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Refugees welcome: Arrival gifts, reciprocity, and the integration of forced migrants

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Refugees welcome: Arrival gifts, reciprocity, and the integration of forced migrants

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Abstract

Against competing political theories of the integration of immigrants, we propose to reframe the relationship between the populations of host countries and arriving refugees in terms of a neo-Maussian theory of gift exchange. Using the example of the European refugee crisis of 2015 and the welcoming attitude of significant parts of German civil society, we argue that this particular situation should be understood as epitomizing the trend toward internal transnationalism. Increasingly, the “international” is becoming part and parcel of the “domestic” sphere. Since Marcel Mauss was concerned with the question of how separate, culturally different communities can establish ties of solidarity and cooperation between each other, we use his work to answer key questions about the relations between international refugees and native citizens in their home countries: What are the expectations underlying gift-giving in the context of welcoming refugees? Should refugees feel obliged to repay the arrival gifts? How should we deal with the normative ambivalence of gift-giving and its potentially humiliating effects on those who receive gifts but are unable to reciprocate? Most importantly, how does gift theory help us to clarify the very concept of integration which is at the heart of recent debates on the ethics of immigration?

Keywords

Ethics of immigration, gift theory, hospitality, integration of refugees, internal transnationalism, Marcel Mauss

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born.
Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

Leviticus 19:34

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If refugees and asylum seekers are to be welcomed into any society, and shown a measure of hospitality, this will not be because the polity is welcoming but because society is so.

Chandran Kukathas (2016: 266)

Introduction

The so-called refugee crisis in Europe, and in particular the decision of the German government in September 2015 to open its borders to what turned out to be around 890,000 refugees and asylum seekers within that same year, most of them from Syria and Iraq, has provoked very different responses and interpretations. Many observers across the world were impressed by what they saw as the expression of a cosmopolitan moral attitude on the part of the German government and large sections of the population. The Indian novelist and postcolonial critic Pankaj Mishra, for example, celebrated Germany as “Europe’s conscience” and as the sole remaining candidate for “the moral leadership of the West” (Mishra, 2015). Others were less kind in their assessment. Wolfgang Streeck, director emeritus at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne and a fierce left-wing critic of the Merkel government, offered an almost Maussian interpretation of the decision to admit and welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees without entry visas or any other documentation. Opening the borders—or rather refusing to close them within Europe’s open-borders Schengen system, which has removed passport checks and border controls between its member states—was a gift for countless desperate people.¹ Yet Streeck claims that the motive behind this seemingly humanitarian action or nonaction was “to shame” the rest of Europe in a spirit of “hegemonic self-righteousness” (Streeck, 2016). According to this view, Germany was engaging in something like a potlatch: While pretending to present a friendly face to the world, the government of this particular country was increasing its moral prestige by publicly sacrificing wealth and security, thereby showing less fortunate Europeans, many of whom were suffering from German-imposed austerity policies, who is calling the shots on the continent.

This is yet another example of how an international gift can trigger a controversy about the intentions of the donors, its true beneficiaries, and the very character of the gift. Without losing sight of this controversy, we would like to shift attention from the international reverberations of Germany’s refugee policy to what has been called the growing “internal transnationalism” (Hardy, 2004) of modern states which are often no longer “nation”-states in the traditional sense of the term. Internal transnationalism is the product of two intertwined trends: the growth of diasporic communities in countries which are immigration destinations and the development of manifold relationships between these groups and the native population.

Yet, there is another way to think about internal transnationalism. Political theorists such as Jürgen Habermas have expressed the hope that through a process of juridification, relations between states in international society can be subject to forms of legal management analogous to those already shaping the relations between citizens within states. The refugee challenge—and internal transnationalism more generally—is the result of the opposite development: instead of being domesticated and civilized by international law, the dynamic of the “international” gradually eats into the domestic sphere of modern states, potentially pitting native and immigrant groups against each other.

What Tocqueville wrote about political parties in antebellum America now applies quite literally to every modern country that admits large numbers of immigrants. At least in the early stages of social and civic integration, newcomers and natives are like “small nations within a great one” (Tocqueville, 2003 [1835–1840]: 293, note 3).

