

SOME PROBLEMS WITH RECIPROCITY¹

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ABSTRACT: *The author rejects an mechanical application of reciprocity for analysing social relations, both in past and current contexts. As the norm of reciprocity is often invoked by the actors themselves, the research can reproduce actors' interested representations of their relations. The paper indicates some of the problems involved.*

Let me begin with a caveat: I usually move between 1400 and 1600. Peasants, notaries, scholars and their wives are my familiar subjects. I am not at all sure whether the few thoughts that follow would be relevant to the ensuing discussions of the workshop. They grew out of my ongoing research on lords-peasants relations in the German countryside and some more general work on the potential insights and limitations of concepts of gift exchange.

It seems easy enough to apply notions of reciprocity for analysing social relations, both in past and current contexts. This is the case mainly because the norm of reciprocity is often invoked by actors themselves, who often portray and evaluate relationships by this standard. Yet this may be bought at the price of reproducing actors' interested representations of their relations. I wish to indicate briefly some of the problems involved.

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1. Invisible Goods

Not all services and counter-services are equally visible (think about household chores)². Representations of reciprocal exchange are contested terrains. Since social actors' chances of imposing their representation of exchange are not equal, services performed by powerful actors' are likely to be more explicit and visible, whereas weaker actors may end up trying in vain to make their contributions felt at all. Instead of giving examples from the historical records I study, which pose some additional problems, let me illustrate the point from Pryor and Graburn's study of a Sugluk, an Eskimo village on the southwest side of the Hudson Strait. Pryor and Graburn tried to track as closely as possible the flow of services and counter-services in the community in question, and came to the conclusion

that many people of low social status were very generous in their gift transactions, and yet they continued to be labeled as low-status individuals, in part because their members broke some of the other moral rules, but mainly because most of the Sallumiut hardly ever visited them, and were, therefore, able to accuse them of lack of hospitality. On the other hand, some of the most productive families were only regularly generous, but were able to maintain their high prestige by occasional conspicuous giveaways on a scale that those who were physically unable or who were poor in hunting equipment were unable to maintain. Furthermore, conspicuous giveaways of successful families were long remembered, and what people said about the rules of sharing sometimes counted for more than what people did: for instance, the high-prestige persons always vehemently upheld the ethics of the system and the necessity of total generosity, whereas some of the poorest questioned the need to continue a distribution system that had been functional among much smaller traditional social groups. Yet, as our analysis indicates, some of the former were net takers (even after the giveaways had been taken into account), and some of the latter, net donors!³

One hence faces a double problem: One the one hand, some of the services actually exchanged are less visible than others, and are therefore not taken

² For an excellent analysis, see Arlie HOCHSCHILD (with Anne MACHUNG), *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 1989).

³ FREDERIC L. G. PRYOR and NELSON H. H. GRABURN, «The Myth of Reciprocity», in *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research*, Kenneth J. G. Gergen, Martin S. Greenberg and Richard H. Willis, eds. (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1980), pp. 215-238, here: pp. 234-235.

into account by participants. Participants' accounts of reciprocity are socially slanted and culturally biased. If we need to study relationships, making actors' notion of reciprocity an analytical concept may double the ideological effects. Where actors do not invoke notions of reciprocity, the meaning of practices rendered invisible may elude us completely. A good example of is provided by Gabriela Signori's work on urban family traditions. By carefully following people's traces in fifteenth-century urban records, she uncovered an invisible exchange of gifts and identities, as former servants or grateful sons-in-law adopted their benefactors' family names⁴.

On the other hand, historians, anthropologists and sociologists are often led to invent invisible counter-services in order to uphold notions of reciprocity⁵. Here, our accounts may verge on tautologies and the ideological effects are obvious. Such «social invisibles», as Pryor and Graburn call them, have often been adduced in order to explain unbalanced exchange or one-sided domination. Medieval lords, for example, have often been described as having supplied their peasants with «something in return» for their labour services and rents, usually in the form of protection. That evidence for this presumed counter-obligation, let alone its fulfilment, has almost never been adduced did not matter, for the assumption has seemed self-evident. Here, conservative defenders of the *ancien régime* find unexpected modern disciples among modern economists seeking to incorporate «protection» into a calculus of benefits⁶, as if power and violence were goods exchanged between sovereign subjects and not forces capable of affecting those subjects, transgressing their boundaries and consequently making the notion of reciprocal exchange almost meaningless.

