, for instance, Bird-David 1992, Cashdan 1989, Winterhalder 1993). The economic approach to primitive societies was therefore criticized for having failed to yield satisfactory interpretative results, but also, and more importantly, for impoverishing the understanding of archaic societies. Economics imperialism had in fact drawn a veil over a fundamental feature of primitive economies, which were certainly able to produce a surplus, but decided not to do so.

It would be incorrect to strictly associate this imperialism only with the application of neoclassical theory to the analysis of archaic societies (which became known as the “formalist” approach of post-war economic anthropology, see below in the text). Any research programme aspiring at founding a non-imperialist economics must necessarily propose a reflection on economic discourse as it has developed in the literature since its very origins with Adam Smith, allowing the identification of the deep, essential core of the discipline as distinct from its historical developments, with the ultimate aim of critically evaluating its intrinsic tendency to imperialism. Seeing itself as a general theory of human life in society, the explanatory capacity of economics rests on the presumed pregnancy of the concept of rational economic man. Starting with Smith himself, economic theory has therefore traditionally sought for “natural” characteristics of human beings – that is, belonging to their own nature –, unambiguous definitions upon which to establish the universality of economic

statements.

Smith's account, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1982b[1776], of the evolution from “savage nations” to their exact opposite, “civilized nations”, draws upon a basic stage theory and the (ab)use of a method which Dugald Stewart (1966[1793]) defined as “conjectural history”, whereby conjectures, or explanatory hypotheses replace facts which are unknown or too hard to handle theoretically. In his *Lectures* at Glasgow University of 1762-63, Smith (1982a) employed Montesquieu's notion of “mode of subsistence” to construct a model of historical growth in which it is population rise that induces division of labour and exchange (both absent in wretched, savage nations, which therefore tend to destroy the surplus they may occasionally create). Notwithstanding ample ethnographic evidence of community exchange systems based on principles that are definitely different from those of market exchange (allowing for the fact that gifts, not commodities, are made the object of exchange), Adam Smith's founding analysis of the economic science subjected the gift to the category of exchange between rational independent individuals. Hence the stereotypical “bartering savage” as the very early figure of economics, an ideological-conjectural construction resting on a notion of exchange of philosophical origins, which is centred around the category of nature.

Notwithstanding the seminal attempt to establish a dialogue with anthropology first in the *Grundrisse* (1972, written in 1857-58) and later in his *Ethnological Notebooks* of 1880-82 (Marx 1972), Marx himself fell victim of this kind of “continuist view” of the transition from primitive to market societies. He in fact wavered between an economist interpretation of archaic societies (wherein they become the first stage of the “realm of necessity” and of the evolution of property) and their characterization as pre-historical (which owes to the direct, non-mediated relationship they maintain with “nature”). It was Lionel Robbins (1932), however, to lay the foundations of economic imperialism. By postulating the universality of scarcity and the consequent universal obligation, for men, to make correct – that is, rational – choices about the use of certain scarce means to attain alternative ends, Robbins's (as well as Frank Knight's and Ludwig Mises's) analysis was the fundamental source of inspiration for “formalist” anthropologists such as Raymond Firth (1939) and Melville J. Herskovits (1940). Conceiving the

“social” as rational response to market imperfections (Fine’s 2002 criticism of the new imperialism of the information-theoretic approach in economics finds here a relevant antecedent), formalists succeeded in eradicating the most threatening source of resistance to the imperialism of economics. By assuming scarcity to be an essential feature of primitive life, and wants to be arrangeable according to a scale of preferences, they admitted that choices are socially conditioned, but claimed nevertheless, positing the existence of a Robbinsian universal concept of economic rationality, that individuals did make choices broadly related to welfare and the provision of material goods. Some decades later, Richard Posner (1980) demonstrated that this concept of rationality could be profitably extended to primitive life as a whole, and be used to illustrate the rationale of the strong redistributive ethics that characterizes archaic societies. Far from a concession to anti-utilitarian moral principles, this ethics would be the rational response to the problems raised by uncertainty and high information costs. Norms of generosity and reciprocity would therefore be a protection against free-riding and moral hazard, while gifts, the main pillars of this system of insurance, would also accomplish a relevant communicative task, acting as vehicles of credible information about donors’ wealth, tastes and attitudes.

The concept of gift provides an ideal testing ground for the proposed research programme on a non-imperialist economics. Immediately banished, in Smith’s analysis, from the imaginary and system of representation of economics, and confined within the reserved domain of anthropology, the gift was later denied, by formalist anthropologists, any constitutive difference with respect to market exchange. Prior to Posner’s effort to elaborate a general theory of primitive societies (building upon concepts, such as uncertainty and information costs, that Posner had discussed in conversations with Gary Becker), which however treats gift-giving as “insurance payments”, the concept of gift had conversely enjoyed great popularity in substantivist approaches to economic systems. But the mainstream of the discipline never attempted at traversing the seemingly impermeable boundary which protect it from the challenges posed by the gift.