This could be observed in the European Union before and after Germany’s short-lived open-borders experiment when hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing war, terror, and poverty tried to enter Europe.² The first casualty of this process was the Dublin Convention which establishes that every asylum seeker whose boat is picked up by a European naval or coast guard service has to apply for asylum in the country of arrival without being able to freely choose in which state he or she wishes to lodge an application. This system simply broke down under the sheer number of people arriving from North Africa and the Middle East in Italy, Spain, Malta, and Greece, most of them in overcrowded fishing boats or inflatable rafts. After a while, the coastal countries of arrival were simply no longer able or willing to look after a rapidly growing number of those immigrants who made it to European shores without drowning.³ According to sociologist Ludger Pries, in late summer 2015, European governments, who had turned a blind eye to the issue in the years before, began to act in increasingly unpredictable and opportunistic ways, closing borders on one day, and announcing to let all refugees pass through their country the next, trying to enforce the Dublin rules on one day and ignoring them the next. In sum, “all relevant groups of actors were oscillating between following moral and legal norms ... on the one hand and simply applying tit-for-tat on the other hand” (Pries, 2016: 61). In the context of this unpredictable, unstable, and unclear situation, where the rules and laws which govern the routines of immigration and citizenship seemed temporarily suspended, civil society stepped in, transcending the tit-for-tat logic.

It is at this point that we propose to bring Marcel Mauss and gift theory back in. The irregular entry of large numbers of foreigners, most of them from Muslim countries, was met with numerous incidents of racist violence and a surge of right-wing populism, but at the same time, tens of thousands of ordinary citizens volunteered to help refugees by giving them what Mauss (1990 [1925]: 36) calls in passing “arrival gifts.” These gifts ranged from money and goods such as clothes or toys for children to services including occasional invitations for dinner or the acceptance of refugees in one’s own house. Some people even signed binding lifelong guarantees to bear all the costs caused by an individual refugee in order to allow her to enter Europe. Another form of giving that is gaining ground is the establishment of “sponsorships” (*Patenschaften*) which imply a commitment akin to family bonds.

We argue that the theory of the gift developed by Mauss in the interwar period provides a useful resource for understanding the complex interactions taking place between newly arriving refugees and recipient societies. According to Mauss, the gift is characterized by a peculiar combination of freedom and obligation and shaped by reciprocal expectations. We argue that gift theory is, at its core, an “international” theory insofar as Mauss was concerned with the question of how separate communities can establish ties of solidarity and cooperation between each other. Re-reading Mauss helps us to answer key questions about the relations between international refugees and native citizens in their home countries: Which forms of giving are we witnessing? What are the expectations underlying gift-giving in the context of welcoming refugees? Should refugees feel

obliged to repay the arrival gifts? If yes, in what ways? How should we deal with the normative ambivalence of gift-giving and its potentially humiliating effects on those who receive gifts but are unable to reciprocate? Most importantly, how does gift theory help us to better understand the very “concept of integration itself” (Miller, 2016: 132) which is at the heart of recent debates on the ethics of immigration?

We will proceed in three steps. First, we explore the range of public responses to Germany’s decision to open its borders and the ensuing huge influx of immigrants. Against the backdrop of this particular empirical context, we again make use of the typology of currents in European international thought presented in the “Introduction” to this Special Issue. Second, we apply gift theory as a heuristics for a better understanding of the ways in which the refugee crisis unfolded within the civil sphere in Germany and some of its neighbors. In the final section, we take up the question of the contribution of gift theory to the ethics of immigration.

Maussian and other public responses to the arrival of refugees

We now examine some of the public responses to Germany’s open-borders experiment. On the surface, much of this response can be captured under the rubric of the new civil myth of a “welcoming culture,” fired up by Merkel’s Obama-like motto “We can do it” (*Wir schaffen das*) and made visible at railway stations from Munich to Dortmund where thousands of citizens greeted refugees like heroes as they arrived from Hungary and Austria. Volunteers amassed large stockpiles of food, graffiti artists painted signboards reading “a warm welcome” in Arabic, and Austria elected the German equivalent of “welcoming culture”—“*Willkommenskultur*”—as “Word of the Year.” Liberal media shared the enthusiasm and spoke of another German “miracle,” a sentiment that was later echoed by the aforementioned Pankaj Mishra and the *New York Times*, among others. A British conservative, however, called Germany “a hippie state, being led by its emotions” (Anthony Glees on BBC World Service, 9 September 2015).⁴

Not only most of the critical debates but also social performances—street rallies, sit-ins, artistic interventions, and violent incidents—surrounding the biggest wave of immigration to Germany since the end of World War II took place outside the formal political system in what Jeffrey Alexander (2006) calls the “civil sphere.” This sphere is governed by the rationality and publicness of democratic speech, but even more so by activists and intellectuals who make use of polarizing codes and narratives that aim to close the gap between democratic movements and the wider audience of citizens. As a result of these polarizing activities, the mythical and miracle-like aspects of the moment only partially translated into stable patterns of civic solidarity. Hospitality was strong, but so was hostility.⁵ While the commitment of citizens to the new cosmopolitan cause continued, opposition to a welcoming refugee policy grew stronger and more militant. In numerous cities, particularly in East Germany, refugee shelters and buildings destined to be turned into homes for refugees were firebombed. While some of these acts might be seen as vandalism, when people were actually living inside those attacked buildings, it would be appropriate to speak of acts of terrorism directed against refugees. On a different level, the welcoming policies adopted by the government were fiercely attacked across the

political spectrum and especially by the newly emerging far-right political party AfD, “Alternative for Germany” (Heins and Unrau, forthcoming).