⁴ Gabriela SIGNORI, «“Family Traditions”: Moral Economy and Memorial “Gift Exchange” in the Urban World of the Late Fifteenth Century», in *Negotiating the Gift*, Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner & Bernhard Jussen eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) (forthcoming).

⁵ «In short, the common assumption of anthropologists and others that exchange in primitive or peasant societies is primarily balanced, where balance can either include or exclude the flow of certain invisibles, needs re-examination in several ways. On a theoretical level, such an assumption leads often to vacuous tautologies, i.e., because transactions are not balanced, a social invisible is invented which balances that transaction at the analytic cost of obscuring the importance of transfer elements. On the empirical level, such an assumption does not lead to very useful predictions in a case study such as this where most of the necessary data for such an analysis are available.» (PRYOR & GRABURN, pp. 226-227).

⁶ Douglas C. NORTH and Robert Paul THOMAS, «The Rise and Fall of the Manorial System: A Theoretical Model», *Journal of Economic History*, 31:2 (1971), pp. 777-803, at pp. 778-779; Douglas C. NORTH, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 19.

Here, history may be of some help by raising indirectly the question, how many of the counter-services invoked in modern political discourse about the welfare state or market capitalism are likely to be perceived as «social invisibles» by external observers or our own more sceptical successors. Accounts of reciprocity should hence at least incorporate accounts of the strategies of representation at work —those that make some relationships seem more reciprocal than others—. Without doing this, applying the notion of reciprocity risks yielding results not significantly different from that of social capital —naturalizing contested social constructions by lending them a scientific aura—.

2. Constructed Links

Marcel Mauss' famous question concerned that mysterious power by which one object seems to be able to attract another, one act eliciting its reciprocation⁷. In discussions of the gift, ample attention has been given to the exact nature of the presumed obligation to reciprocate and to the uncertainties accompanying the stretch of time separating the act of giving from the expected return⁸. But how do objects and actions get tied to each other in the first place? I am not concerned here with the circumstances under which participants' expectations are likely to be fulfilled. The question is rather how distinct objects and services (which are not embedded in a common context of production) come to be perceived as elements of a *quid pro quo* relationship. Material objects and practices do not come into the world with tiny badges attached to them, pointing out to which objects they ought to be linked. Actors have to invest time and resources in order to present a given service they perform as a counter-service (and not, say, as fulfilment of their obligation, unrelated to any prior act). In other circumstances, they would insist that what might otherwise seem an act reciprocating a prior move, is «in fact» a free one. To take an example: Did the Palestinian inhabitants of a certain village in present day Israel vote for the local party bosses in exchange for the service provided by these patrons in preventing villagers' homes (routinely declared «illegal»

⁷ Marcel MAUSS, «Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques», in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, 9th edition (Paris: PUF, 1985), pp. 145-279, at p. 148.

⁸ Pierre BOURDIEU, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 4-7, 171-174; IDEM, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 98-121.

by state authorities) from being demolished? In some circumstances, villagers would insist that this is not the case: Their right to build houses has never been questioned, they would say, and it is their right to vote for whomever they choose. This constitutes their identity and dignity as free citizens. In other circumstances (for example, when state officials come again to demolish their «illegal» homes), villagers would insist that they are entitled to protection from demolition, *inter alia* because they had voted for the right patrons. Their former patrons, on their part, would equally be able to deny any link between voting behaviour and house demolitions. In both cases, these representations could be contested and subverted by others; each would imply a different representation of the social relations and of the actors involved. Here as elsewhere, social actors are engaged in weaving thin threads around heterogeneous and potentially unrelated obligations and services. Their collective and contradictory efforts shape the representation of the obligations at issue and the reciprocal link connecting them. Applying notions of reciprocity may thus not always illuminate the issues at stake; it may just as well turn them more opaque by participating unwillingly in actors' strategies of shaping the situation.