3. The debate on the gift, a “lost moment of history” for economics

It was only in the last decades of the nineteenth century that primitive and archaic economies became a topic of interest for the scientific community. Prior to the anthropological work of Franz Boas (1897), and later Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), as this latter observed, the “economic nature of man” was “as a rule illustrated on imaginary savages for didactic purposes only, and the conclusions of the authors [were] in reality based on their study of the facts of developed economics” (Malinowski 1922, p. 62). Such “rough conceptions” of the economic nature of primitives were of no use; on the contrary, “the study of extremely primitive economic institutions would no doubt prove very refreshing and fertilising to [economic] theory” (Malinowski 1921, p. 12). Boas and Malinowski brought interest to two outstanding examples of the complexity of the social life of primitive societies. Boas introduced his readers to the somewhat pugilistic gift-giving festival, or *potlatch*, of the American Indians of the Northwest coast, while Malinowski provided an accurate description of the *kula*, the inter-tribal gift exchange system developed by the Trobriand Islanders in Melanesia.

An “armchair anthropologist”, Marcel Mauss, was later to write a fundamental essay, *The Gift* (1923-24), systematising the whole collection of previous studies of exchange in primitive and pre-capitalistic societies. Drawing inspiration from Boas and Malinowski, Mauss identified the distinctive feature of this system in gift exchange, and claimed to have found “one of the human foundations on which our societies are built” (Mauss 1990[1923-24], p. 4). He argued that in pre-industrial societies, all aspects of individual and social life were involved in “gift exchange”, which part of a complex social cycle (a complex of “‘total’ social phenomena” wherein “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time”, p. 3) structured around the three interlocking obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Mauss described such gifts as “apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested”, and the rule that governs these dynamics as one “of legality and self-interest” (ibid.). In the course of the essay, however, trying to decode the essence of

gift-giving by retracing similarities between apparently radically different social practices, Mauss gradually accentuated the dimension of freedom and reduced the burden of obligation (see Godbout 2004), as perfectly grasped by Sahlins's (1972, p. 170) motto: the gift is "no sacrifice of equality and never of liberty".

This latent tension between freedom and obligation is one of the key access point to the pioneering research programme initiated by Malinowski and Mauss on the socio-political foundations of human aggregates. At its core was the intention to reintroduce historicity in the analysis of the economy of archaic societies, from which the "bartering savage" stage-illusion of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had removed it. The *Homo oeconomicus*, Mauss argued, was "not behind us, but lies ahead ... For a very long time man was something different; and he has not been a machine for very long, made complicated by a calculating machine" (Mauss 1990[1923-24], p. 76). It was Karl Polanyi (1944), in particular, to carry on the program. Polanyi demonstrated that modern economic system were the result of the relatively recent autonomization of the economy from society and culture, in which it had been embedded for most part of history. He therefore proposed, with other scholars, what became known as the "substantivist approach" in economic anthropology, considering the economy as "instituted process", that is embedded in a societal context, and presented a threefold typology of forms of exchange (redistribution – reciprocity – market exchange), assigning critical importance to gift-giving.

Despite the undisputed relevance of Malinowsky's and Mauss's work to economic anthropology, and the "formalists-substantivists debate" which developed in the Sixties, the discipline of economics has *de facto* failed to participate in the huge discussion jointly organized by other social scientists in the Twentieth century around the concept of gift. This owes to the strongly inward-looking evolution of mainstream economics after World War II. The peculiar development of the economics of altruism is revealing in this regard. Unselfishness has an enduring tradition in economics, dating back to the classics. It was nevertheless incorporated into mainstream analysis only in the Seventies – Boulding (1973), Becker (1974) and Phelps (1975) shaped the field – owing to the need to explain failures of the invisible hand in the decade, the

increasing importance of altruistic practices, such as philanthropy, and the dynamics of the welfare state (Fontaine 2007).

The dominant use of “interdependent utility functions” and the special attention posed on situations of “selfish altruism” are evidences of the difficulty faced by economists when trying to enlarge the narrow domain of economics with respect to the complexity of individual and social motivations. Economists do not question that the concepts and method of economics can be fruitfully employed for the analysis of altruism and gift-giving, although a broader spectrum of motivations for action needs to be brought into the analysis. Still, it has been argued (Fontaine 2012) that in general, mainstream economics has begun to emphasize the heterogeneity of motivations of the *homo oeconomicus* when confronted with the challenge of socio-biology in particular. To put it differently, the economics turned to unselfish behaviour with the aim of addressing non-economic phenomena and demonstrating the primacy of economics over other social sciences. Among the few exceptions to this general rule is a strand in the literature that borrowed the concept of gift from anthropology and sociology to explain how cooperation and reciprocity can emerge between self-interested individuals, such as Akerlof's (1982, 1984) and Camerer's (1988) contributions. In response to the criticisms of behavioural economics, recent field experiments (Gneezy and List 2006) have provided support to Akerlof's “fair wage-effort” hypothesis. Still, on a more general level, the use of the gift to substantiate wage-efficiency theories and commitment in labour relations raises various problems (Zenou et al. 1992), having a somewhat paradigmatic nature for understanding the difficulties economics faces in debating with other disciplines. The most relevant for our purposes are the instrumental conception of rationality embedded in these relationships, which are in truth shaped by utility and profit maximization, and the neglect of the complex dynamics of freedom and obligation which characterizes such relations.

