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**GIVING AND SOCIAL RELATIONS**  
*The Culture of Free Giving and its Differentiation Today*

**1. Free giving and modern society: from emargination to "rediscovery" ?**

1.1. Free giving is a universal category of the human spirit, but it has different meanings and roles in different historical periods and cultures. Here I would like to show, in a sociological perspective, how it may be thought of today, with reference to processes that change its societal importance profoundly, both in terms of generalisation and of differentiation. My thesis is that the free gift, after first having been placed on the margins of society in the modern period is now emerging increasingly as an indispensable element of generalised social welfare action that becomes specific and takes concrete form in an increasingly wide variety of ways. As society becomes more complex, making a gift implies possessing greater skill and choosing from a greater variety of types (one must choose which type of gift to make and then know how to do it in terms of means, purposes and rules). What we must speak about here is the differentiation and integration between the different ethics and functions of gifts.

From a cultural viewpoint the central problem is definitely that of recognising a free gift as a motor for generalised social relations, including those of exchange. This recognition is often absent, scarce or distorted. From a practical viewpoint, the problem is above all that of how giving is practised in different social organisations in which the sets of regulations (incentives and punishments) condition the opportunities that they offer and involve.

1.2. Generally speaking, the quality of a free gift has always been a mysterious and ambiguous affair, but with the advent of modern society it has become even more so and in new forms different from those known before. According to modern culture, a person who makes a gift can be described (and to some extent judged) as far as his external behaviour is concerned, but as far as the motives of the deed are concerned (and the gratuitous motives in particular), this is really too much to ask. Modern culture emphasises the fact that the quality of a free gift can never be taken for granted, not even for what by definition it should express, and that is disinterested love. In current western culture, gratuitousness<sup>(1)</sup> describes love and similar terms like altruism, and it actually renders them such (we say: *true* love, *true* altruism), *only under certain conditions*: only if it is possible to apply the guiding distinction of gratuitousness to a deed. In other words there is always the suspicion that the deed was not gratuitous and the guiding distinction of freely-given/not-freely-given must be continuously re-introduced to verify its presence, in order to be able to free it of "contamination" (non

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<sup>1</sup> In this text, gratuitousness is used in the sense of free giving (*gratis dare*) for good (mutual or altruistic) purposes, and not in the sense of "without reason and justification" (as it is commonly used in English).

gratuitous elements) and to be able to see true love, true altruism as something distinct from that which is not really true (false altruism, false love, poisoned love, etc.) (Komter, 1996).

But the point is that even the definition of gratuitousness (in giving) becomes uncertain.

Modernity delights itself by showing that a free gift is one of the rarest events in human life. A simile is drawn with the ambiguity and uncertainty of love. The modern person likes to point out that even when one speaks of love, if one wishes to speak of “true” love, then it must be qualified as freely given and this happens rarely because even love - which at first sight would seem the thing that is most freely given - is usually possessive, interested, narcissistic and in any case always contains - without considering its semantic range from *eros* through to *agape* - an intrinsic ambiguity as Hannah Arendt (1929) claimed when reflecting as a modern thinker on the concept of love in Saint Augustine’s works. There certainly exists a term for “freely given love” and this is *charitas* (charity in the Christian sense). However, I must point out that the term “charity” has undergone so many different mutations due to the succession of various semantic systems that have occurred over the last two thousand years that its use today is generally ambiguous and can only be specified correctly in particular situations by means of appropriate theological reflection (Sequeri 1999). The Christian meaning of *charitas* has in fact become confused with the mere philanthropy (giving of money to the poor to salve ones conscience), so it would seem opportune to rigorously maintain the original, strictly theological, meaning of the term.

The ambiguity of a gift, like that of love, can only be resolved by specifying its gratuitous nature, the quality of acting in which and for which a person gives something or all of himself to others - known or strangers - without expecting, and in fact without wanting or in anyway desiring anything in exchange, not even the good faith of the other. A distinction must even be made between a gift that is freely given because it is not asked if the person who receives it deserves it or not and a gift given to the poor under the precise condition that they deserve it because they are in a situation of genuine need and undesired social exclusion [the reader is referred to C. Frégné (1999) on the subject of giving according to the type of poor recipient, in order to prevent those of the poor who are ineligible from benefitting].

The absence of any expectation that is not the *beneficium* of the other is what - in modern culture - distinguishes gratuitousness in giving. In the first instance, even in law, gratuitousness is defined as a service given for no corresponding consideration, that is without reward and in particular without any direct monetary payment. It is obviously a reductive interpretation acceptable perhaps in the modern age but no longer today. In order to understand what this reduction means one must enter into the heart of modern culture and into its current developments with discriminating and instructive questions such as whether there may be, in the action of free giving, an expectation on the part of the donor of something that is not a reward (certainly not payment) but which is nevertheless something “in exchange”. In modern culture the answer to this question is decidedly negative; it avoids measuring itself against the many sided if ambiguous and rich phenomenon of giving.

Today we realise, even more than in the past, that the gratuitousness of giving is an “enigmatic” quality (Godelier, 1996). We must understand whether and when gratuitousness is mysterious in the sense of being *mysteric* (as it is in pagan cults, which is to say as in animist cults, human cults of spirits), or simply in the sense of being *secret and arcane*, or yet again of being mystagogical <sup>2</sup>, or of being “*mysterial*” (i.e. containing enlightening,

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<sup>2</sup> In M. Weber’s definition (1968, vol. I, p. 452), a mystagogue is one who dispenses magic salvation, “he practices sacraments, i.e. magical operations that guarantee the good of salvation. Redeemers of this type have existed throughout the world. They only distinguish themselves from ordinary witch-doctors gradually by collecting a special community around themselves”. What they lack is an ethical doctrine, and in its place they practice a magic art from which they draw economic sustenance. He cites the examples of Indian gurus and the heads of certain taoist sects in China.

splendid truth, which our human eyes can only see under particular conditions) <sup>(3)</sup>. But it must be immediately said that in my opinion, if it is true that to be genuinely such, it must be possible to apply gratuitousness to itself, then it can be neither mysteric, nor secret or arcane and it cannot be mystagogic, but rather it can be mysterial. The enigma of free giving, as I will explain, is that of how a social relation can come into being as a truly human relation.

1.3. Modern society not only makes gifts more mysterious and ambiguous, but at the same time it makes it a more complex phenomenon in all aspects, psychological, cultural, social and also economic.

The complexity of what is intended by the concept of giving and more specifically of free giving obviously has to do with its polymorphous character and the many meanings of the motivations, intentions, ways of acting, ways of reacting and so on in which giving takes concrete form. Behind all this, however, there is a radical change in the entire structure of society. In ordinary language and in law, what is free is just that which receives no corresponding payment, payment in money that is (Marini, 1976; Morozzo della Rocca, 1998). Sociologically however, there are many ways of paying and being paid, apart from the fact that gratuitousness also has its price (Montuschi, 1997). For modern thinkers a gift can only be “purchased” and “paid for” with gratuitousness, but what does this mean?

What I wish to make clear is that to the modern mind, gratuitousness in giving allows no exchange, while in pre-modern societies (as shown by research studies ranging from those of M. Mauss to C. Lévi-Strauss) giving must always be seen in terms of an underlying structure of exchange.

The relationship between free giving and exchange became a central problem for modernity and today it is a fundamental social problem, but the point is that the problem cannot be solved within modernity and in fact ends with a radical paradox. In its symbolic code, a true gift is and can only be free, but at the same time it is held that gratuitousness does not exist and cannot exist. Modernity seeks a sort of “absolute” (*ab-solutus* -freed of any constraint or interest), which modernity itself declares as impossible <sup>(4)</sup>

To find a solution one must employ an interpretation of phenomena which, as J. Godbout (1992, p. 259) puts it, manages to see that “beneath exchange, there lies a gift”. In other words *it is necessary to understand that exchange is based on free giving and not vice versa*. This is so not only, as M. Mauss said, because a gift is the motor of exchange since it constitutes the starting point that envisages acceptance and repayment, but in a deeper and more generalised sense which is, in my approach, that all social relationships, including those of exchange, are not human unless they start from an act of free giving. Gratuitousness is incompatible with social exchange only in a relative way and not in absolute terms, since gratuitousness is absent only when exchanges are merely utilitarian or constrained. However, as far as social exchanges generally are concerned, the latter is not usually the case. In other words, free giving is opposed to exchange in so far as (i) the motivation for the latter and/or its main purpose is something that in principle excludes any social end and/or (ii) the action is

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<sup>3</sup> “Mysterial”, according to M.J. Scheeben (1960, p. 4), is what appears secret and arcane only because we are unable to penetrate the truth. In mysteries in the “mysterial” sense, the author says, “what fascinates is the apparition of a *light* that was hidden to us. Mysteries must therefore be splendid, enlightening truths; darkness can only arise on our part because our eye is not on them or at least is unable to penetrate them and grasp their content. They must be truths that we are unable to see, not because of intrinsic darkness or confusion, but because of their overwhelming majesty, sublimity, beauty which even the most acute human eye can approach without being dazzled”. A truly and absolutely free gift is such when we see it as vital relation.

<sup>4</sup> The paradox can be expressed in the following way: a gift attempts in essence to achieve the intention of an act of “giving” that does not expect in any way to have to receive, and the experience of “receiving” which does not solicit repayment in any way. When however free giving ‘occurs’, this essence is irremediably ‘denied’.

totally mandatory or forced. A free gift is a unilateral transfer and without conditions, but subsequent exchange is not excluded.