3. The Work of History

These problems are rendered more complicated by the work of time, of history. Tenuous links between services may turn into firm, self-evident ties in historical records. Contested, situated constructions appear naturally related in decontextualized accounts. The hazards of open-ended social action regularly disappear from *post factum* reports. Actors' strategies, if successful, suppress their own traces, and only in exceptional cases can we reconstruct the labour of representation involved in their making⁹. Beyond these general problems, I would like to point out two specific aspects in which history plays a particular role.

(a) Reciprocity is central to self-images of the West. At least since the eighteenth century, reciprocal obligations between rulers and ruled in polities, between lords and peasants in local communities, have become part of the myth of the West, opposed, for instance, to «Oriental despotism» or unrestrai-

⁹ One case of constructing reciprocities is analysed in some detail in my «Feigned Reciprocities: Lords, Peasants, and the Afterlife of Medieval Social Strategies», in: ALGAZI/GROEBNER/JUSEN, eds., *Negotiating the Gift*.

ned und whimsical Islamic rule. Historical myths of reciprocity are hard to dispel, especially because they have been useful as charter myths (think about the «Norman Yoke» and the afterlife of the Magna Carta) for political communities in modern times.

(b) The rise of market exchange (here I find myself in complete agreement with Ignasi Terradas) has modified all social relations and, more specifically, deeply shaped our understanding of reciprocity¹⁰. On the one hand, it imposed its categories on the way we think about reciprocity (a calculus of benefits underlying exchange between independent and sovereign subjects), thus smuggling through the backdoor notions of *homo oeconomicus*. At the same time, the domination of market exchange also involved the construction of purified counter-images, mystified in their own particular manner, the most famous example being the free uninterested gift as the complete opposite of market exchange and contractual obligations¹¹.

As long as accounts of reciprocity bear the imprint of an economic calculus of benefits, one can easily imagine contexts in which weak groups in modern society might lose by trying to ground some of their entitlements in notions of reciprocity. For this would require them to prove they had also provided (are likely to provide in the foreseeable future) some calculable (or at least, economically significant) services, which they would not necessarily be able to do. Under such circumstances, language of entitlements, of universal and unconditional human and social rights might sometimes be more helpful.

4. From Reciprocity to Interdependence

As Norbert Elias reminded us in the thirties, The Western scholarly tradition has bequeathed us the notion of *homo clausus*, of imagining bounded, independent and self-sufficient subjects as its primary unit of analysis. Recipro-

¹⁰ Roy DILLEY, «Contesting Markets: A General Introduction to Market Ideology, Imagery and Discourse», in *Contesting Markets: Analyses of Ideology, Discourse and Practice*, Roy Dilley ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 1-34.

¹¹ This seems to have been part of the point Mauss was making, though he was not necessarily understood in this way: see Jonathan PARRY, «The Gift, the Indian Gift and the “Indian Gift”», *Man*, 21 n.s. (1986), pp. 453-473.

city does not sufficiently undermine this cherished self-image, because it assumes fully formed subjects interacting and exchanging services and goods. It also does not fully capture the deeper interrelations between members of society. It is actors' contested construction of their actions, and hence difficult to use in order to critically analyse them.

An alternative account would take as its point of departure not reciprocity but *interdependence* as a deep structure of social life, challenging directly the notion that society consists of self-sufficient and autonomous subjects. From this perspective, reciprocity is a surface structure —one important and highly ambivalent expression of human interdependence, which may bring to light some dimensions of interdependence while concealing others—. It is enlightening, but not enlightening enough. Interdependent actors rely on each other not only when exchanging services, but for their own constitution. Their interdependence does not reveal itself first at the moment when they have goods to exchange, but already in producing them.

I would not presume to offer here detailed recipes for working out such an approach¹². Instead, I would rather give the argument a last turn by asking about the social conditions which enabled scholars to perceive themselves as abstract subjects, abstracted from the webs of reciprocities, and hence construct the theoretical image of social actors as prior to the networks of interdependence which constitute them.