How are we to understand these developments? In this article, we maintain that gift-giving practices as described and analyzed by Mauss are at the heart of the dynamics of the integration of refugees and other forced migrants. In contrast to rational purposive action or legalistic rule following, the concept of gift exchange emphasizes a noncalculative or nonutilitarian responsiveness within expanding networks of mutual social expectations that are based on the triple obligation of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 50). Without this kind of reciprocal responsiveness, the social and civic integration cannot succeed. But before we discuss this central claim further, we would like to translate the main public responses to the refugee challenge in Germany back into the typology presented in the “Introduction.” In fact, the public debate in Germany and Europe was dominated by the four political languages of liberal rationalism, anti-liberal realism, Marxist revolutionism, and Maussian solidarism:

(a) Many see the arrival of almost 1 million refugees through the lens of liberal rationalism and the “doux-commerce” thesis that emphasizes the beneficial effects of market exchange. This perspective has been taken by academics, politicians, or representatives of chambers of commerce who reject the public image of refugees as a dark and dangerous mass of people. Instead, audiences across the country are called upon to see not only the arrival of persecuted individuals but also the arrival of potential consumers and of workers who address the shortage of labor in many industries. For example, Ulrich Grillo, then president of the Federation of German Industries, emphasized that refugees might help German industry to solve some of its problems: “We will have a demographic problem in the future, a shortage of labor. This lack can be reduced . . . We must take the chances and minimize the risks as much as possible” (Deutschlandfunk, 2015).

While pointing to constitutional and international obligations, Grillo and other liberals stress utilitarian considerations and the potential benefits migrants from all over the world might bring. In order to actually realize those potentials, migration scholars Alexander Betts and Paul Collier have suggested establishing special economic zones for industrial production in countries such as Jordan which would employ both Syrian refugees and natives. Such innovative projects would have to guarantee international labor standards. This way, they would transform the economic exploitation of the plight of refugees into a win-win scenario for both refugees and the host society: “When it comes to refugee policy, compassion and enlightened self-interest are not mutually exclusive” (Betts and Collier, 2015: 88). The central metaphor used by many of the proponents of this narrative is the “social contract” to be negotiated between the newly arrived refugees and the host society.

(b) Anti-liberal realists in the academic and public debate about the integration of migrants take a quite different position by highlighting the existential threat posed by migrants—in particular by migrants with African or Islamic backgrounds—against any European nation. For example, well-known German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who has become an intellectual figurehead for the New Right, claimed in an interview that “the more refugees come, the weaker it [i.e., Germany] becomes—to the delight of its rivals. That is why Obama is lauding Ms. Merkel” (Sloterdijk, 2016; cited in Müller, 2016). Sloterdijk explicitly refers to Carl Schmitt, the godfather of anti-liberal realism, twisting his famous definition according to

which “sovereign is who decides about the state of exception” by claiming, “Now, the refugees decide on the state of exception. The German government has allowed itself to be overrun in an act of renouncement of sovereignty.” (cited in Müller, 2016) This diagnosis of a fatal “weakening” of state and nation draws on Schmitt’s conception of politics as antagonism between friends and foes, as well as on his more specific view of the United States as promoter of “spatial chaos” and—in normative terms—of a “dissolution into general universality” (2006 [1950]: 227, 257–258). Sloterdijk’s comments articulate and amplify the old European fear of the barbarian “Other.” Although he claims to be ambivalent about the “phobocratic” tendencies of the present age, his diagnosis is ultimately based on fear. Fear of the Other is even more of a motif in the comments of one of Sloterdijk’s former students, Marc Jongen, who has become something like the party philosopher of the far-right party “Alternative for Germany.” Jongen (cited in Helg, 2016) translates Sloterdijk’s (2012) hope for a return of European manliness and “thymos” (2012: 12) into a justification for the formation of “citizen militias,” claiming that in the current situation, “we have to put on the emergency brake and in the name of abstract ideals we cannot promote a development which leads into the abyss.”