There always remains, however, a doubt over the true remote intentions, especially over the subconscious intentions of the giver and over the effects on the beneficiary who receives without deserving to. In fact in all societies free giving is appreciated as much as it is also feared: the rules of social life never look well on this type of transfer since it is never known what it might hide and where it might lead. An interesting illustration of this ambivalence is given by the curiosity found in the vocabulary of Indo-European languages and in the German language in particular: the word *gift* has a dual semantic content which in English means to give freely but in German has taken on the meaning of 'poison' (Mauss, 1969; Benveniste, 1951).

It is a historical fact that gratuitousness in giving, intended as a form of social behaviour (i.e. of relations between persons where goods are produced in common), has been judged differently in different societies. The impression is that the further one goes back in time the more it has been appreciated and encouraged and most of all in the so-called primitive, archaic or simple societies and that it has progressively declined since then. That is the opinion of most students of the subject today.

Following an evolutionary scheme inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they find that free giving is the institution that creates social cohesion in archaic societies. One has only to consider the famous studies on the *Potlach* and on the *Kula* starting with the *Essay on Gift* by Marcel Mauss (1923-24). Its gratuitousness is thought to be completely apparent because behind it to a large degree there probably lay a set of exchange mechanisms for the extended reproduction of society. Then, as the story tells us, in traditional stratified societies free giving took on a less important role, limited to particular social spheres, to certain occasions in life (births, marriage, death, etc.) to certain actions or rituals. Finally in the modern world gifts probably tend to disappear. The Einaudi encyclopaedia, for example, states that "the social character of free giving as it is observed today is essentially dominated, if also externally, by bourgeois relations of production" (under *Dono*, Turin, Einaudi, 1978, vol. 5, p. 111). A whole school of thought, from J. Baudrillard (*Symbolic exchange and death* 1976) to J. Derrida (*Donner le temps* 1991, *The Gift of Death* 1995) interprets free giving as death: a person who makes a gift should die, and this for these authors is incomprehensible.

From this viewpoint, the persistence of free giving becomes increasingly more concealed, enigmatic and paradoxical, except that we find that there is increasingly greater need of it, that only free giving can save society. Some think that by means of some unknown mysterious power, it could become the new central symbol of social life, freed of instrumental ties and therefore made so radically gratuitous that it will change into a supernatural saving motive (a re-edition of *sola gratia* by Martin Luther). On this basis there are those who theorise a new theological role for free giving and its incarnation in a form of universal voluntarism (which is in sympathy with those, like J. Rifkin, who theorise the "end of work").

I feel that interpretations of the history of free giving clearly lean on romantic and evolutionary visions inherited from the nineteenth century. Enlightenment reduced the gratuitousness of gifts to occasional private giving to the poor. Modern socialist schools, from Rousseau to Marx, not without influence on M. Mauss, formed a conception of evolution in which the last stage consisted of a (sublimated) return to a golden age when society was free giving, in an anti-capitalist humanist vision. The legacy of this tradition still today plays a nasty joke on us when we reread the importance of free giving in the history of humankind. One may try to seek a dialogue with evolutionism and put the accent on the fact that the factors of gratuitousness in free giving, altruism and solidarity are no less necessary to development than their opposites are (Sacco and Zamagni, 1994). Even biology has sought to show that there is an altruistic gene alongside the selfish gene, but I do not believe that

evolutionism is the best key to understanding the social meaning and manner of existence of gratuitousness in free giving and altruism.

1.4. Most modern and post-modern thinkers observe, on the wave of enlightenment, that free giving was emarginated from society at the start of modernity. They put solid well documented arguments, but the conclusions they draw are generally quite distorted.

Modern culture is certainly founded on the removal of free giving (Esposito, 1998). It avoids thinking in terms of free giving. The more societies become modern - it is said -, the less free giving becomes the factor *par excellence* for social generation, as opposed to what used to happened. Modernity is a way of thinking that sees “an impossible figure” in free giving (Derrida, 1991, p. 19). It actually becomes *unthinkable*.

To receive a gift, to be the recipient of a free deed, induces a sense of obligation in that person. A gift binds and it does so in a way that particularises (personalises) the relations between the persons involved. Modernity on the other hand wishes to untie everything to make everything available at its monetary equivalent, a function of its markets and at the impersonal command of the interests of the state. It therefore cannot tolerate giving and above all free giving.

Free giving excludes calculation and therefore cannot exist where the market rules. Gratuitousness in giving, however, also excludes legal obligations and therefore cannot exist under the rule of the law. Gratuitousness in giving involves neither legal duty nor right, except for particular cases specified by law, such as the case of legal aid granted to the poor in the courts which, however, - at the moment it is granted - is no longer spontaneous so that its gratuitousness is reduced to the mere fact that the defendant no longer pays for the services of a lawyer. The gratuitousness in giving does not have an economic price, just as it does not have a juridical reward (or punishment). Its price and its reward (or its penalty) are of another type, they are moral. It then remains to be seen if the moral character only concerns the consideration that one person gives another or systemic trust (Luhmann, 1990), or whether, on the contrary, it does not involve - as I think - much deeper levels of the existence of people and society. Nevertheless gratuitousness in free giving requires the pre-eminence of ethics or at least independent and effective morals. Without such morals they wither away and this is another reason why modernity must realise that free giving disappears hand in hand with the disappearance of the pre-eminence of morals over economics and politics in society.

From the sad lament of a disappointed ancient world, the famous saying “*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*” (I fear Greeks bearing gifts) has become the cardinal principle of modern organisation: people bearing gifts are suspected in advance and may be admitted only after much inspection and verification (see Decree Law, No. 460/1997 on *ONLUS*'s - non-profit organisations).

It is on these premises that current studies of free giving base a scenario for the society of today and the near future of basic schizophrenia:

a) on the one hand, it is seen that free giving persists; a huge number of studies and empirical investigations demonstrate this (Nabokov, 1991; Godbout, 1992, 1999; Caillé, 1996, 1998), although it may be noticed that the number of individual donors has recently decreased in some advanced countries (while assets and endowments of non profit foundations have increased); it seems that, on the wave of this research, free giving changes its forms but no longer suffers emargination as it did in modern societies; as a matter of fact, it has now been rediscovered and its existence and role is valued above all in the organised forms of the third sector (Donati, 1996);

b) on the other hand, there are those who point out that things are not so simple because free giving has cultural requirements that are not easily satisfiable today, such as a sense of the sacred (Godelier, 1996), and because the sociological and cultural premises that

characterise the contexts of free giving no longer exist; free giving is appreciated but emphasis is given to the “aura of uncertainty” that surrounds it and accompanies it everywhere and as such tends to isolate it as a phenomenon which, if it really exists, is detached and very particular (see the entry for *dono* in the already cited *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, pp. 123-124); from this viewpoint, a renewed critical and sceptical reading of gratuitousness and free giving is to be expected (see for instance the approach held by Ascoli, 1999).

It seems then that, in our society, gratuitousness in giving is an insoluble paradox. We have a desperate need of free giving because it is only with it, by it and through it that sociality can be generated, but what makes it possible, in individuals as in social fabrics and in the premises as in the outcomes, is increasingly removed from the social scene.

The contradiction has a clear nihilistic background (good examples of which are given in the already cited essay by Esposito, 1998): the pillars of our society immunising themselves against free giving, which is relegated to residual and “irrational” life-worlds<sup>5</sup>).

Faced with this impasse, what can we say? Are we condemned to schizophrenia? There are those who think so, and there are many of them, but I would like to try and see if there are other ways of solving the problem, not so much and not only at a theoretical level (utopian thoughts on this topic are wasted), but also and above all in terms of social phenomena that are occurring and above all emerging now.

1.5. I propose in this essay to show that gratuitousness in giving is an absolutely necessary element or assumption of social life that has a ‘public’ character (in the sense of being in the sphere of civil society and not the statutory sphere) and that it is not a superfluous, ‘contingent’ or merely ‘private’ affair, because the very existence of what society does, which is both specific and generalised social relation, depends on free giving.

I would like to use an analogy to explain this viewpoint. Just as biological life depends on the life of cells which consist of various elements combined together according to the genetic code, but which do not contain in themselves the secret of life, social relation which makes society live in its whole social body and in each of its parts (with specific connected differences), consists of many elements combined together but does not come into existence if, in addition to its genetic code, it does not contain that property that makes it live, which is the gratuitousness contained in free giving. Social relation could not occur or exist without a minimum of gratuitousness (to enter into a social relation is, to some extent, already a form of gift). The analogy states that what is valid for the individual cell and for the entire psycho-physical body is also valid for individual social relation and for the entire society (understood as the whole set of particular relation systems). Therefore the analogy holds true for generalised social relation, if and to the extent to which the relation is human. Social relation may occur without gratuitousness, but then - although it may be social - it is not human, it is something else (and it must be noted here that no value judgement is implied, but only a factual description) since it is mechanical, impersonal behaviour with no intentionality.