Such examples shed light not only on the manifest impossibility of an interdisciplinary neoclassical theory (Mirowski 2001), but also on the narrowness of mainstream economists' interest for the breadth and complexity of the challenges posed by the notion of gift to our understanding of human life in society. The “Titmuss affaire” of

the Seventies is quite revealing in this regard (see Archard 2002). Having argued in favour of blood donation on the bases of technical criteria and reasons of efficiency, Titmuss (1970) referred to the restricted “freedom to choose to give or not to give” (p. 245) which he believed to result from the use of a market-approach to blood collection and supply. The British social researcher went so far as to claim that the commercialization of donor relationships “represses the expression of altruism, erodes the sense of community” (ibid.). Arrow's review of Titmuss' book was a perfect example of “futility thesis”, as Mirowski (2001) calls it, simply asserting that gifts are impossible: Arrow (1972, p. 352) could not tolerate the idea that markets restrict (rather than enhance) freedom, and wanted “ethical behavior to be confined to those circumstances where the price system breaks down” (p. 355). It was the philosopher Peter Singer, in a review of 1973, to point out that the future Nobel prize winner had in truth eluded a relevant issue. Arrow had failed to consider, Singer wrote, the support voluntary systems offer to attitudes of altruism and the desire to help strangers in a community. More in general, he had eluded the real question at stake: “What sort of society do we want?”.

4. Laying down the theoretical foundations of a non-imperialist economics

4.1 On complexity and economics: a methodological premise

The advent of the new microeconomics of limited rationality and imperfect information directed new attention to the problem of the realism of economic hypotheses. The subsequent integration of psychology and economics into a new research programme on the behavioural aspects of economic phenomena called into question the capability of economic theory to investigate behaviours that neither comply with the *homo oeconomicus* model nor are reducible to the abused category of non-rational behaviours. In economics, (awareness of) new problems have usually required the establishment of new research fields, as shown by the emergence of an economics of altruism, among others. Yet it would be a conceptual error both to believe that the economics of unselfish behaviour has faced the challenge posed by the complexity of the gift, and that it ever could.

Altruism is in fact a more tractable and less troublesome concept for economics: its assumptions about human nature are simply too strong to resist the reductionism of interdependent utility functions, wherewith altruism is reconciled with the standard egoism of neoclassical economics. To the contrary, if economics has voluntarily left aside the gift, it is because the revolutionary essence of Mauss' work lies in "posing as morally desirable just what the whole of known societies seems to consider exactly as such: an invariant core which is common to all ethics. What men must do is no longer intrinsically different from what they in fact do" (Caillé 1998, p. 30, our translation). Both the power of the gift, which helps to explain the enormous interest it has excited in the other social disciplines, and its weakness, which causes it to be an easy victim of the reductionism of economics, owe to the same fundamental factor: the gift does not make any unnecessarily demanding assumption about human nature.

To grasp this point, however, economics should denounce the limits of what economists perceive as a key advantage of the discipline, justifying its imperialism. The apparent intractability of the gift sheds light on the difficulties economists face in giving adequate explanation of social complexity, which derive from the widely accepted mainstream view of complexity as an obstacle to "seeing what is essential" (Lazear 2000, p. 100). Two main strands have been quarrelling in economics as concern the adequate methodology for treating complex objects. First, the orthodox tradition established by John Stuart Mill and Carl Menger, resulting in the adoption of methodological individualism; second, the approach developed in modern economics by, in particular, Alfred Marshall and John Maynard Keynes, expressly addressing the problem of how to make science with a complex world. In *System of Logic*, Mill (1843) assigns due importance to social relations, and even argues that complexity is a key issue in social sciences, but ultimately uses the term to denote a context characterized by large number of interacting variables and multiplicity of behavioural motivations. He in fact believed that the laws of complex social wholes can be deduced from those ruling individual behaviour. Mill's proposal of a concrete-deductive method of analysis instead of the inductive methods of hard sciences, which would clash against the lack of adequate tools available to economists and the impossibility to conduct

controlled experiments, was meant to overcome the limitations affecting human computational powers. Walras's and Robbins's conceptions of economics draw on Mill's famous expedient, the *homo oeconomicus*, and on his argument in favour of deduction. Still, as Pareto (2007[1892-93]: 4; on Pareto and Mill, see Marchionatti and Gambino 1997) noted with respect to Walras (in whose thought, he believed, "reasoning dominates experience"), they both strongly limited the role played by the word "concrete" in Mill's definition of the method of political economy (wherein, according to Pareto's experimental approach, theoretical deduction rests on initial induction from observed phenomena and is then subject to the test of real facts).