(c) On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the “No Borders!” movement reenacted a version of the narrative of Marxist revolutionism which shares with anti-liberal realists the understanding of migration as threatening the old order but looks at this possibility in a rather festive mood. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) have put it,

Even the most significant population movements of modernity (including the black and white Atlantic migrations) constitute Lilliputian events with respect to the enormous population transfers of our times. A spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration. All the powers of the old world are allied in a merciless operation against it, but the movement is irresistible. Along with the flight from the so-called Third World there are flows of political refugees and transfers of intellectual labor power, in addition to the massive movements of the agricultural, manufacturing, and service proletariat. (2001: 213)

So instead of the specter of communism which haunted Europe a while ago, it is now the specter of migration which is believed to be able to threaten the old liberal–capitalist order. Yet in the real world of the European civil sphere, a nonrevolutionary version of this interpretation gained more prominence. As German sociologist Ludger Pries (2016) points out, mass migration from the Global South should be interpreted as the consequence of a “new and transnational social issue” (2016: 54) and its neglect by governments and societies in the Global North. A similar point has been made by Joseph Carens (2013), who writes that “the control that democratic states exercise over immigration plays a crucial role in maintaining unjust global inequalities and in limiting human freedom unjustly” (2013: 230). He goes even further by drawing an analogy between the restriction of the global freedom of movement and feudal class privileges, even though he explicitly distinguishes his own plea for open borders from the revolutionist call for abolishing state borders, and thus state sovereignty, altogether. Pries and Carens would interpret the arrival of large groups of forced migrants and the activism of those who welcome and take care of them as part of a wider movement for the protection of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in general. In this context, refugees are no longer understood as passive recipients of aid, but as active movement members who make claims for justice and invoke global human rights.

(d) A prominent voice for the civic equivalent of what we have called solidarist rationalism in the “Introduction” is the journalist and philosopher Carolin Emcke, who agrees that what has developed in Germany and some of the neighboring countries is a new “social movement.” Interestingly, Emcke (2015) insists, with explicit reference to Mauss, that at the heart of this movement for welcoming refugees is the idea and the practice of gift-giving: “It is not simply about an individual act of hospitality. For quite some time now, a committed social movement has developed from the idea of the gift.” This emphasis on gift-giving encapsulates the neo-Maussian perspective, which we would like to further develop in the remainder of this article. We propose to interpret the interaction between forced migrants and welcoming members of the host society as a form of gift exchange in the sense of Mauss.

The gift as a heuristic for understanding evolving relations between host society and refugees

Mauss addresses the question of how clans and tribes in premodern societies were able to manage conflicts and to establish lasting peaceful relationships between strangers before markets and legal contracts came into being. He also emphasizes that anthropological findings from seemingly remote societies have relevant implications for contemporary societies as well:

Thus we can and must return to archaic society and to elements in it. We shall find in this reasons for life and action that are still prevalent in certain societies and numerous social classes: the joy of public giving, the pleasure in generous expenditure on the arts, in hospitality, and in the private and public festival. (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 88–89)

Here, hospitality as shown by volunteers in the European refugee crisis is explicitly listed as one of the instances where we find the “archaic” morality of the gift at work today. While not being absolute or unconditional in the sense of Derrida (2000: 25; 77), widespread public hospitality toward migrants is, nevertheless, remarkable in a structurally inhospitable world of militarized border controls and increasingly selective immigration policies tailored to the labor market needs of rich countries. In international politics, hospitality may be an outdated norm that has been replaced by the twin ideals of state sovereignty and individual rights (McKeown, 2008: 355), but for citizens in northern Europe or along the Italian and Greek shores of the Mediterranean something close to pure hospitality toward unknown and unknowable strangers seems to have served as a “regulatory ideal” (Kearney, 2015: 174). However, we argue that Derrida’s (2000) account of unconditional hospitality toward the other—“I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (2000: 25)—is less appropriate as a starting point for understanding the interaction between refugees and European citizens than Mauss’ concept of the gift as reciprocally obliging.

This leads to two more specific reasons for analyzing the relations between refugees and members of the host society through the lens of gift theory. One reason is that refugees themselves have interpreted their situation in gift-theoretical terms. Here are a few

examples. In Berlin, immigrants (refugees and others) engaged in voluntary work with refugees have set up an online platform called “Give Something Back to Berlin,” where “new Berliners” including refugees offer services ranging from fixing bikes to language instruction, dance classes, and self-defense courses.⁶ In the fall of 2015, refugees distributed roses to passersby in various German cities, to “thank Germans for their hospitality.” Some of them distributed little paper cards which read “You have seen our sadness, today we want to show you our happiness.” After heavy rains caused a flood in several parts of southern Germany in May 2016, groups of refugees volunteered to clean up the squares and houses which were covered in mud and debris. One of them commented to a national newspaper, “We have received so much help from the people in Simbach [one of the affected towns], now we can give something back. That feels good” (Heinig, 2015; Reinartz, 2015; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2016).