Gratuitousness of giving is therefore a widespread dimension, although it may be latent (it is found in all relations, just as life exists in all living cells). But just as a living cell specialises in certain functions, free giving has different specialisations according to the type of relation it supports: it may take concrete form in different relations depending on the type of social form in which it exists, in which it is embedded and embodied, but wherever it is found, gratuitousness in giving corresponds to the sense of what makes society alive, to the extent that *it is what supports relations as relations*, it is what makes a relation relational

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<sup>5</sup> The expression "life-world" translates the German word *Lebenswelt* into English and is drawn from A. Schütz (1962).

whatever its genetic code and function is. In a certain sense it can be said that *the greater the relational content of services, the more they require free giving.*

The basic thread of my argument runs as follows.

First of all I intend to clarify in what sense and how free giving is present in today's complex society (part 2). The differentiation of free giving is complex. Little free giving is really free. Which forms, in an evolutionary perspective, tend to spread and which to diminish?

To answer these questions a *generalised theory of free giving* must be sought which shows, like a compass, at which intersection of infinite co-ordinates the free giving spoken of in a determined context is to be found, within the space of events which are possible (contingent) both at present or in the future. This may be done using a relational approach to free giving (part 3).

The theoretical picture that is thus outlined will enable us to observe/describe/analyse what is happening in the internal dynamics of the non profit sector, which is usually identified as that organised sector that has the precise purpose of institutionalising free giving (part 4).

In conclusion we must recognise that, apart from some easily identified phenomena of people exploiting it, the current rediscovery of free giving contains *an underlying sociological ambiguity*: the rediscovery I am talking about does in fact attribute an uncertain status to free giving, because it sees it at times as an *interstice for marginal expressive activity* (Gasparini, 1998, 1999) and at times as *the 'true' foundation of sociality* (Caillé, 1996). To enter into the heart of this ambivalence means entering not only into the mystery of free giving to understand the enigma of it (i.e. the allusion to that mysterious object expressed in ambiguous form that it contains and that we must guess), but also entering into the mystery of what "makes" a society human: the fact that it *is* (and necessarily implies the existence of) *relation* between human beings (part 5).

Empirically it is quite true that, in the current dynamics, free giving is used with both of the meanings mentioned above (marginal interstice and widespread precondition for sociality), in their many forms, but the two meanings have to be understood together and this can only be done by a relational theory of society. Free giving, and this is in fact my underlying thesis, reactivates and poses the problem of absoluteness in human relations and has to do with the problem of salvation.

Speaking from a human viewpoint, there can be no authentic relationship with the *Alter* (the Other) except by means of free giving and there can be no salvation except by means of freely given love: any other way of acting for relation and for salvation is sociological suicide (because in destroying relation a person destroys himself). Free giving is the only way to put human persons in relation to each other as human beings and to save them as such. It seems so obvious that social life (all that is social *tout court*) is only vital if, in giving, by giving and through giving, salvation (i.e. avoiding social death and, from the same viewpoint, also personal death) coincides with that qualified relating with the Other characterised by acting gratuitously.

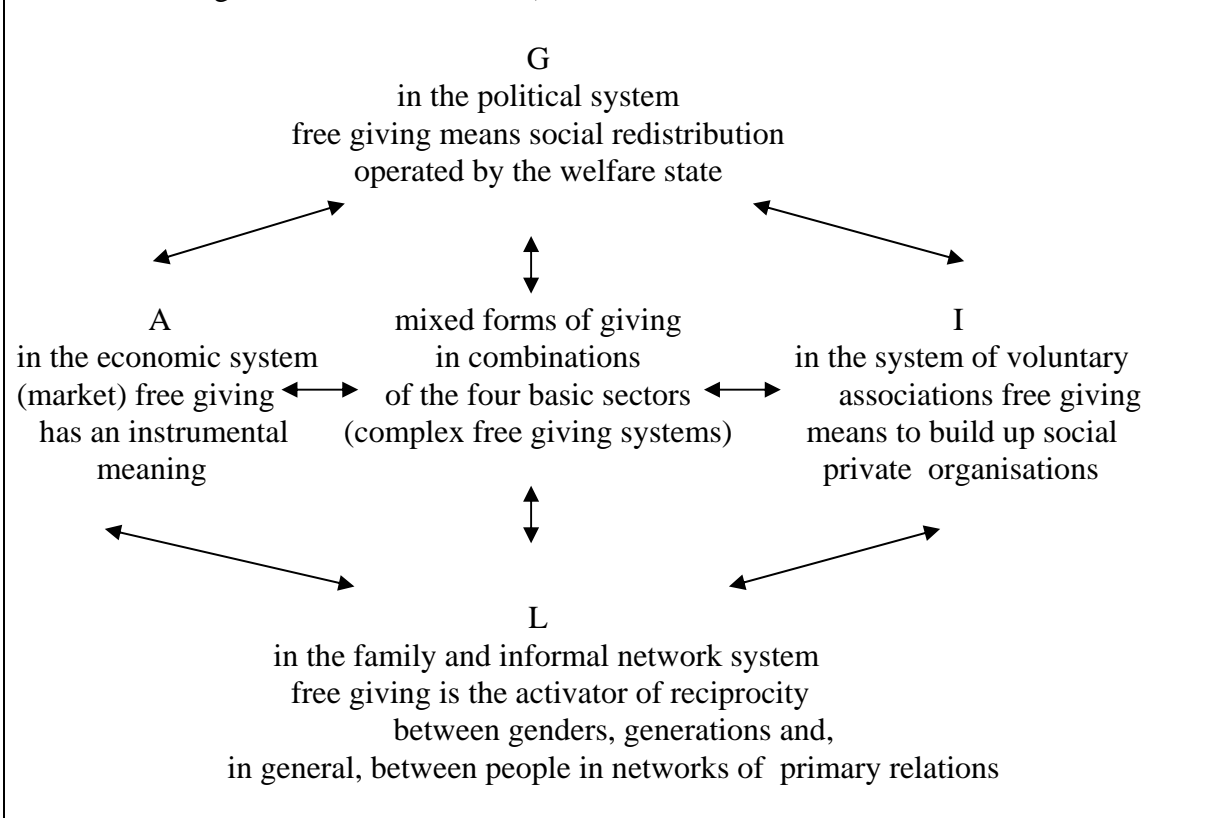
## **2. *Free giving in the today's societal system.***

2.1. In advanced contemporary societies, free giving is found in many different spheres of society, not just one sphere. Many feel that free giving is confined to the family and to informal networks (relations, friends, neighbours), but that is not so. It is present everywhere, but differently in each place and moment of society. In other words the ubiquity of free giving is differentiated and qualified.

One way of interpreting this plurality of presences and different forms is to use a

relational framework according to which, both in theory and empirically, society can be described as a network of systems both distinct and interconnected which at an initial descriptive level are divided into four main spheres: the economic system, the political system, the system of voluntary associations, the system of families and informal networks (see fig. 1). Where is free giving located in these spheres?

Fig. 1- The place of free giving in a differentiated society (according to the relational version of the AGIL diagram: Donati 1991, ch. 4).



This diagram (fig. 1) helps us do draw a map:

A) in the market, competitive relations may use free giving; it is obviously done for a purpose (when “presents” are given to sell a product); here free giving is used as a means to gain comparative advantages over competitors; free giving is not the initial motive, nor the main motive of the action, but is always subordinate to the profit motive; the free gift is connected with a product (good or service) that is put on sale in the market; its value is therefore in relation to what must be sold or given up for some gain; the purpose of the free giving is to attract customers and its value is appreciated to the extent that it fulfils this function;

G) in the political-administrative system, redistributive relations use free giving as a generalised symbolic means of compensation for the weaker, poorer and more unfortunate; the central political power obliges by law individual members (citizens and collective bodies) to make a contribution that is accumulated at the centre and then redistributed according to various criteria including that of free giving; in certain cases the political-administrative system uses voluntary organisations to effect this type of free giving: it can be done using



spontaneous volunteers as in the case of voluntary and free donation of blood [which some, like Titmuss (1971), consider the basis of a social welfare policy], or using “compulsory volunteers”, as in the case of civil service or other services (e.g. of social utility) when they are commanded by the government; many welfare entitlements are of this type; they are gifts resulting from forced redistribution; here free giving is expressed as social altruism of society towards the needy (the underclass, etc.) and is necessarily of a welfare character even if it is called social altruism (Page, 1991; Giner and Sarasa, 1996);

I) in the system of voluntary associations of the “social private sector” <sup>(6)</sup> or “third” sector, in which spontaneous co-operative relations predominate (and not those of competition for profit or of command) free giving is the prime mover of action; these social forms originate if and only if motivated by free giving; the action systems, however, are differentiated on the basis of the different criteria they use to organise themselves over time to achieve their constitutional goals; some organisations set their free giving in a reciprocal context (it is the case of welfare associations and to a large extent of social welfare co-operatives); others seek to maintain the criteria of free giving as a single (‘pure’) criterion of conduct; in voluntary organisation in particular, the so-called pure volunteers, there is no reciprocation and the freely given action is its own end (*gratis data*);

L) in the family and informal network system, in which highly personal relations predominate, connected to specific identities to which each belongs according to gender, generation, family relationship, friendship, neighbours, the free giving may appear to be pure, but it is not; it is when starting with the gift of one's life, there is total oblation, but it is rare; even the gift of life in the generation of children is often mixed with motives of personal self-fulfilment and reciprocation between generations; in the symbolic codes of these spheres the act of free giving does not mean renouncing the advantages of exchange that free giving may bring between alive persons and between alive and dead persons in relations between the generations (Barraud, 1984) and between genders, if it is taken into account that reciprocal giving “is worth more than gold” (Weiner, 1992a); in these contexts free giving is distinguished from how it operates in the other spheres since it is not used for profit (even if using it for selfish ends is certainly not excluded), neither is it done by command of the law, nor is it used to organise welfare action, but exists to create the sociality specific to these spheres.