Marshall and Keynes took a radically different stance, although it has been necessary to wait for the last part of the Twentieth century to see the potential of their legacy fully acknowledged (see Marchionatti 2002, 2004, 2010). It is now increasingly recognized that Marshall's and Keynes's work share much, both on the methodological and analytical level, with modern complexity science. Marshall's perspective suggests that today's mainstream approach is necessarily unable to grasp the complexity of the real world, essentially because it traces precise borders exactly there where (that is, in the real world) borders are uncertain, concepts are ill-defined and cannot be captured in one-dimensional definitions. In Marshall's *Principles*, economics is a science of human and social complexity: it cannot only consist of "abstract reasoning", which, in itself, is inadequate "to disentangle the interwoven effects of complex causes" (as Marshall wrote in a letter to Edgeworth of 18 August 1902, in Whitaker 1996, II, p. 393). Intellectual faculties, such as perception and imagination, on one side, and historical knowledge, required to investigate specific cases, on the other, must rather supplement abstract reasoning. Most of all, the economist needs "imagination, to put him on the track of those causes of visible events which are remote or lie below the surface, and of those effects of visible causes" (Marshall 1920, p. 43). Marshall felt that dealing with economic complexity implies the use of various languages. He expressed a reasonable preference for a discursive, sophisticatedly informal and context-based style of exposition, and, as a highly trained mathematician, he believed mathematics to be just one among many of such languages.

Keynes's conception of economics as a non-positivist "moral" science, dealing with introspection and ethical values, was rooted in Marshall's profound sense of the complexity of the economic subject. Pioneering works in the Eighties and contributions that followed (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2013, and the literature there cited) have brought attention to the continuity between the early epistemological concern of Keynes's work on probability (*A Treatise on Probability*, 1921[1973b]) and his reflections on the method, theory and practice of economics in the *General Theory* (1936[1973a]). This effort fostered an original interpretation of Keynes as thinker of complexity. Keynes progressively developed a conception of economic theory as primarily "a method" rather than "a doctrine". Economics would be a "technique of thinking" (Keynes 1983, p. 856) helping its possessor to cope with a complex economic material made of "motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties" (1973c, p. 300) and, in general, with a social world which is not simply explicable in terms of the individual behaviour of its presumed separable parts. The "atomic hypothesis" – underlying much of neoclassical economics as well as the "blind" manipulation of unqualified, "pseudo-mathematical methods" (1973a, p. 297) – "breaks down in psychics. We are faced at every turn with the problems of organic unity, of discreteness, of discontinuity – the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts, comparisons of quantity fail us, small changes produce large effects, the assumptions of a uniform and homogeneous continuum are not satisfied" (1972, p. 262).

Keynes's reflections, along Marshallian lines, on economic reasoning, and the conditions to capture the complexity of economic process beyond the limits of simplistic theorizing, offer theoretical support for the construction of a transdisciplinary perspective on human behaviour, and insights that modern complexity economics can legitimately and profitably put to use in attempting to achieve significant developments in this regard. These authors were in fact concerned with the problem of building a theoretical framework able to resist the comfort of methodological individualism. It is this peculiar perspective, perceiving and emphasizing the complex nature of the socio-historical world, that allows revisiting and reformulating the issue of interdisciplinarity, and possibly laying down the bases

of a non-imperialistic economics.

4.2. The gift across social sciences

Debate on the gift across social disciplines has revealed its utmost importance to the general dispute between rationalistic-individualistic and normativistic approaches to the socio-political foundations of modern societies (Adloff and Mau 2006). The former include rational choice theory and neoclassical economics. Self-interest (utility maximization) as the mover of relations of social exchange is the economic counterpart to Peter Blau's (1964) sociological theory of social exchange, stating that human beings are characterized by a natural tendency to take interest in others, and practically recur to sociality in order to reach otherwise unattainable individual goals. Still, game theory and experimental economics have provided a methodology, as well as virtual laboratories to test the core assumptions underlying the *homo oeconomicus* and the resulting vision of social exchange. Moreover, social learning has been made the object of a study of the triggering mechanisms of reciprocity. Robert Axelrod's 1984 work is now a classic study on cooperative behaviour, while contributions related to the "economics of reciprocity" (see Fehr and Gächter 2000) have documented that reciprocal behaviour is simply too important to leave the pure self-interest model a free hand in explaining decision-making. Some path-breaking contributions of behavioural economics have empirically contested the selfishness axiom and found self-interest inadequate as a foundation for social sciences.

Notwithstanding these critical developments in economics, the discussion of the complex gift/reciprocity has mainly occurred outside the utilitarian strand. It was the sociologist Emile Durkheim to launch an interdisciplinary debate, crossing the boundaries between sociology and anthropology, on the bases of social integration in modern human aggregates. This literature has essentially debated around the so-called paradox of the free gift, and substantially confirmed, despite differences of approach, Mary Douglas' (1990) "political" view of Mauss's essay. In this perspective, *The Gift* is celebrated as a successful attempt to escape both the reductionism of methodological individualism and the ideology of the free gift, namely "the gift given with no strings

attached" (Gouldner 1973, p. 277), or the gift which, doing nothing to enhance solidarity, is in itself a "contradiction" (Douglas 1990, p. vii). A gift which conversely attracted the attention of theologians, philosophers, like Derrida, and sociologists like Bourdieu (1998). Derrida (1994, p. 7) saw the gift as "the very figure of the impossible": the unconstrained, purely altruistic gift was in his view, in the end, a by-product of what the gift should *not* be about, that is economicist calculus, self-interest and instrumental rationality (see Osteen 2002). Through a paradoxical reading of the paradox of the free gift, Derrida somehow threw light on the impossibility to force the gift within the artificial boundaries of a single discipline, thereby highlighting the potential fertility of the concept for a would-be truly transdisciplinary theory of human behaviour.