The second reason for using gift theory to explore the relations between refugees and host societies is that this approach shifts attention away from state policies toward refugees to informal everyday interactions in the civil sphere. The fact that most of these interactions are voluntary and not required by law does not imply that reciprocal obligations do not arise in this field. Quite the contrary, to a large extent, it is in this field that citizens and newcomers begin to accept, or fail to accept, that they have some minimal obligations toward one another as members of the same society. Close to Mauss’ use of the term “obligation,” David Miller (2016) speaks of “associative obligations—obligations that we have simply in virtue of the relationships in which we stand to other people rather than as part of some universal scheme” (2016: 25–26). This new focus on civil interactions raises a number of both empirical and theoretical issues. Empirically, what first struck some observers and field researchers was the emotional intensity of some of those interactions during the refugee crisis. One of countless volunteers stated in an interview: “It was a collective euphoria, because it made sense and did not happen from a position of superiority” (cited in Pries, 2016: 66). We saw that some refugees, too, spoke of their mostly symbolic acts of “giving something back” as emotionally gratifying. In Mauss’ terms, we witnessed small cycles of giving, receiving, and returning that contributed to the restoration of equality and respect in a situation of gross asymmetry between citizens and newcomers who still had to struggle for legal status.

But there was also a downside to this “atmosphere of the gift” that according to Mauss (1990 [1925]: 83) still permeates much of our morality and, in certain situations, the behavior of governments and citizens in contemporary global society. For various reasons, the gifts given to refugees by citizens including former migrants often remained unreciprocated. This situation of interrupted cycles of giving has moral consequences that were anticipated by Mauss:

The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it ... Charity is still wounding for him who has accepted it, and the whole tendency of our morality is to strive to do away with the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver. (1990 [1925]: 83)

This has been the starting point for anthropologists such as Barbara Harrell-Bond, who focuses on the experiences of refugees both in rich and poor countries. Her collection of testimonies by refugees in different situations suggests that the very “experience

of being helped” is potentially “one of the major sources of stress” (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 136) for refugees. In describing how it feels to be a recipient of aid, they frequently use words such as “humiliated, degraded, shamed, disgraced” (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 142). According to Harrell-Bond, this experience can sometimes be understood as a consequence of inappropriate aid, such as supply with completely inappropriate clothing or unknown food. In some cases, the experience of being dependent is a major source of stress in the context of forced migration; in other cases, it is the fact that for many refugees, it is the first time in their lives that they receive help from a stranger. As a former refugee camp manager from Sudan, who became a refugee himself and arrived in Ireland, explained in an interview given to Harrell-Bond (1999) in Dublin: he felt that he was viewed as “an object of philanthropy” (1999: 143), not as a person.⁷ This is by no means an unavoidable situation. In other historical contexts such as the arrival of Hungarians or Czech refugees in the West after 1956 and 1968, respectively, humanitarians were able to stir feelings of civil solidarity by relying on political affinities such as anticommunism. If that did not work, refugees were portrayed as helpless victims, and appeals were made to the compassion of potential donors, often using dramatic images of human suffering. In the absence of religious or political allegiances and affinities that can be mobilized, this strategy has been used ever since.

During the European refugee crisis, which we have described as an iconic moment of the “international” becoming a part and parcel of the “domestic,” the trend toward portraying and treating refugees as victims and mere receivers of aid was again very strong, unless, of course, they were portrayed and treated as intruders, potential terrorists, or welfare abusers. Some of the harmful consequences of what might be perceived by the beneficiaries of civil generosity as “injurious patronage” can be traced back to avoidable mistakes, lack of knowledge, or negligence on the part of the givers of help. But what is most important in our context is the structure of a situation of receiving gifts when the impossibility to reciprocate leads to humiliation. If they are “unable to repay such obligations,” Harrell-Bond (1999) writes, “refugees feel compelled to exhibit the deference of a subordinate” (1999: 150).

At this point, we want to introduce the perspective of third-party observers in politics and the civil sphere who were neither refugees nor volunteers welcoming refugees. What we wish to call the inclusionary enthusiasm of welcoming citizens and activist groups has been widely interpreted as dishonest or self-serving. Pro-refugee volunteers have been ridiculed as people who are longing for easy ways to satisfy their hunger for authentic experiences while constantly posting Facebook updates with their new Syrian friends. “The state of emergency,” one journalist wrote, “seemed to bring redemption” to vast crowds of German consumers who otherwise could not care less about the state of the world (Pauer, 2015). Other commentators claimed that large numbers of needy refugees in every town and city gave Germans the opportunity to declutter their garages and basements and get rid of things they could not use anyway.