It must be understood that free giving, even when it appears to be the same, does in fact differ according to the context in which it is located (in A, G, I or L respectively) and according to the relations of distinction and combination of those contexts. The same act of free giving has a different meaning and value according to whether it was performed in the family, in a voluntary organisation, in a welfare state social service, or in a market transaction.

There are then mixed combinations. Free giving is found in complex circuits that may combine families and informal networks, the third sector, the state and the market. They are extended and indirect circuits of exchange.

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<sup>6</sup> Here “social private” sector (or organisation) means a sphere of relations which is run privately (it is self-constituted and self-managed) but has purposes of social solidarity (it acts not for profit or for self-interest but for the common good of the community). The theory of the social private sector differs deeply, in its meaning and range of symbolic and practical references, from the theory of the “third sector” (see Donati, 1997).

2.2. Gratuitousness in the strict sense is an action that is performed without expecting anything, absolutely anything in return. It follows its own imperative of oblation love, which is that which says “how good it is that you exist. I will make you this gift to tell you I am for you”, or to express my unconditioned assent to you of the value of your being, but beyond the personal and subjective deed, in the wide or social sense. Free giving is an expression of a love that - without wanting anything in exchange - thinks that others too should behave in this way. Gratuitousness, like any generalised medium of communication would want love to be universal and therefore reciprocal between all.

If a community of people observes an individual who makes a free gift to another, it thinks (expects) that some gratitude will be demonstrated, that the donor will be acknowledged in some way by the recipient, even if only by a look or a word of affection, in a way that reveals the comprehension of the gratuitousness itself as an intimate bond between persons. If the recipient is unable to do this, then the community expects that the gift is in any case acknowledged by others who are nearby.

This is why a freely given gift (*gratis datum*) can only be recognised in its specificity (motive, concrete purpose, norms and values that it contains) in a context endowed with a ‘community’ character. A socio-cultural context is needed to understand where the gift comes from and where it leads and what the giver is seeking: if she/he is seeking only the affirmation of the Other (her/his good) or if she/he expects something and what. The context is what allows us to understand the gift, because in some way it informs it. Free giving without a context is indecipherable, it arouses anxieties, fears, doubts and uncertainties because only the context defines the meaning of the action and without a context one cannot act *cum-sensus* (i.e. meaningfully and with consent between *Ego* and *Alter*, since they may not understand each other).

There are various ways of interpreting the context. One way is to see if it can be defined as a context of primary relations (i.e. organised around people who know each other personally and have face-to-face contacts) or as a context of secondary relations (i.e. organised on an impersonal basis), and if the latter has a predominant social, political or economic character.

Another way of interpreting the context is that of analysing it as inter-penetration and interdependence between four elements: a culture (value models), a set of social rules, the situational objectives aimed at and the means used.

Yet another way of understanding the context is that of seeing whether it defines the gift as a simple interaction (in so far as the context puts the gift in an informal network) or as an organised form in an exchange network designed to produce something, and if what has to be produced is something which has a social utility, public or private, and if it has a relational character or not.

To summarise, we can see free giving as the result of two ways of relating donors and receivers in a determined culture: according to the value that the context culture attributes to free giving (expressive – i.e. as a merit good <sup>7</sup>), or instrumental – i.e. as a value useful to something else) and according to the intrinsic or extrinsic character of free giving that the culture gives the relation that exists between the donor and the receiver (fig. 2). It is another way of reading the differentiation of free giving according to my AGIL relational diagram.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the expression “merit good” to refer to goods which deserve to be pursued in themselves. Peter William Musgrave introduced (in 1959) the concept of merit wants/goods. He argued that goods and services that are capable of being supplied privately may be considered so meritorious that they are subsidised by the government. Publicly provided school lunches, low cost housing and free education were cited as examples of merit wants (goods). This is essentially an equity argument for the subsidisation of many welfare provisions.

Fig. 2- Types of cultural contexts of free giving.		
Free giving is:		
	<i>intrinsic</i> to the relation	<i>extrinsic</i> to the relation
Free giving has:	a predominantly <i>expressive</i> value (as a <i>merit</i> good)	(L) free giving for the creation of a primary relational good (as a value in itself)
	a predominantly <i>instrumental</i> value	(G) welfare free giving (for purposes of social cohesion and/or civiness)
	(I) social enterprise free giving (for purposes of social utility understood as a production of a secondary relational good)	(A) mercantile free giving (for purposes of private utility, like free gifts that come with purchases as 'presents', gifts for advertising, etc.)

A) there are contexts in which free giving is performed for private utility; a free gift is certainly made, but in view of obtaining a direct or indirect advantage, which is a private good of the giver or of others; here the gift has an instrumental value and is extrinsic to the main relation that it is intended to make; these contexts are defined as the market in the generalised sense (to which all the components in figure 1 many belong including families);

G) there are contexts in which free giving is performed to help the needy, whether it occurs as public or private sector philanthropy or as a result of social or welfare policies designed to create social cohesion; again the free giving here is extrinsic to the relation, but its value is expressive of social solidarity; these contexts are those that are generally defined as those of a welfare state in a generalised sense;

I) there are contexts in which free giving is performed to create social enterprises, with a social utility purpose; here the value is instrumental, but it is intrinsic to the social relation; this occurs in most third sector organisations such as welfare co-operatives, welfare associations, foundations and voluntary organisations that act for other bodies (public or private sector) to achieve set and accountable goals.

L) there are contexts in which free giving is performed for the expressive value of the act itself and is totally intrinsic to the relation: the utility that it has or the obligation it may embody are totally secondary and unnecessary; it is pure gratuitous action, that occurs where the context is organised around the principle of the production of a primary purely relational good; this action is that of the family, or friendship, or neighbours of pure sociality, when the value in question is that of life, when what counts is the human value of the relation.

It is also too easy to observe that free giving is rare. It survives on its relationship with the actual sources of social life. It is the motor of those relational goods termed primary because we cannot do without them for our constitutional identity. It risks bureaucratisation when it must be used to create a secondary relational good and it decidedly loses its expressive and intrinsic value when it is organised for the production of strictly private sector and strictly public sector state goods.

There has always been a temptation to scorn giving when it is not free, but it must be admitted that pure free giving has extremely difficult to meet social requirements. As opposed to the views of others, it is my opinion that we are on principle able to distinguish “true” free giving (containing purity) from commercial giving, from poisoned giving, from false giving, from giving that kills (*the killing gift*: Wood, 1977; Derrida *et al.*, 1995), and so on.

In the symbolism of modern culture, free giving suffers from radical suspicion because modern symbolism is not a symbolism that aims at connecting, but on the contrary - it is a symbolism based on scotomisation and it works by continuous separation-differentiation as an end in itself (it is a *dia-bolic* and not *sym-bolic symbolism*). According to modernity, for pure free giving, pure gratuitousness to be achieved the social agent must act in a way that is always more - for each new gratuitous act - and always absolutely free of any selfish aim and from any extrinsic relation between the free giving and other relations. This type of action, however, may only actually occur empirically very rarely, because free giving generally occurs in contexts in which other values and other relations have importance (fig. 2). Pure free giving does in fact lie on the border between the social and the religious, where the social becomes radically human and thereby demonstrates that the human is specifically human when it transcends itself into the divine. The paradox by which it is only by free giving that life may be conserved and with it the inalienable goods that it brings with it (Weiner, 1992b) is resolved when a perspective is adopted in which free giving makes the capacity of social relation to transcend itself. In my opinion this perspective is more instructive than that which resolves the paradox by claiming - as do Parsons, Fox and Lidz, 1972 - that the actors must give freely to fulfil a social rule, the rule by which the gift of life must be normatively reciprocated.

### ***3. Free giving as social relation: generalised social prerequisite and sui generis forms.***

3.1. The synchronic interpretation of free giving in our society that I have just made is not sufficient to tell us how social phenomena are evolving dynamically and what might happen in the near future. It is not a question of making forecasts or prophecies, but of furnishing ourselves with a picture that opens up space for possible developments that might occur tomorrow, showing us which are plausible. We must orient towards the formulation of a generalised theory of free giving.

In order to build such a theory, we must in my opinion proceed in the following way.

First we must analyse the semantics of free giving understood as social relation and then look at its the dynamic tendencies in complex sociality

3.2. Free giving is often considered as a manifestation of the subject-person and in this case the accent is on the spiritual, conscience and psychological motives of the individual. That is not wrong, on the contrary, it is essential, but it is only one side of the coin. In fact since the abstract individual does not exist, free giving as a manifestation of a pure subject is also pure abstraction. Free giving exists in a relation and takes on substance and meaning *in* and *by* that relation. There must be at least two persons in the relation and the relation has its own existence that cannot be reduced to the characteristics of the giver or the recipient of the gift. Free giving only exists in a context and as an expression of the subjects that express it inter-subjectively.