The ascendancy of the notion of *homines clausi* may be related to the rise of capitalism, but it has deeper roots in Western intellectuals traditions. Philosophers had already imagined themselves as bounded, self-sufficient subjects in times when merchants, for instance, would easily recognize their reliance on reciprocal services and webs of trust and support. Denying reciprocity and interdependence has a scholarly pedigree that goes much beyond economic

¹² I am, however, still tempted to draw at least one political conclusion. Reciprocity between unequal parties can hardly lead to overcoming power differentials. On the contrary: Strict, «balanced» reciprocity can result in the reproduction of inequality (think about negotiations between colonizers and colonized, or between «first world» and «third world» nations; see also Lawrence Blum's review of Lawrence BECKER's book, *Reciprocity, Political Theory* [feb. 1998], pp. 143-148, esp. p. 146). By contrast, by looking at the parties as interdependent, as involved in the making of each other's position, one draws attention to the part of the vanquished in the making of their rulers and vice versa. In this way, one gains a vantage point from which history becomes relevant and redressing inequality means more than establishing transactional reciprocity between unequal parties.

structures. Powerful theoretical critiques of this image of the human actors are not lacking. What we do not yet have, I think, is a historical account of the making of this image—a historical sociology of knowledge whose object is to find what social conditions produced—first, among scholars— notions of self-sufficiency and autonomy—. I would suggest the domestic relations of production of early modern science—the family structures established by West European scholars when they began to found family households in the late Middle Ages— can provide us an important clue into the making of scholarly subjects that can successfully imagine themselves independent and self-sufficient¹³.

¹³ I have tried to sketch some provisional findings of this project on the making of scholars' habitus in two forthcoming papers: «Scholars in Households: Refiguring the Learned Habitus, 1400-1600», in: *The Scientific Persona*, Lorraine Daston and Otto Sibum eds. (special issue of *Science in Context*) and «Food for Thought: Sixteenth-Century Scholars as Consumers», in *Ego-Documents: History, Identity, Narrative*, Rudolf Dekker ed.

THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF RECIPROCITY FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF CONTEMPORARY ADVANCED INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES: AMBIGUITIES AND ASSETS ¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses reciprocity as a tool for the interpretation of modern industrial societies and some of the problems we find when we transfer the anthropological concept into sociology.

This paper deals, in a preliminary and schematic way, with the use of reciprocity as a tool for interpreting modern industrial societies. Within my approach it is necessary to clarify immediately that reciprocity is not only a resource but, as a diffused and variable form of social relation, also an inextricable mix of resources and obligations. This fact must not be forgotten in order to avoid the ambiguities and myths that are usually attached to the use of this and related concept, in particular the fashionable one of social capital.

An anthropological approach allows us to identify a typology of social relations that is significant in terms of both content and organizational logic. It is a question of adapting the concepts formulated to serve micro analysis so that they are compatible with an approach oriented to the macro analysis of social organization.

Reciprocity is a type of social relation that only has meaning within an organizational system, because exchange is not concluded in a single act, transactions are potentially inequitable and the commitment to reciprocity is

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vague or implicit. For this reason reciprocity refers to forms of social organization involving a varying but limited number of individuals who know specifically of each other's existence and engage in personal contact. Both in the case of reciprocity and in that of association the sense of the social relationship is given by different types of common interests, and this is reflected in the underlying form of social organization. To take this distinction to its extreme limit, one could say that whereas in reciprocity the defence of a group interest requires some members to make sacrifices in favour of the group, associative relations advance the interests of all the members of an association and defend them against those who are not members. The difference becomes evident if two examples from opposite ends of the spectrum, that is to say less prone to assuming a mixed meaning, are considered; for example family and trade union. The common interest of the family assumes a meaning independently of its members' individual interests and involves unequal sacrifices and exchanges. The common interest of the trade union is not separate from that of its members and whenever some of them systematically benefit more than others from trade union action, this weakens the organization and can in the long run lead to its break-up.