This raises the theoretical question of whether the gifts given to refugees or other people in need are self-serving and motivated by moral narcissism, not by genuine benevolence or solidarity. Can there be such a thing as a false gift? The suspicion that there is something wrong with gift-giving has been generalized by recent critics of humanitarianism. Didier Fassin (2012), for example, characterizes humanitarian foreign

aid as a “salutary power” for Westerners, “because by saving lives, it also relieves the burden of this unequal world order” (2012: 252). This argument is intriguing because it is strongly reminiscent of the rhetoric of church reformer Martin Luther, who objected to the idea that individual good deeds or the selling of indulgences should make Christians believe that their souls would be saved from hell. But Fassin’s critique is also interesting because it is symptomatic for the widespread assumption that we live in a deeply utilitarian world where no such thing as a free gift exists. Alleged gifts or acts of generosity, especially when they occur in the global sphere marked by huge asymmetries of wealth and power, are notoriously met with skepticism. Apparently, there is a deep-seated impulse to identify and “unmask” impure or nefarious motives behind seemingly innocuous acts of generosity.

From a strictly Maussian point of view, this critique of gift exchange as a self-serving ideology is irrelevant. The point of his analysis is precisely that the dichotomy of generosity versus self-interest is misleading (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 93). This does not imply, however, that there is no way of distinguishing genuine gifts from false gifts. But what makes a gift a false gift? Again, from a Maussian perspective, there are two wrong and one correct answers to this question. First, gifts do not cease to be genuine gifts simply because they have the side effect of relieving the conscience of generous citizens in the face of an unjust world. Mauss is very clear on this point: giving “alms” is a matter of “justice” (1990 [1925]: 23), regardless of the complex reasons that may motivate such acts. Second, items do not necessarily cease to be genuine gifts only because they have lost their use value for those who give them away. In a world of deep differences, one and the same object might well be appreciated and used by different people in very different ways.

Against these two moralistic misunderstandings of the meaning of gift exchange, we argue that a false gift can only be one that fails to establish, strengthen, or restore a lasting bond between strangers or separate communities.⁸ This failure to connect may sometimes be due to impure or egocentric motives, if these motives transpire in the process of gift exchange. It may also be due to the worthlessness of the object given as a gift or the absence of a common metric between donors and beneficiaries about what constitutes a valuable and useful object. There are many reasons why gift exchanges fail to create a sense of solidarity or togetherness. Remember that gift-giving, as we have explained in the “Introduction” to this Special Issue, is a particular type of transfer of socially valued objects. This leaves the question open for whom certain objects are valuable, and why. It is important to note that, in principle, any object can become a gift, or a commodity, or a piece of junk, depending on the symbolic power invested in them. The things given to refugees and their families during the first stages of Germany’s open-borders experiment, including money, clothes, especially designed apps, commitments to sponsor or vouch for refugees, valuable information, and free time, were mostly regarded as genuine “arrival gifts.” In many of these cases, Mauss’ observation applied that “by giving one is giving oneself” (1990 [1925]: 59) to others.

Gift exchange and the concept of migrant integration

The admittance and accommodation of immigrants in general, and refugees in particular, is contentious because it is likely to “impose costs on the receiving community” (Miller,

2016: 107). With regard to refugees and asylum seekers, receiving societies face the difficulty that the legal obligations toward refugees are much more stringent than toward other migrants, but at the same time, the costs for integrating them are often significantly higher. In the case of economic migrants, the compensating benefits for the economy are often fairly evident, for example, in the case of highly skilled experts who are deliberately attracted to join the national workforce. Here, the costs can be represented as “investments” in the future. The case of refugees, however, is different because in strictly economic terms there is typically no obviously good deal available for the receiving population. Even if backed up by international human rights agreements, both the opening of national borders for refugees and the first steps toward integrating them into mainstream society are not trade-like but rather gift-like in the sense that political leaders and ordinary citizens gratuitously surrender a small share of wealth to noncitizens. This is bound to be controversial, especially in a world of highly stratified mobility, in which immigrants are normally admitted only on the basis of merit and anticipated benefit to the receiving society (Shachar, 2016).

The other reason why immigration in general—and the immigration of people regarded as “undeserving” in particular—is contentious is that reciprocity or even “gratitude” is not assured. Who knows whether the newcomers from faraway places will really turn out to be like their role models presented by cosmopolitan political theorists: “ordinary, peaceful people seeking to build decent, secure lives for themselves and their families” (Carens, 2013: 276)? And who knows how in the long run the growing social and ethnic heterogeneity of the population will affect the welfare state and other basic institutions of democratic society (Rueda, 2014)?