Authentic free giving as social relation can be investigated by means of three interconnected semantics (Donati, 1999):

1) firstly, in the semantic of the *refero* (the operation of “referring to”), the relation of free giving is a reference to a significant symbolic purpose: to say that a gift is given freely

means that it signifies positive renunciation, *unilateral unconditioned transfer*, for the pure good of the recipient; it is important to underline that the affirmation has a primarily analytical and not empirical value in the sense that in this semantic, free giving has the value of initial motor of the relation to the extent that it enters into the relation by accepting the risk of total loss, but -empirically - it is not excluded *a priori* that the *alter* may react positively and even give something in return, exchange, reciprocate, and so on, even if - and this is the point - the action is not motivated by the purpose of exchange however deferred in time and improbable;

2) secondly, in the semantic of the *religo* (the operation of “connecting”), the relation of free giving is the *affirmation of a social tie*; the tie that is established or reinforced has no other means and norms except itself; it has neither external constraints nor conditionings of any other type; it is a tie for itself and in itself due to the very fact of being in relation; it knows no other rules of obligation or debt on resources except the norm of free giving (one must give because that is the only way one can feel how beautiful it is to be tied to the other/others); here too the affirmation is primarily analytical, which means that the use of other means and rules is not excluded empirically and in any case these will be subordinated to those of free giving;

3) third, in the semantic of relation as *emerging effect*, the relation of free giving is the product of the combined disposition of the two preceding semantics when that product exceeds in its own distinguishing direction: making a free gift rather than something else; basically, free giving here is the relation that constitutes the identity of the *ego* as what gives something or all of itself to the *alter*, in the emerging relation that constitutes the subjects in relation; free giving is then the relation that makes our being-together vital, living together according to a certain social form (family, association, business, etc.).

Free giving as social relation is the performance of an action of care, or taking responsibility that is always constituted on the basis of this triple semantic (*refero, religo, emerging reality*). In the case of ‘truly’ gratuitous free giving, the recipient of the giving and the constraint of the giving correspond to the affirmation of the relation as such, of the relation as an expression of social life in and for itself. Truly gratuitous free giving has no other meaning other than the giving itself and is not constrained by anything except itself. What is in play is pure giving of oneself to the Other. This is the source of society as relation. The “additions” to this original relation and the uses that can be made of it in widely differing contexts, as occurs when free giving is part of the norm of reciprocation, cannot affect the original generative matrix of free giving as relation. That free giving-relation may be performed in very many different ways, we know; it is the bread and butter of everyday life and we shouldn’t wonder at it too much, because what it means is managing to distinguish reciprocation as exchange, even symbolic, from free giving as the motor of reciprocation.

To put it briefly, the generalised relational theory of free giving identifies, in free giving, the pre-requisite for generalised social action *to the extent that it is human*, as distinguished from non human social relations (which does not mean inhuman but very simply not species specific to human beings). And it does it by seeing *an internal structure* (MINV fig. 3) and a *structure of relation to other than itself* (i.e. relations that are not free giving) (ESAG fig. 4).<sup>(8)</sup>

In its internal structure (MINV diagram), the free giving-relation must meet four requirements: it must have *a value* (what gives the free giving-relation value is not the object

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<sup>8</sup> I am introducing in my relational theory for the first time here the relational diagrams MINV and ESAG which represent the differentiation of the AGIL relation internally and externally.

or service given but the value of the relation itself as a human relation)<sup>9</sup>, *a norm* (giving without conditions), *an intention* (the good of the Other) and *a means* (the object given or the service rendered; and it should be noted that free giving can be performed with differing degrees of skill, or in other words it is not enough to give, but that it can be done with more or less appropriate tools and knowledge with regard to the recipient and the situation).

In a relation structure that must distinguish itself from relations that are not those of free giving (other than themselves) (ESAG diagram), the free giving-relation is defined on the basis of a dual (and always combined) selection. Firstly, it must decide whether to choose auto-nomy or hetero-nomy, which is to say whether the giving is performed in itself and for itself or whether another type of relation is needed or it depends on another relation; here the reference to self means finding ones own reason (rule) for life in oneself. Secondly it must decide whether to have a gratuitous character or that of a means for other relations. Gratuitous is thus defined not only in a negative sense (as the absence of reward and compensation), but also in the positive sense, as the affirmation of a good, as a presence, as giving value to a relation as such and with all that it brings to those in it.

I would like to make it clear that I do not mean by this that free-giving is a sort of “trick” that society uses on individuals to make them social and overcome their asocial tendencies. Studies conducted along the lines of Mauss’s thinking, and structuralist studies in particular have emphasised the fact that free giving is a very singular mechanism, a sort of cunning in the social order, that manages to make the opposing motives for which individuals act compatible, and that is obligation and freedom, self interest (for oneself) and altruistic interest (for others). This character of supra-individual social rule undoubtedly exists and functions, but it cannot be separated from the other side of the coin, which is that free giving is *a universal anthropological principle that expresses the sociality of an individual when the individual makes himself a person* (individual-in-relation). In brief, free giving is not so much an external and coercive rule that acts on individuals, but rather and above all it is a manifestation of their internal sociality, of their need to enter into, to be in and to live in human relations. It is precisely because the two sides of the coin co-respond (they rel-action each other) shows us that - in principle, as a social and not an individual phenomenon - free giving is not performed primarily for the purpose of self gratification (as those who have been called “theorists of suspicion”, including J. Derrida, claim).

The attribute “gratuitous”, is not in fact used with an object, but with a “thing” that is given, which leaves the ethical quality of the action open, but is used precisely where an action implies a moral decision: gratuitous is an ethical attribute of human action, of a deed, of a service, and of that only, because the person who performs it feels that its primary and most fundamental reward lies in the action itself. This does not mean that a gratuitous act may have utility value that might have specific aims (particular purposes, investments) or that might be used in social exchange systems (reciprocity). These characteristics, however, are attributed externally, not by the actor that makes the free gift, or they may even be observed by the giver if and when that person looks from the viewpoint of an external interest.

It is here that light is thrown on the distinction between the “pure” and the “impure” gift. The truly free gift is pure by definition while it becomes “impure” when it springs not from its own internal system of motivation, but from an external, extrinsic, point of view of those who attribute a utility to it of purpose and advantage that become a motive for the gift and the gratuitous act (e.g. voluntary work). If these motives predominate over gratuitousness, then the action is simply not pure free giving but something else. That, on the basis of the

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<sup>9</sup> The sense of this affirmation must be understood by analogy with the passage in the Old Testament that says “my delight is to stay with the children of men” It is not therefore relationalism for its own sake.

relational theory presented here, does not mean that it is not a gift. It is simply another type of gift within a complex classification of free giving that I am gradually illustrating.

We notice that according to relational theory, the *sentiment* of gratuitousness, as it has been dealt with by many including Georg Simmel (1996, 1988), is a moral sentiment and like all moral sentiments cannot be purely subjective, but has/expresses a logic that is social (Boudon, 1994). The sentiment does in fact reside in the interior of a person, but must be fed by the social context in which the person lives, a context that may point him in different directions, but which may also destroy him. Just as the soul requires a body to exist in a person and the body, in turn, does not live if it has no soul, gratuitousness also needs to be embodied in a behaviour or object, but the behaviour of the object donated has no life except in a relation of free giving.

The decisions to donate, in accordance with the internal (MINV) and the external (ESAG) relation of free giving, are made by the giver, but the giver operates in a context made of cultural models, of social norms, of situational purposes and of resources that are available in differing degrees.

Culture is decisive to the extent that it allows or does not allow the symbols of free giving. In certain societies a sea shell may be a highly valued gift while in others it may have no value. In certain societies a wedding gift is a highly personalised symbol of the couple's courtship and of other people who are important to them and it is also a souvenir for them in their future relations; in other societies - as in our current society - it is a sort of contribution to the expenses of the couple who must set up house.

Social norms may encourage free giving or discourage it, provide incentives for it and reward it or disincentives for it and penalise it.

The situational purposes can be defined as highly subjective (free giving for self-fulfilment, to satisfy an interior impulse) or objective (free giving to produce a collective, common, relational good).

Some of the resources available are reserved for free giving (only certain things can be donated, or can be the means of free giving), others are not. For example, sacred things can never be given as gifts, but only respected and conserved. In principle one cannot donate (alienate) one's body, because it is a good that is unavailable, but there can be exceptions (e.g. the donation of an organ, under exceptional circumstances and under certain conditions, as long as it is freely given).

Why give some things and not others? Why give in one way and not in another? The answers must be sought not in the object that is donated, but in the *sense* of the relation that it creates and signifies. The relation is in turn a complex game of the factors described above and their relations.

Fig. 3- The internal structure of the free giving relation (MINV-relation of free giving, or free giving as relation that reflects on itself to the extent that it identifies and co-ordinates its four internal dimensions: value, norm, intention, means employed).

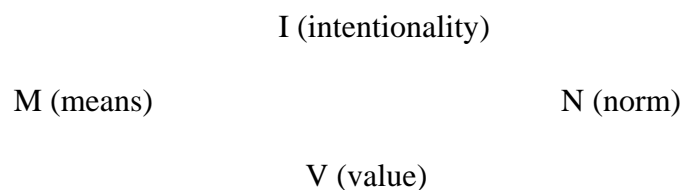
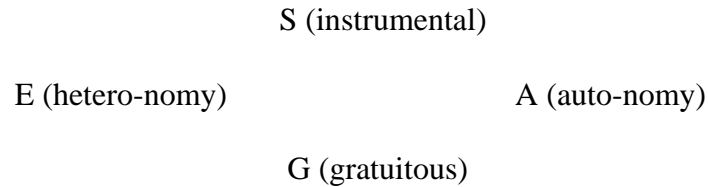


Fig. 4- The structure of free giving as relation that must be distinguished by other types of relations (ESAG relation - free giving as relation that is differentiated externally from non free giving to the extent that the distinction is made on the basis of possible selections on two axes: auto/hetero-nomy, instrumental/gratuitous).