The question of the group interest having priority over the immediate interests of individuals constitutes the core of the concept of reciprocity as a factor of social organization. But this constitutes only the general universal frame of the concept even if it evokes already two important questions: the fact that in order to prevail over potentially conflicting individual interests the goals, order and ethical system of the reciprocal groups must be embedded deeply, even if for various different reasons, in individual consciousness; and the strict interconnection between advantages and obligations. The transfer of the concept into sociological analysis imposes facing serious problems connected with the historical and cultural variability of the contexts of reciprocity.

Historical variability

This is a major problem particularly because it has been ignored by scholars: within micro approaches reciprocity is not considered as an historical and changing construction, while sociology has often thought of community organizations as disappearing or becoming less and less important within the mo-

dernization process. On the contrary we now know that reciprocity is persistently important but also highly changing within the processes of modernization. Let us mention some traces of change.

- 1) Historians have noted that, particularly in continental Europe, the industrialization and urbanization process has weakened the influx of local communities in favour of kinship and, later on, companionship and friendship.
- 2) The ethnic basis for reciprocity has reappeared in new, various and transformed ways in migration chains and ethnic businesses.
- 3) The family/kinship basis for primary reciprocity has been greatly modified from its patriarchal/clannish origins into various selective and individualistic mixes between nuclear households and close-by or preferred kin relations.
- 4) High geographical and social mobility, and more recently new communication technologies, have promoted opportunities for reciprocity nets that were previously difficult, at least on a mass scale.
- 5) Urbanization itself has promoted new opportunities for reciprocity relations: for example, neighbourhood but also commuters travelling at the same time on the same bus or train.

In general, even if it is a risky operation, it is possible to point to two trends in the transformation of the social basis of reciprocal organizations: a tendency towards less unbalanced distribution of power (from patriarchy to democracy?); an increasing importance of voluntary, chosen selective relations compared to strictly attributed ones. These trends are more powerful within more affluent communities freed from the constraints of everyday needs which, on the contrary, impose a strict line of command and moral obligations and lack of individual choice.

Cultural variability

This is even more problematic. If we start from anthropological experience the variety of reciprocal organizations is nearly infinite in terms of cultural forms and rules of exchange, rituals and norms. For groups with clear and fixed goals (like the genetic reproduction of the group for families) we can

limit and master the complexity but for other cases it is more difficult. Let us look again for some traces for discussion.

- 1) The first area of variability concerns the strength of the network and the amount and quality of resources circulating within it. Each individual is involved in many different and changing systems of reciprocity, from the cohabiting family to the kinship network, from one or more circles of friends to the neighbourhood or village system, from the firm where one works or the school where one studies to companions at work or school. These systems may be more or less strong and more or less rich in resources, in the sense of being able to subordinate immediate individual interests to those of the system itself. Systems rich in resources are also stronger for reasons based on an indirect application of Weberian rationality in that the possibility of more substantial compensation is evident. But the reverse is not true: a poor and socially isolated family is still a strong system with few resources. Granovetter's idea of strong and weak ties falls in this area of variability. We know better now that the difference is mainly given by the quality of resources (and obligations) circulating in strong, closed and homogeneous networks (more supportive but within a more limited range of resources) with respect to looser and more heterogeneous networks. And the difference can go well beyond the application in the case of finding a job.
- 2) The second area of variation is the voluntary versus attributive nature of reciprocal groups. Here it is interesting to point to the mixes like the current ones of kinship or ethnicity: how much and under what conditions a member of a network can select the relations (and consequently resources and obligations) to which (s)he is bound and with what consequences in terms of life strategies and opportunities.
- 3) A third area of diversity is the structure of power within the network. Here I repeat some considerations already made in *Fragmented Societies*. In as much as they are socio-organizational contexts, reciprocal systems are by definition systems of power. The family and the patriarchal power structure are the themes that have been studied most. Also in terms of power, reciprocal contexts are different from bureaucratic or associative ones. Not only is a father-boss different from a foreman, but his power tends to change in different directions, with the growth of technologically advanced modern family businesses or with the urbanization of the poor rural strata in underdeveloped countries and the de-