In his study on the norm of reciprocity as social regulative rule, Gouldner had observed that the norm of reciprocity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure social cohesion. "Mechanisms which induce people to remain socially indebted to each other and which inhibit their complete repayment" (1960, p. 73) are equally required in order to foster and preserve social stability: a principle of "something for nothing" provides the starting mechanism "for stopping vicious cycles of social interaction" and "helping to initiate social interaction" (Gouldner 1973, p. 274). Gouldner's early work on reciprocity had a certain influence on Marshall Sahlins, who was to initiate a reflection of political anthropology having in Mauss's *The Gift* one of its main inspirations. In *Stone Age Economics*, Sahlins (1972, p. 169) pointed out that the gift in primitive societies is the equivalent of social contract (ultimately guaranteed by the state) in civil society: "the transfer of things that are in some degree persons and of persons in some degree treated as things, such is the consent at the base of organised society". The gift is therefore "alliance, solidarity, communion – in brief, peace, the great virtue that earlier philosophers, Hobbes notably, had discovered in the State" (ibid.).

Remarkably, Sahlins considers reciprocity as a "between" relation: "it does not dissolve the separate parties within a higher unity, but on the contrary, in correlating their opposition, perpetuates it" (p. 170), without creating a third party standing over and

above the separate interests of the contracting parties. Gift exchange is thus not a sacrifice of liberty, but rather a relationship between free and equal individuals. Archaic societies define themselves through gift exchange and a refusal of the state – not societies without state, but societies “against” the state (Clastres 1977), which is also the reason why all exchanges “must bear in their material design some political burden of reconciliation” (Sahlins 1972, p. 182). The basic principle of “an economics properly anthropological” is thus that every exchange, “as it embodies some coefficient of sociability, cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms” (p. 183).

By adopting a fully Maussian perspective (but taking inspiration also from Lévi-Strauss' 1980[1950] reading of the *The Gift*), Mary Douglas (1990, p. xiv) associates society with its cycling gift system, this latter being “a theoretical counterpart to the [Smithian] invisible hand”. The peculiarity of primitive economic organization and also the precise space of the economy in primitive societies only become intelligible if and when it is recognized that the archaic social contract guarantees political freedom (and independence) of the society as well as of its members, raising equality to the status of a common good to be absolutely preserved. If independence is to be real, it requires productive self-sufficiency (with limited needs) and reciprocity, which are the basic characteristics of the domestic mode of production analysed by Sahlins in his work (see Marchionatti 2008, 2012).

This overall tradition of studies situating themselves at the boundaries between anthropology and sociology seems capable of incorporating Mauss' theoretical legacy in a broader perspective. Once recognized that modernity itself, in reason of the artificial separation it establishes with what precedes it, lies at the basis of the paradox of the free gift, Mauss can now be shown to have provided that theory of social indebtedness which modern theories of reciprocity require to explain social cohesion. Mauss “discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange” (Douglas 1990, p. xiv). Among the most surprising aspects of *The Gift* are not only the final remarks on the persistence of gift-giving practices in modern societies, and the explicit connection between the

reasons of gift exchange in primitive societies and those supporting the modern welfare state. To strike the imagination is mainly Mauss's insistence on the complex nature of the mix of obligation and freedom, social norms and individual interests, which characterize gifts exchange. Maussian interpretations of gifts as means to promote alliance (in the Lévi-Strauss-Sahlins-Clastres tradition) and foster social ties ultimately rest on this *ante litteram* solution given by Mauss to the much-debated paradox of the free gift.

The debate in social disciplines on the gift provisionally ends with reaffirming the radical novelty of Mauss's approach to social cohesion. Authors gathered around the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (M.A.U.S.S., see Godbout 1998) propose to consider the gift as key to the construction of a “third paradigm” (Caillé 1998) opposing both the individualism of utilitarian conceptions and modern holistic views of Durkheimian flavour. The M.A.U.S.S. concentrates on the complexity of a social environment characterized by uncertainty and want of freedom, and emphasizes the fundamental role played by “unconditional” gifts (that is, voluntarily offered, without guarantee of return), in an interactionist (political) perspective, in creating and sustaining social bonds and alliances between partners previously regarding each other as potential enemies. Denouncing the excessively strong assumptions about human nature made by economics (economics of unselfishness included), as well as the traditional duality between poles and motives for action, the M.A.U.S.S. draws the following epistemological lesson from the Maussian view of the gift. Behavioural disciplines must not be considered as separate or even alien one to each other, but rather as moments of a general social science investigating both the part humans devote to utilitarian practices and the one they devote to non utilitarian activities (see Caillé 1998).