It can be seen from all this just how far free giving often is from how we often think of it in the unreflecting thought of so-called common sense. We are in fact used to thinking of free giving as an internal motion of the individual, an impulse, a subjective need, a spontaneous requirement of a person who lives in his pure awareness. We are used to saying: people who make gifts are good, people who do not make gifts are selfish.

The theory that I am presenting certainly does not deny all this and there is truth in it. The theory inserts the act of free giving in the development of society because it shows that whether free giving emerges or not and which forms it emerges in is tied to the characteristics (components) of free giving as social relation, as both a reflexive relation in itself and as context relation.

3.3. From the point of view of daily change and tendencies, we can say that the complexity with which this free giving occurs is tied to the process of differentiation that it encounters because our society is systematically oriented towards the growth of complexity.

Future society will differentiate free giving, to the extent that it continues to differentiate social relations. Attempts to measure this phenomenon statistically must necessarily meet with huge limitations. The phenomenon of free giving is inherently very difficult or impossible to quantify, although certain quantifications may be useful at a practical level. The awareness that we have of the complexity of the phenomenon goes far beyond the technical instruments (quantitative and qualitative) that we possess for identifying and measuring it (Donati, 1986; Irer, 1998; Nuzzo, 1999). In any case, however, free giving is multiplying in all sectors: the economy; the political system; the third sector; families and informal networks. The profiles of social operators also require rethinking along the lines of altruism as a network phenomenon (Fogheraiter, 1994).

One factor of growing importance in this process is the dimension of the organisational context (free giving network), or the difference between free giving in small and large organisations. It is precisely because I wish to treat free giving as social relation that the size of the organisational context is crucial to the definition of the possible characteristics of free giving. Free giving exists in both small and large voluntary organisations, in individual government services and in the government organisation as a whole, but the possibilities of defining their quality - especially in terms of gratuitousness - are tied to the different structure of these contexts. Free giving becomes less visible to the extent that the circuits become wider and more impersonal. In theory even free giving performed at high levels of complexity and at great distances can be made visible, but this requires specially designed instruments and systems that our culture has not yet developed and it is only now beginning to be seen



(consider for example the so-called “adoption at a distance”). The expanding complexity of free giving requires the creation of special supports.

In order to answer the questions, “What drives free giving?”, “What is the role of free giving in social relations?”, it is indispensable to define the context in question. Since my thesis is that free giving is the source and the guarantee, or in other words the originating relation, of relational goods, it is by looking at the scale of these goods that empirically we find it most frequently.

Put briefly, free giving is a prerequisite of generalised social action to the extent that it is specifically human and not mechanical and automatic. Generalised social action, however, is specified in each concrete context in different ways depending on how the relational dilemmas that free giving must set up with relations that are not of the free giving type are resolved. It is here that we must see if, when and how free giving manages to find a way of organising the spheres that belong to it (in which to be a social form *sui generis*) and if, when and how it must combine with other types of relation, that are not of the free giving type, but which can co-exist with it, use it, feed it or even just tolerate it.

Complex society increases all these types of free giving, because it is in its relational nature to seek to develop all these possibilities, isotheropically (i.e. equally in all directions). At the same time, with the theory that has just been expounded, we are capable of seeing under what conditions and in which contexts pure, truly gratuitous, free giving, can be developed and where, however, it necessarily dies away.

3.4. Giving concrete examples is not easy, but we can start to tackle the more practical and operational problems by making a few considerations.

I would like first of all to make a general point. When we speak to a person who is not acquainted with gratuitousness, because he is used to stubbornly acting out of utility, for the goals of power and dominion, this person clearly shows himself to be in difficulty when faced with a gratuitous action. He cannot account for it, he sees it as something that he cannot grasp, that causes anxiety and not uncommonly puts him into crisis arousing instinctive reactions, *ad modum recipientis* (according to the way of the receiver), which is that of a selfish, calculating or dominating person, who asks himself how he can use the person who gives freely to his own advantage (accompanying this person - more often than not - with intimate disdain, because not only does he not obey utilitarian rules of the social game, but he even puts them in danger). The characteristic may be found, as personality traits, in individual persons. We encounter them everyday, first and foremost at our work places, but it can be seen as inherent to an entire culture. Modern culture is by its very nature suspicious and sceptical towards free gifts. It does not rely on them in anyway except in the private sphere of charity and in intimate relations<sup>10</sup>). That is because it sees no utility in pure free giving. Free giving, when it is appreciated, must have a use, at least that of the “something in return” as one of the three rules in the gift circuit (give-receive-return). The return must be seen as a gift not as utility. This is still difficult for today’s culture. It is not by chance that the word “gratuitous”, is totally absent from social sciences dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Even when free giving appears in sociological theories it is generally explained as the first move in a game of narrow or broad return payments, which - in the end - are justified by some social utility. Insistence on the fact that free giving does not exist without something being given in return is a sign of the poverty with which free giving is still treated in current social sciences.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Giddens’ theory is emblematic of the incapacity of today’s dominating culture to understand free giving in intimate relations (as else where for that matter). The “pure relation” theorised by Giddens as a form, in his opinion, characteristic of couple and family relations in general is none other than a continuous renegotiation for individual self fulfilment with equal opportunities for all (Giddens, 1995).

To show then that there are social phenomena in which gratuitousness not only persists, but in which it is capable of appearing in new forms is a very difficult task. Nevertheless there is no shortage of examples, such as for example the adoption of seriously handicapped children, the free donation of organs to strangers, caring for the terminally ill, or any other situation in which one must go without some personal gratification. However, we may also consider the decision to take a job with a lower income, but which is richer in relational content, becoming involved in religious, civic or ecologist organisations with goals of bringing humanitarian aid to populations in difficulty and general of fostering social private organisations in all the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of social life.

In reality, sociological research should be capable of empirically showing that, although phenomena to the contrary exist, there is nevertheless a growing awareness that men have a common destiny and that the only adequate answer is social altruism (Monroe, 1996), even in terms of efficiency, as well as effectiveness, not to mention equity. Free giving stands out increasingly more as a necessary pre-requisite for the promotion of respect for and the nature, both interior and exterior, of humankind. The construction of a new civil society begins by placing more value on free giving (Sacks, 1996-97). Nevertheless we are certainly still behind in understanding how free giving can be an autonomous principle of co-ordinating social life before, alongside and apart from markets, hierarchies and exchange networks (which remain the dominant modalities: Thompson *et al.*, 1991).

#### **4. Acting gratuitously and differentiation of the social private sector.**

4.1. We can make the theoretical arguments that have been put more concrete by observing practical forms of free giving and gratuitousness more systematically.

Free giving, as we have said exists in every society. If a society is continuously generated and alive, not only as a reproductive mechanism, but as human creation, it is because free giving is at work in it (Caillé, 1998). Free giving is in fact present in all relations if, and to the extent to which, it does not depend on technical mechanisms but needs a specific relational quality that cannot be performed technically. If society becomes more complex, then free giving must also become more complex. The fact that it is so difficult to track it down today can be explained in various ways: the difficulty in recognising what lies at the origin of a relation is increasing due to the growing complexity of exchange systems; the latency of the values that motivate free giving and more specifically of the relational value that free giving embodies is deepening; there is growth in the types of free giving in both public and private sectors accompanied by processes in which public and private sectors intertwine. Essentially, however, the difficulty in seeing free giving today depends on the fact that the sphere that generates it as an expression (also as a language) and means of generalised communication is being removed.

Free giving is in fact a means of communication that must be recognised in all the relational spheres of society, but it is also a relation *sui generis* which has its own specific means of institutionalisation, without which the forms of generalised recognition become latent, uncertain and problematic.

With the division of social relations into spheres that do not contain a human element (technical spheres) and into spheres that are only or mainly qualified by their relational quality (human spheres), one of the things that emerges in society are “places” given the responsibility of institutionalising the generative moment of giving, and of free giving in particular. They are to do this through processes that create goods and services which, as individual gifts with different characteristics, are then circulated under certain conditions, in the other spheres of society. There remains, however, the problem of how these other spheres

recognise them, if they do, how they motivate them, if they do and under what conditions that happens or may happen.

These “places” are those of the family and the sphere that I have called the *social private sector*, which - not by chance - is termed, not without disdain, the “third sector” by the two other main spheres of society, the state and the market (Donati, 1997). Others term it the “independent sector”, but this independence must be analysed semantically (Alexander, 1987). The actual diffusion of the social private sector has occurred because in it, with it and by it, free giving is set as an institutional precondition for a sort of *constitutionalisation of private organisations* defined by their own constitutions, which I call “*constitution configurations*”. There is the intention in what we might call the “constitutional will” of a social private sphere to place value on a benefit conferred on others as a gift, and, as a consequence of this, rules and regulations are specially designed to achieve that aim.