Reflecting on the European refugee crisis and the welcoming culture in parts of Europe, Miller (2016) has made the following fairly pessimistic and in some respects sadly accurate prediction:

Many ordinary Europeans deserve moral credit for the willingness they have so far shown to extend help to migrants arriving by sea or travelling across the continent. But this generous initial response may not survive the experience of immigrants entering local communities in large numbers and competing for jobs and housing (it will certainly not survive if it turns out that the migrant flows include a few radicalised Islamists bent on terrorism). (2016: 172–173)

In this article, we have translated what Miller calls the “generous initial response” of civil society to the influx of refugees into Maussian terms of gift-giving. We agree with Miller that those initial responses were insufficient and perhaps short-lived. Even if successful and gratifying, iterative cycles of giving, accepting, and reciprocating gifts between volunteers and refugees are limited in reach and significance. There are three reasons for this. The first reason points to the general shortcomings of voluntary action in democracies. Judith Shklar (1998) has argued that if volunteering for good causes is motivated by pity and compassion, its foundation can turn out to be very unstable (1998: 289–290). Almost rephrasing Mauss’ argument about the psychological harm sometimes caused by the “patronage of the rich almsgiver,” Shklar writes that “charity offered by voluntary groups is degrading for the recipients in a way that legislated state benefits are not” (1998: 381). What is required, then, is a routinization of the inclusionary enthusiasm

that fueled the generous initial response to the refugee crisis. One basic precondition for a successful cycle of gift exchanges is that migrants are not reduced to objects of philanthropy and that they are not explicitly called upon to show their gratitude (Nayeri, 2017). Instead, they need to be obliquely encouraged to reciprocate the initial welcome gift by offering their own skills, abilities, and experiences to society. Moreover, the exchange through gifts must be underpinned by institutionalized and state-backed rules and rights. Refugees need to and, in fact, do struggle to claim their rights under national and international laws.

Second, the transition from pity to justice demands the organization of a much broader social basis. Laying the groundwork for a new refugee policy in Europe is impossible without engaging the nonengaged, the bystanders, and the skeptics who ask the kind of questions which political theorists such as David Miller and other advocates of closed borders are asking. In the case of Germany and other liberal democracies, this broadening of the social basis of welcoming refugees has indeed been established. The range of “rich almsgivers” includes not only volunteers but also the federal and local governments, voluntary welfare associations, the Christian Churches, Muslim charities, as well as Jewish organizations and initiatives. At the same time, it is obvious that the immigration systems in most democratic countries are widely considered to be in crisis, mostly because the law governing immigration is rather inadequate for the “irregular” reality of immigration on the ground, as we were able to see during the refugee crisis, but also because of the lack of connection between policy makers, businesses, and advocacy groups, on one hand, and the general public on the other hand.

Third, if the wealth of civic gift-giving practices in the context of European refugee policies is supposed to help us “to perceive better organizational procedures applicable in our societies” (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 91), it is not enough to harness the power of the national state; the power and the resources of other member states of the European Union have to be mobilized as well. In Europe, it is not only uncertain whether the gifts given to refugees will ever be repaid (in any form); what is even more uncertain is whether some member states will ever start *giving* anything to refugees in the first place. If Germany has been engaging in something akin to a potlatch by welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees, as Wolfgang Streeck claims, it is far from clear whether the European Union will at some point in the future take up the challenge and transform the potlatch into a burden-sharing scheme that might resemble the *kula* ring described by Mauss: a circular kind of reciprocity in which all members accept common obligations toward refugees and take turns in fulfilling these obligations according to their capacities (cf. Oates and Grynawski in this Special Issue).

Despite these limitations and shortcomings, we argue that the kind of exchanges through gifts in which volunteers and refugees are engaged encapsulate and foreshadow the process of migrant integration in its entirety. Gift theory is particularly relevant in situations where the goal is to jumpstart a process of integration between natives and newcomers from markedly different cultural backgrounds. In such a situation of internal transnationalism, interaction is to be sought without (the knowledge or the existence of) any prior common basis in shared values and norms. Mauss has argued that under certain circumstances, practices of gift exchange can give rise to cooperation and a sense of mutual interdependence even in the absence of a preexisting common religion or

tradition. They can also give rise to “integration,” defined by Mauss (2013)—following the British–Australian anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer—as the contested process of producing “a relative moral, mental and cultural unity” (2013: 84) among the residents of a functioning modern state. Our argument is that once we unpack this multidimensional process of what Miller (2016: Chap. 8) calls “social,” “civic,” and “cultural” integration, we discover that it contains often overlooked elements of gift exchange. The integration of migrants is not a two-step process of give and take similar to a social contract but rather a three-step process of giving, taking, and reciprocating.