4.3. Back to the future with Mauss. The gift as the basis of a new economic discourse

There is probably no better way to introduce a discourse on the criticality of Mauss's analysis of the gift for re-discussing the theoretical and epistemological core of economic theory than to recall one of the main achievements of the *Essai sur le don*.

"*Homo oeconomicus* is not behind us, but lies ahead, as does the man of morality and duty, the man of science and reason. For a very long time man was something different; and he has not been a machine for very long, made complicated by a calculating machine" (Mauss 1990[1923-24], p. 76). If Mauss's work has truly succeeded in confuting the naturality of the *homo oeconomicus*, as the surprisingly enduring legacy of *The Gift* in the literature seems to confirm, then any reflection on the nature and method of economics should necessarily address the issues Mauss identified as problematic in his account of the evolution of human societies. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is the beginning of two stories, rather than one only: that of economics, but also that of economics imperialism. By actively encouraging the "bartering savage" paradigm, Smith ended up with expelling himself from a pioneering research program (launched by ethnographic sources which were available to him) on the historical origins of modern societies, in which he had initially inscribed his own work. Shedding light on the historicity of market exchange, on the contrary, Mauss helps us recognise the political aim of Smith's theoretical construction: the a-historical path towards emancipation from the serfdom of necessity ends with reaching exactly the societal context that allows man to fully express his "bartering" essence, that is a market society.

He himself a promoter of a (radically different) political project (see Hart 2007), Mauss re-introduces historicity exactly there where Smith had removed it, with the result of dissolving the notion of history in that of nature, from the analysis of primitive societies. "Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear ... Only then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms. Thus the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another. This is what tomorrow, in our so-called civilized world, classes and nations and individuals also, must learn. This is one of the enduring secrets of their wisdom and solidarity" (Mauss 1990[1923-24], pp.

82-83).

Mauss intercepts the *homo oeconomicus* not at the beginning but at the (provisional) end of it. In the beginning, he finds human beings engaged in the attempt to escape the state of nature. He finds not a natural propensity to truck, barter and exchange elaborated on the model of modern, free-market societies, but a social contract. This contract rests on a general rule of reciprocity and practically depends on a non-contractual element (Hart 2007), committing “the whole person within a complex institutional system that defines the rules of life in society” (Rist 2010, p. 56). By applying a sort of “substantial” rationality (Marchionatti 2010) – which includes rationality *à la* Robbins but transfers it into a context of perceived abundance with socially limited material needs –, primitives achieve two significant goals. They in fact succeed in defending their tribes’ independence against the potentially disastrous consequences of the Hobbesian war, but also against the harmful effects of the traditional pattern of resolution of such conflict. For the establishment of a hierarchical power such as the state is destined to break with a tradition of equality (hence the prohibition of hoarding and the marginalization of market exchange) which corresponds in truth to a social preference. What Mauss finds, in the end, is the *visible hand* of gift exchanges, that is the sociopolitical foundation of societies, on which their economic dimension (and its rationality) depends.

The dark side of economic exchange, gift exchange is truly a missed opportunity for economics. Owing to the (ab)use Smith made of the conjectural method in studying the evolution towards free market societies, economics lost sight of the non-contractual element of the social contract, and erroneously came to perceive self-regulation as a natural quality of market exchange. Mauss's apparently *retro* notion of “total social fact” draws attention to the complexity of the gift, to its being a complex mix of freedom and obligation, the cycling gift system providing both a political-symbolical and a practical representation of society. Mauss’s gift might be a chance for economics to become the non-imperialistic science of social complexity that the other disciplines require as an active partner in the construction of a unified theoretical framework for the analysis of individual behaviour in society.

5. An illustration of the fertility of the concept of gift: the political essence of Keynes's plans of global reform

Among the few economic sub-disciplines that have shown interest for the concept of gift are, quite obviously, international economics and above all the economics of international aid (see Kanbur 2006). Although the anthropology and sociology of gift-giving could offer a valuable contribution to the analysis of so-called “donor failings” (see Birdsall 2004), the economics of international aid has rarely overcome the boundaries of a purely economic discourse on the effectiveness of mechanisms of transfer from rich to poor and developing countries. A quite relevant exception to this rule is represented by a transdisciplinary, though limited discussion of the European Recovery Programme (ERP) plan implemented by the United States for the reconstruction of Europe in the years 1948-52. French economist François Perroux (1954) investigated the economic necessity of the ERP “pseudo-gift”, intended to ensure a more balanced and wealthier global economy to the benefit of all parties (donor, recipient, third actors) involved. Walter Dillon’s (1968) Maussian study of the concrete dynamics of the gift relationships established by the plan was even more explicitly inspired by a systemic conception of the gift. Practical failures to achieve some of the scheme's aims, it was argued, were the result of neglecting the systemic character of the gift (Bateson 2004), which abhors strictly unilateral dynamics and rather requires, for the establishment of a social fabric of reciprocity and interdependence, that each recipient in the system be able not only to receive but also to reciprocate. In other words, each participant, receivers included, should be a potential donor (see also Godbout 1998) – but this requires that donors be both aware of the recipient's desire to reciprocate and willing to receive a counter-gift on the part of the donee.