Social private organisations differ from all other types of organisation in this respect which, to the extent that it is used for internal re-distinctions, also characterises the distinctions between different social private organisations. The latter differ from each other precisely because they organise the original motive for free giving with systems of action that achieve the value-purpose of free giving with different types of rules and means; in fact where aims are analogous or similar, the use of different rules and means results in completely different free giving relations (i.e. emerging effects). Secondly, the organisations in question differ in the way they exchange means and rules with the outside.

The complexity of daily relations means that social private organisations must also interact, exchange, negotiate, and so on with other spheres and this involves conditions, constraints, transfers of rules and means from one domain to the other and this is not also without consequences for the constitutional identity of these organisations. If the state imposes certain rules or the market makes certain means more competitive, then the social private sector is faced with the alternatives of including or excluding these possibilities and this involves making particular choices in the ways in which each organisation adapts to its environment. This is also why the process of differentiation of free giving organisations is and will increasingly be endless.

The risks of the social private sector being taken over by the state or the market, like other forms of colonisation, are always on the increase. The organisations that wish to pursue the voluntary aims, based on free giving, of their constitutions can only persist and regenerate by adequate self-reflection inside the organisation. They must decide which of the different ways of giving full expression to free giving and making it a motor for different means of action (voluntarism, co-operation, etc.) to employ.

In other words we must think that there is a complex process of differentiation of free giving that society needs if it is to avoid death as a human society. But if the social private (or third) sector wishes to survive and thus remain the place in which society can rediscover its sense of the civil and human, it in turn must have a place in which the distinctive action of free giving can be performed gratuitously.

4.2. We can identify, again on the basis of the relational compass in my AGIL diagram, four distinctive ways or spheres or operations of free giving in the social private sector (fig. 5).

Figure 5 illustrates how free giving can differentiate into a sort of complex wreath.

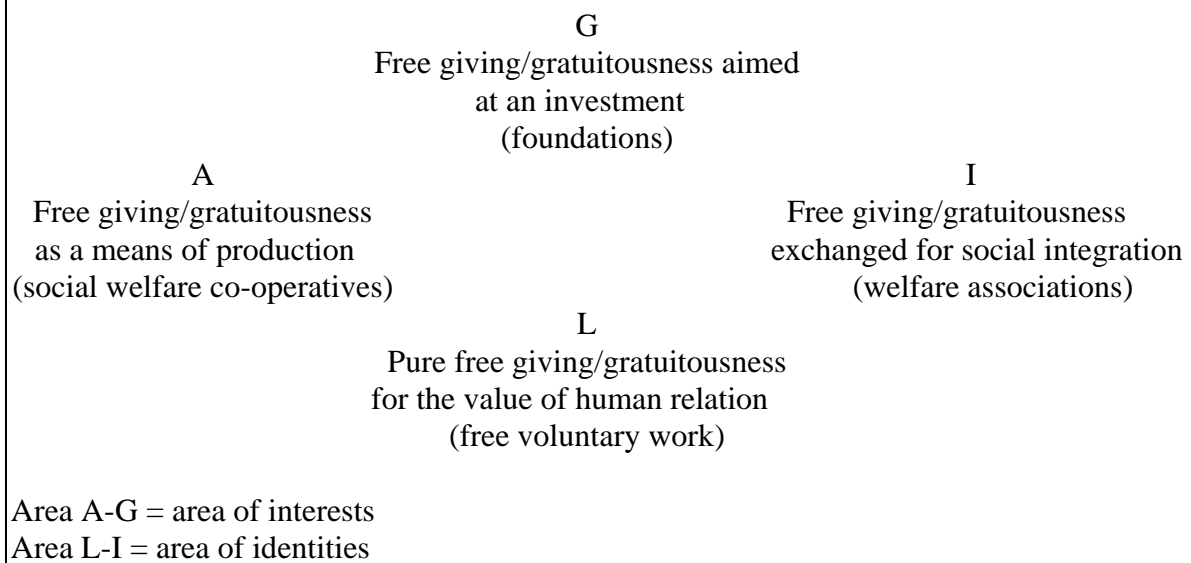
Internal differentiation of free giving relations as a societal system of action leads to different organisations. The concrete forms of ideal types are as follows:

- A) free giving that has an economic character, which is a means of producing something, takes the form of altruistic social welfare co-operation;
- G) free giving that is aimed at an investment for a determined altruistic purpose (i.e. which

must be used for a specific purpose and provides the means in the form of an investment) takes the form of a foundation; the type known as community foundations are of particular interest <sup>(11)</sup>;

- I) free giving that has a character primarily of social integration (mutual cohesion), which is to say it operates for the good of its members, takes the form of welfare associations that may act on behalf of widespread interests and identities;
- L) free giving that has an extremely value oriented character, which is to say that is the sign, the witness and the emblem of its caring relation values (where the “because-motives” and the “in-order-to motives” coincide) <sup>(12)</sup>; it takes the form of free voluntary work, pure and not conditioned by anything except its own manifestation.

Fig. 5- Differentiation of free giving and gratuitousness in the social private sector.



Naturally there are intermediate and interconnected forms of these four ideal types. To understand them we must make a *relational* use of the AGIL distinctions (in my *non-Parsonsian* AGIL version of the diagram). Social welfare co-operatives often use voluntary workers; foundations may promote voluntary, co-operative and/or associative organisations; associations are mixed a lot with volunteer organisations, but can create co-operatives and foundations. It is important to understand that, to the extent to which they do it, the codes of free giving are mixed and that the processes can only be properly managed by encouraging

<sup>11</sup> In Italy, the new *Community Foundations*, as opposed to the old banking foundations, have not been conceived as treasury reserves on which to draw for charitable ends, but as an organised network (not operational but grant-making) of bodies in a community. Donations are not made to a foundation, but through it to voluntary and social solidarity organisations. A community foundation does not make requests for itself to then redistribute funds, but acts as a reserve and multiplier using synergies to increase total donations in a community. It stimulates donation and organises it more effectively, efficiently and appropriately on the basis of social welfare investment projects. It removes difficulties that prevent generosity from manifesting fully and facilitates the development of the entire private social sector. It does this by removing all bureaucratic obstacles that donors face in obtaining tax exemptions, and by helping donors to identify precise projects that they wish to support. A foundation identifies the organisation most capable of implementing a given social investment project and makes sure that the actual programme chosen is implemented and not another and also that it is implemented well (monitoring of quality). Concrete examples of these foundations are springing up fast in Lombardy (Foundation of the Province of Lecco, The Community Foundations of Como, Mantua, Novara, etc.) (Casadei 1997).

<sup>12</sup> The distinction between “because motives” and “in order to motives” has been drawn by A. Schütz (1962).

and rewarding synergies.

4.3. Let us focus on voluntary workers. From this picture it seems fairly clear that voluntary work is the sphere whose existence is most at risk:

- i) because it must re-distinguish itself on the basis of the value of free giving in a cultural situation in which that value is losing its capacity to integrate internally and to distinguish externally;
- ii) because it is precisely as a value that voluntary work is hidden, removed and repressed in spheres other than the social private sphere (state and market), that can only understand their counterparts (social welfare co-operatives in A and Foundations in G) up to a certain point, but in general they are suspicious of associations and above all of free voluntary work as models of life and social organisation, above all when they are not confined to the purely private but have some influence on the public sector sphere.

It can then be understood why our society is so anxious to regulate all these spheres and the voluntary sphere in particular. Two tendencies result from these pressures: the strong moves to push pure voluntary work into the other forms indicates (associations, foundations, social welfare co-operatives) where free giving can be better controlled; the tendency to privilege large voluntary organisations with government contracts at central or local level.

In order to maintain their identity, all that voluntary organisations that act for the sake of pure gratuitousness can do is to lay claim to their own internal distinction (fig. 3 MINV diagram) at each transaction or contact or interchange with the outside. This however must be made possible by the context that consists of both other free giving organisations and by the outside environment (social relations that are not free giving organisations) (fig. 4 ESAG diagram).

How can it be done? The conditions are as follows:

- a) the environmental context allows, acknowledges and rewards the relation of original free giving;
- b) voluntary organisations found their identities not on external relations (e.g. in contracts with government departments or on clauses in market contracts), but within their own relations.

And here again we find that pure voluntary work is the most delicate and problematic of social living. We cannot do without it because if it disappeared that fundamental operation that enables us to distinguish between gratuitousness that is truly free (expression of an unconditional value) and gratuitousness that has a purpose (i.e. that is aimed at production, investment, exchange) would no longer be available as a result of the logic that binds the four semantic codes and the corresponding organisations (fig. 5). It must never be forgotten that these four forms stand or fall together, because each is defined by (and exists in) the relation with the others. It is the relations that gives substance to the identity of each form and the elements are real because of the reality of their relation of distinction-connection.

If there were no gratuitousness that is aware of itself and acts by continuously re-distinguishing its existence as gratuitous from its existence as something else, social relation would lose its human vitality and salvation would no longer be within reach (<sup>13</sup>).

## ***5. Conclusions: free giving in "after-modern" society*** (<sup>14</sup>).

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<sup>13</sup> The final observation of L. Boella in the book by H. Arendt cited throws useful light on this viewpoint.