This way of making use of gift theory leads us right into the heart of current struggles over immigration and the admittance or resettlement of refugees. What is at stake in these struggles is primarily social “trust”—a term used, but not further explored both by Miller (2016: 18, 64–65) and Carens (2013: 282). In our view, trust and gift-giving are closely related. If we accept Carens’ premise that societies which are the destination of migrant flows are composed of “members” and “strangers” (2013: 109) on their way to becoming members, the building of social trust is key to social integration, and gifts can be one important element in this. The reason is that gift-giving both *signals* and potentially *generates* trust as long as the gifts exchanged prove to have social value and are not “false” in the sense explained before. As Martin Hartmann (2011) explains, trust is the “fragile result of socio-cultural processes of interaction.” (2011: 11) It cannot be the object of moral imperatives. People do not become more trustful of others simply by being told that they ought to trust others. Nor can trust be the result of a cost–benefit calculation. Knowing that it might be useful to trust a person is not enough to actually generate trust.⁹

In other words, we cannot decide to trust another person; instead, trust *grows* through repeated practice. Relations of trust are very different from contracts, even if they may facilitate or give rise to contracts. Trusting others implies having “no guarantees” (Hartmann, 2011: 25) that those trusted others will not disappoint us. All this makes trust very similar to gift-giving. Both trust and gift exchange as understood by Mauss presuppose what Hartmann (2011) calls the “cooperative autonomy” (2011: 185) of humans and human communities. Gifts are a way of demonstrating our trust or at least our readiness to build relations of trust. When we trust others, these others gain a greater range of options, including the option to hurt or disappoint us. Vulnerability is thus constitutive both of trust and of gift-giving. This is why Mauss writes that “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.” (1990 [1925]: 16) It is also the reason why in societies which attract immigrants the interaction between members and strangers, and particularly between members and refugees, are fraught with ambivalence and conflict.

Notes

1. Admitting the refugees was a gift in the sense that Germany, according to a ruling of the European Court of Justice in July 2017, was legally entitled but “not required” to tolerate the irregular border crossings of large numbers of migrants without visas or other travel documents (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2017).
2. In this article, we use the terms “refugees” and “forced migrants” generically and interchangeably for all people from war-torn countries or tyrannical regimes who sought and still

seek refuge in Europe or elsewhere. Technically speaking, the term “refugee” is too narrow because it implies a legal status that usually has not yet been established upon arrival in Europe. However, the term “forced migrant” is too broad because it includes not only persons who were smuggled across borders but also those who were “trafficked”—that is, moved by deception or coercion for the purposes of exploitation. As David Miller observes, the events which created the migration crisis in 2015 have important consequences for the distinction between refugees and other migrants. Although he ultimately argues in favor of upholding this distinction, he admits that the events in 2015 have put it into question, since many of those who arrived were “victims of state failure rather than state persecution” (Miller, 2016: 168). For the lack of normative theorizing in the field of refugee and forced migration studies, see Gibney (2014).

3. Many migrants did drown, of course. According to Italian filmmaker Gianfranco Rosi (“Fire at Sea”) “25,000 people died in 15 years trying to reach freedom. Many died being gassed on the boats by the engine. The third class on the boat is a death chamber” (cited in Kramer, 2016).
4. We wish to add that the global civil myth of Germany’s new welcoming culture does have a basis in public policies and popular attitudes but is, of course, by no means unique or uncontested. From an international perspective, when asked whether they would personally accept people fleeing war and persecution in their country, the top countries whose populations answer with “yes,” are Spain, Germany, and Jordan, whereas the least welcoming countries are Poland and Russia. According to Amnesty International’s *Refugees Welcome Index*, the picture looks somewhat different when people are asked whether they would accept refugees “in their home” or in their “neighborhood” (Amnesty International, 2016).
5. For an analysis of the common root and complex relationship between hospitality and hostility, both of which can turn into the respective other, see Kearney (2015). This ambivalence is reminiscent of the “double meaning” of the word “gift” in German where, as Mauss (1990 [1925]: 81) noted, it means “poison.”
6. See the website: <http://www.givesomethingbacktoberlin.com/> (accessed on 15 December 2017).
7. Similar evidence has been collected by the French anthropologist and philosopher Isabelle Delpla after the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina. Humanitarian aid, she writes, was necessary for the survival of many individuals and families but was also experienced as “humiliating” and as “a fall in the hierarchy of countries, peoples and cultures, where it is always possible to fall lower” (Delpla, 2007: 141). See also the debate in Heins et al. (2016).
8. It is perhaps worth noting in this context that Axel Honneth, a moral philosopher, has explicitly rejected neo-Maussian approaches because the act of gift-giving cannot be traced back to an unambiguously moral attitude of suspended self-interest in a Kantian sense. See his review of Hénaff (2010) in Honneth (2010).
9. Carens rightly insists that refugees and other immigrants should not be encouraged “to take the attitude ‘What’s in it for me?’ in thinking about whether to become citizens” of their new home country. Merely “instrumental reasons” are not enough to build trust and a genuine “sense of identity and attachment” (Carens, 2013: 107).

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