Yet interdisciplinary attempts of this kind clash with economists' preference for the mainstream realist approach of power-politics to international economic relations (see Bateson 2004). As known, the current troubled times of crisis have brought unprecedented attention to John Maynard Keynes’s global reform plans of the Forties.

Still, the aforementioned bias plays a strong role in distracting attention from the repeated use John Maynard Keynes made of the concept of gift in his work of international economics and diplomacy. At the end of both World Wars, in fact, Keynes suggested the need to resort to a gift dynamic to favor international adjustment to a more balanced economic world.

It is in particular his somewhat heretical 1945 proposal of an American gift (which then became, to Keynes's disappointment, a loan of a "business as usual" character) to a highly indebted Britain to strike the imagination. The literature has mainly regarded this surprising episode of Keynes's diplomacy as a desperate attempt to save Britain from financial decline, all the more so in the transition to a new international order which would have relegated Britain to the status of second-order power (see e.g. Skidelsky 2000). But the suggestion to reconsider and redistribute the costs of war, in 1945, in such a way as to strongly limit the evils their burden could produce for the transition to the new order, is not an *unicum* in Keynes's work of international diplomacy. Rather, the proposal provides direct continuity with the recommendations he had made at the end of WWI to cancel Inter-Allied debts as a preliminary and indispensable requirement for a more viable solution to the problem of German reparations. The literature has mainly focused on Keynes's presumed political *naïveté* and identified an abuse of moral arguments in his WWI diplomacy. A methodological reading of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* as an essay in the complexity of international economic relations (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010a), to the contrary, provides reasons to believe that the concept of gift plays a fundamental role in Keynes's vision.

Keynes considered the impasse of German reparations as a situation of general conflict within a continental economy characterized by organic interdependence, a fallacy of composition between particular and general interests which reflected, and was nurtured by, the uncertain economic prospects of European countries. The conflict was nurtured by Inter-Allied debts: it was mainly because of their burden that European policymakers could not recede from asking for impossible reparations to Germany, thereby inviting their own destruction as well. The Cambridge economist believed that

the only possibility to overcome the continent's debt impasse lay in a starting gift in the form of generous Inter-Allied debt cancellation on the part of the two only creditor countries (the United States and Britain). This would have induced European countries, in their turn, to moderate their requests upon Germany to the advantage of the whole continent and its future trade partners. The gift, in Keynes's vision, was the triggering mechanism of a spiral of "generosity" progressively enlarging the spectrum of countries disposed to take part in the adjustment to a more equilibrated world.

Twenty-six years later, at the end of WWII, Keynes recovered this line of reasoning when suggesting that only creditors' generosity could provide a chance of restoring a multilateral world of free trade after the economic disasters and international animosity of both the war and the interwar period. In discussing the proposal of an American gift to an exhausted Britain (overburdened with the costs of the Allies' war, and highly indebted vis-à-vis the sterling area and the US) in a correspondence with the Treasury Official in Washington Robert H. Brand in Spring 1945, Keynes referred to the "psychological atmosphere of the free gift" (Keynes 1979, p. 340). He described this latter as the decisive factor to induce sterling countries, which were the main creditors of Britain and the only nations who could revive multilateral trade in the postwar period by stimulating American exports, to participate in the adjustment to the Bretton Woods world (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010a, 2010b).

Keynes had an "extraordinarily clear understanding of how **pieces of global economy** interact, driven by the policies of autonomous nations, in an only partly coherent manner" (Vines 2003, p. 339). He had acute awareness of the problem of freedom in a complex international society, to say it *à la* Polanyi, wherein economic interdependence seems to require a strong degree of discipline and a general tendency towards uniformity of policy. Keynes avoided assimilating nations to the utility-maximizers actors of rational choice theory (*ibid.*), and rather saw them as social actors who can and should cooperate internationally in the name of mutual respect for each other's freedom, if the opportunities of global interdependence must exceed its threats. Now, Mallard (2011) and Carabelli and Cedrini (2010a) have recently stressed the affinity between Keynes's and Mauss's reasoning about German reparations and the European

economic conflict at the end of WWI – it is to be noted that Mauss, who considered the international environment as “le milieu des milieux” (Ramel 2004, p. 231) was then drafting *The Gift*. This comparison offers therefore a fundamental starting point for a highly promising research on Keynes’s attempt to promote a desired social dimension in international relations.