<sup>14</sup> The expression "after-modern" is different from the seemingly similar phrase "post-modern society" in so far as the former is meant to underline the fact that contemporary society changes the guiding distinctions which dominated modernity (e.g. the idea of linear social progress turns into the idea of increasingly risky and not

5.1. Modernity did not eliminate free giving nor even gratuitousness, but it did perform some operations which society must now take into account because there is no going back.

1) Modernity distinguished between free giving and all other types of relation in a way that no previous society had done. This occurred firstly with the location of free giving in the private sphere and then, due to the inevitable interconnections that exist in social life, giving rise to huge repercussions in the public sphere too, and above all generating new spheres of free giving “halfway” between public and private spheres unknown in any previous society. From then on free giving could no longer be an “overall” container or transmitter of what characterised society as had occurred in primitive or traditional societies. Its existence as a “total social fact” persisted (as observed by Karsenti, 1994), but - in my opinion - it no longer consisted in maintaining *in-mediatly* together all the values of human existence (economic, political, cultural, psychological, juridical, religious dimensions). Free giving is still a “total social fact” because it makes social relation so: it makes every social relation vital to the extent that social action is not performed mechanically but in a human manner (contrary to what Niklas Luhmann maintains). Free giving involves the whole being of those who do it not because it is done by bringing all that is social into it, but rather because the vital element of a person’s social existence must be brought into play and that is the relation which binds a person to others and through which it confers an individual identity on a person (which is necessarily relational).

2) After having distinguished the place of free giving, modernity gave pride of place to relations of utilitarian exchange (*lib* side), entrusted to the market, and alternated these with those of control entrusted to the command of the nation state (*lab* side). These two operators, however, (money and law) did not succeed in building a society capable of regenerating its own premises which is to say its own foundations. The society that modernity gave birth to was sterile and had to rely on free giving to become viable, but free giving under conditions of differentiated complexity was no longer the same as before.

As soon as free giving must relate to non free giving (which is to say those who act by free giving ask themselves how to relate to those who do not act by free giving) it must perform two operations: a) define its own differentness (diversity); b) find in itself what it is that makes it subsist by itself. Free giving emerges from these dynamics as a relation *sui generis* which: i) underlies all social relations as a vital component of them including those of exchange when they operate with human meaning and not by automatic mechanisms (such as by the impersonal laws of the market, the technical rules imposed by the mass media, etc.): no social relation that wishes to be capable of reproducing itself (and not simply consume itself as a social relation) can exist without an initial act of free giving that is born from empathy towards the Other. Putting oneself in the place of the Other - as renunciation of one’s own point of view and also of one’s own interests - is the free gift required by any act of human relation and if this does not happen, then the relation will be only or prevalently of a consuming nature (it will consume the sociality without concern for adequately regenerating it, as occurs in *lib/lab* relations). From this starting point free giving - considered as a latent relation (having the value pattern of recognising the dignity of the *alter* of trusting him and empathising with him) - divides into various forms according to the relational patterns in which it is combined (with the means, the situation purposes and the norms that constitute the value pattern). It may also remain an activity of internal self-poiesis (that of free giving itself), which, in the infinite chain of being, tends towards simple purity of the relation.

5.2. What place can be given to free giving in a society that seems to have emarginated it, but which needs it desperately?

Put briefly our society finds itself in absolute need of *liberating free giving*, after having imprisoned it in order to liberate all that is not free giving.

According to what has been said so far, liberating free giving means liberating society with/by/through its generalised and particular human relations.

As far as generalised relations are concerned, liberating free giving means tackling the issue of human rights in a different and more radical manner than that of the symbolic codes that modernity has given us, i.e. in terms of civil (bourgeois), political (according to the rules of electoral democracy) and social (welfare) rights. Affirmation of human rights requires an initial act of free giving that consists of conferring a not explicit, but a counter-factual dignity on those who seem not to have that dignity or to have trampled on it or to not deserve it.

As far as particular social relations are concerned, liberating free giving means constructing contexts of human ecology in which relations are initiated and held up by free giving as the spirit that invigorates these relations. There may be applications in all fields. For example:

- A) at work, liberating free giving means seeing work as a social relation in the human sense where the person who is working comes before any other motive or end, including that of production or profit;
- G) in politics, liberating free giving means “pre-understanding” citizenship relations in terms of a common good, before and apart from vested (party) interests;
- I) in associations, liberating free giving means organising relations on the basis of the capacity to promote exchange of all types, and not just mutual assistance, between members who hold free giving above all other considerations or ends of individuals or of the association as such;
- L) in the family, liberating free giving means forming relations between genders and between generations as reciprocal actions that exalt the reciprocal giving without any other end than that of experiencing the value of being in a family relation.

The abstract utopia of a society “founded” on free giving as the single universal operator is to be avoided. It is, however, possible to think of a society that gives free giving the place it deserves as a motor for sociality and for all other types of behaviour to the extent that it is desired that they are qualified as human.

Free giving cannot have the functional pre-eminence in the after-modern world that it had in archaic societies and not even a sort of “normative” pre-eminence. Its moral pre-eminence consists basically in the fact that *only free giving confers that special quality on social relations that qualifies them as human*. What the after-modern world can do is:

I) (towards the outside) liberate free giving from the constraints that the modern dominion (economic and political) imposed on it; this is an action that free givers must do, that is starting from inside free giving relations moving towards the outside; but in doing this they will find that there are also internal constraints and that they lie in the people and in their relations, even the most personal and intimate; these constraints become clear when people are unable to internally distinguish free giving from other relational spheres;

II) (towards the inside) increase the internal autonomy of social forms based on free giving as a specific relation which means: a) not reducing it to something other than itself, such as economic utility or political help or a substitute for administrative functions or welfare policies; b) do not try to “encourage” it from those same viewpoints that willingly assign it a supplementary and residual philanthropic function; c) employ the self-differentiation of free giving and its nature of constituting fundamental processes of social

regeneration in the relational spheres inherent to it.

To summarise: it is a question of free giving organising itself according to a philosophy of regulating its promotion in a manner that does not reflect the viewpoints of ‘others’, such as those of an essentially economic and political nature which still dominate today and which tend to be “consumers” of sociality (rather than producers of sociality) and are in a self-subsistence crisis. The Italian experience of institutionalising voluntary organisations by means of Law No. 266 of 1991 has basically been a failure in this respect even if the positive results of giving voluntary organisations a new social role, which has nevertheless been subsumed under para-state regulation, is not to be underestimated.

Free giving remained an irrational fact for a long time in the modern epoch, fed by faith and residual utopias (Otto, 1949). It must recover its relationship with reason and become a task and a vocation that is feasible in ordinary life as a “rational” action, rational toward a value that legitimises and justifies other goals including those of interests, of exchange, of help and of service aimed at goals of social cohesion, but without alienating itself in these goals. In order to be itself and not lose itself in something else, it needs, more than ever, a culture capable of bearing and treating the transcending sense of social relations. However, if this is to happen free giving must know how to reflect on itself as a social requirement that must be developed as social relation with a human quality and not as an expression of community structures or enlightened individual spirits. To do this free giving must be seen as a point of contact and bordering on what is “sacred” in that it is worthy of respect, love and wanted for itself. And this is the religious sense of existence, since in the end the *enigma* of free giving, that has been discussed and investigated so much, is nothing other than life itself when it is seen as relation that is given with/by/through the human quality of relation without which we could not be *consortes divinae naturae* (partakers of divine nature). *The enigma of free giving is that special “life” (not biological and not even psychic) that is given with relation, in relation and through relations with the Other, without which we could not participate in the substance of what is divine. Free giving is not only a “trick” or a regulating mechanism through which society brings individuals to channel their selfish instincts and competition, rivalry, agonism towards constructive rather than destructive goals, to become friends instead of enemies; its enigma is rooted rather in the fact that human beings cannot fully become themselves as such without entering into relationships and one doesn’t enter into relationships as human persons except through the door of free giving.*

We are capable today, more than in the past, of seeing that the spirit of free giving does not lie “in the thing” given<sup>(15)</sup> and not even - looking carefully - in the triple obligation that free giving involves (give-receive-return). It consists in that special human quality that free giving signifies and involves because it is relation. The social function of free giving is not in fact primarily that of strengthening social ties sociologically intended as a mutual constraint and regulatory norm (sometimes there is no tie of this type at all, or it is very weak, as in voluntary action performed for the benefit of a severely disabled person completely unable to respond and form ties). The function of forming social ties that free giving has certainly always exists, if only latently and for the internal community that observes it, but it is secondary to the primary function of demonstrating the *inherent value of relation* through which, with which and by which humans can reaffirm and regenerate themselves in the deepest sense. In order to enter into a human relationship a gift must first be made: recognise the Other as having dignity, give your trust and put yourself in his/her place. Everything that avoids or eliminates this gift of meaning makes the relation less human. When this gift of meaning is totally denied, for that very reason, the relation becomes non human. That is why

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<sup>15</sup> As M. Mauss asked himself seeking to interpret the action of primitive peoples (cf. Godelier, 1996, p. 13).



gratuitousness is still and in fact is becoming even more the “sign of the salvation” of society, if, to the extent which and where society can (re)generate itself as a “society of the human”<sup>(16)</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> The expression “society of the human” is different from the seemingly similar phrase “human society” in so far as the former is meant to underline the fact that contemporary society, as opposed to past societies, is not immediately human, but it has to be produced intentionally with efforts and distinctions which were not required previously (see Donati, 1991, pp. 540-544).

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