An interdisciplinary study of the non-purely economic aspects of Keynes's desired new world order shows that the “American gift” proposal rests on the complex play of freedom and obligation which characterizes Maussian gift dynamics. This tension allows gifts to perform a role in creating socio-political alliances intended to defend individual autonomy, as stressed by the research tradition stemming from the work of Mauss. Moreover, Keynes's gift proposal helps to grasp the revolutionary principles (which the proposal fully embodies) which inspires his lifelong effort to endow the world with public-spirited institutions promoting “shared responsibilities” approaches to global equilibrium. The culminating stage of this work, the International Clearing Union scheme designed for the Bretton Woods world, sheds light on the overall political essence of Keynes’s desired reform. Designed to avoid the insurgence of excessive debt and credit positions, Keynes’s rules for symmetric adjustment limited creditor countries’ license to adopt rentier-like attitudes, but granted them the possibility to reap the fruits of the proposed recycling of surpluses. Yet this criterion of economic efficiency was indissolubly associated with a full political vision centered on the need to defend debtors’ policy space from the presumed inevitability of austerity solutions, and more in general their right to heterogeneity and diversity in devising road-maps toward growth and development (see Kirshner 2009, Newton 2006). Expressly building on the peculiar social dimension of the gift as against the purely instrumental rationality of a market loan, the American gift proposal is a telltale sign of this general, political vision of the international economic order (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2010b).

The Maussian character of Keynes’s new order – wherein, as Sahlin (1972, p. 162) observed in relation to gift exchange in archaic societies, “the freedom to gain at others’ expense is not envisioned by the relations and form of exchange” – may profitably

become the focus of a strongly interdisciplinary research on the international economic order. In particular, this research should aim at establishing the political foundations of a possible alternative to the current “non-system” which favored the most severe global crisis since the Great Depression in a context of unprecedented global and European imbalances. The emphasis Keynes posed on policy space and his vision of the global order as a happy mix of international discipline and national freedom may in fact offer the foundations for constructing the “new Bretton Woods compromise” which Rodrik (2011), among others, posit as the only viable solution for today’s world. And the interdisciplinary character of Keynes’s approach to the complexity of international economic relations, coupled with the use he made of ethical arguments when defending the right to policy heterogeneity, supplies a powerful alternative of thought to the currently prevailing moralistic vision (see De Grauwe 2011) of intra-European imbalances.

6. Concluding remarks

With the expressed ambition of laying down the theoretical foundations of a non-imperialist economics, this paper has tried to outline the theoretical bases for overcoming the boundaries separating economics from contiguous disciplines. Economics imperialism considers complexity – that is the main motive why interdisciplinarity is required – not as the fundamental issue at stake when dealing with social contexts, but as an unnecessary complication that economists luckily manage to get rid of in progressing toward better understanding of human behaviour. The proposed research program brings social complexity to the fore. In particular, it is argued that the interpretation of the gift proposed by the anthropological-sociological literature, directly addressing the problem of the historicity, rather than naturality, of market exchange, might be of the utmost importance to our understanding of how to develop a less aggressive economics. In this approach, the gift appears as both a triggering mechanism for the creation of social bonds and a vehicle of such ties. Social cohesion is ensured exactly by practices of gift exchange, which appear to protect individual autonomy from the potentially excessive discipline of social norms, through

the paradoxical – only to modern eyes – and complex mix of freedom and obligation on which the act of giving rests.

The rediscovery of gift exchange might prove an important stimulus to a reform of economics. In a recent essay, Rist (2010) argues that the new economic paradigm required in order to pass “from reductionism to complexity” (p. 20) must fully accept the challenge of interdisciplinarity. Not least because economic imperialism rejects, to the detriment of economics itself (the “decreasing returns of economics imperialism” when applied to primitive societies is a clear example), the variety and diversity of economic practices, “which can only appear through the filter of multiple theories” (p. 164). Economics is already accepting some forms of the required “pluralism”: various scholars have recently designated the current epoch as one of pluralism in economics, due to the emergence of many competing research programs violating the core assumptions and methods of neoclassical economics (see Davis 2008). Among the most promising, and surely the most relevant for our purposes, is complexity economics as developed by scientists of the Economic Program at the Santa Fe Institute for the Study of Complex Systems (SFI; see Fontana 2010). Recent developments in anthropology show that the tools and methods of contemporary complexity science might have a high impact on our understanding of social systems (see e.g. Aktipis *et al.*'s 2011 agent-based model on gift-giving systems). Yet the historical evolution of research undertaken under the SFI Economic Program provides evidence of the expected “return of orthodoxy”: latest developments in the complexity approach show signs of reconciliation with neoclassical economics, while the genuine interdisciplinarity of the most innovative period of the Economic Program has significantly decreased (see Fontana and Corsatea 2013).

This paper has argued that if economists are to contribute to a unified theoretical framework for analyzing behavior, a more ambitious research program is required. Economics reformers should first, address the original, historical sin of their discipline, and possibly remove the deep roots of economics imperialism. Second, they should rediscover and update a methodological approach dating back to Marshall and Keynes but soon left aside. This approach conceives economics as a science of social

complexity – thereby avoiding the reductionism of methodological individualism (on Keynes's relevance to transforming economics in a “complex systems science”, see Foster 2006) – and the economic material as made up of human actions, beliefs and feelings shaping a social scenario. Third, they should explore the potential of reform stemming from tackling, on “Maussian” premises, a dangerous omission of economics and an inherently complex social fact, of the kind of those economics is called for to cope with in collaboration with the other disciplines.

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