velopment of the informal sector. The diversity and the changes in the power structure of reciprocal systems are both connected to the meaning and importance of their common goals and to some general social conditions. In theory, it is true that reciprocal patterns of social organization are originally far from individual autonomy and, consequently, the power structure of organizations based on reciprocity can be extremely authoritarian. Take the example of the original legal structure of the Roman family where the *pater familias* had the right of life and death over all the members, including adult children. Conversely, in other cases the power structure can be extremely loose and democratically distributed among members; this often occurs in voluntary networks. The best example is that of a network of friends. But, in this case too, where the objective of the group is more significant, it is also likely that the power structure will change and become more authoritarian. An instance is that of a group of friends who decide to go on an adventurous holiday together involving difficult environmental conditions. A much more unequal power structure will probably emerge. One of the friends will act naturally as a leader and those least able to cope with the difficult conditions will be denigrated and relegated to a subordinate condition. This may eventually lead to a partial or total discontinuation of the friendship. Take a second example. The power structure of a group of teenage friends changes completely when the group becomes transformed into a street gang. Not only does the structure become authoritarian and hierarchical with a leader, deputy leader, etc., but participation in the group may possibly lose its voluntary character. When this happens, members who try to leave the gang are threatened. However, reciprocal patterns of social organization may today be more open to changing their internal power structure in order to accommodate an increasing need for individual autonomy and self-fulfilment than large bureaucratic structures, at least under certain social conditions. This is a point that the classical tradition in sociology has entirely overlooked. The best example are the transformations of the family power structure in the industrialized countries, particularly the changes in social groups with average or above-average incomes. Age and gender asymmetry have decreased and the scope of the organization is more often negotiated than dictated by a single member: individual aspirations and vocations are taken into consideration even when they appear to be in conflict with previous assumptions about the perspective and scope of the

family. The greater flexibility of reciprocal networks in accommodating individual autonomy compared to large organizations is not a paradox, considering their more manageable size or, in other words, the fact that individuals are closer to the decision-making apparatus and so can better negotiate with and influence the group action strategies. Correspondingly, the decision-making apparatus may be more receptive to individual needs and aspirations. This flexibility and receptivity are found only in societies in the industrial age when the diffusion of competitive behaviour opportunities and the parallel emergence of individual self-consciousness leads to the dismantling of the social order based on a strict subordination of individual interests to those of groups based on reciprocity. Furthermore, this process is conditioned by the fact that the opportunities available to such groups for attaining their goals are not too restricted. This is particularly visible in the case of the family. The most egalitarian processes of renegotiation of the power structure are more likely in the case of families with a full range of opportunities than in that of families condemned to struggle for bare survival.

- 4) Perhaps the area of variability which is more important and at the same time more difficult to analyse relates to the goals of the group, its ties and moral structure that justify the superiority of group interests and the specific modes or rituals of their implementation. For interpretative sociological purposes, this exercise cannot stop at a purely descriptive level but has to be grounded in the general social order. In this sense, the analysis of reciprocal systems is a constitutional part of any theory of embeddedness. In conclusion, let us look briefly at some problems concerning this area of variability.

The limits of reciprocity: tensions and contradictions in respect of the general social order

A first problem arises from the fact that within the wide range of reciprocal networks there are some based on goals or power structures that are highly contradictory with respect to the moral basis of society in general. They have a strong internal legitimation with precise rules of honour for circulating resources and obligations, channel loyalty and trust but are disruptive of the general social order. And this is not only so in the clear case of criminal organizations

like mafia groups but also in more ambiguous instances. Let us take the case, recently reported in the press (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 2-9-2001), of what happened in the village of Alinagar in northern India. A 17-year-old man and a 16-year-old woman of different casts were seen together having a conversation by a neighbour who reported the fact, strictly forbidden in the village, to the family of the girl, member of the powerful agricultural cast dominating the region. The two teenagers were privately tried before an assembly of adult village members, including the families of both, condemned to death and strangled. This is a limit case where we have no doubts that the end of story is totally unacceptable but, on the other hand, the internal traditional order of reciprocal groups may contribute to a sufficient level of trust to be used in new opportunities being combined with the preservation of social integration. This occurs within rules that by definition (the priority of the interests of the specific group) are inconsistent with equal opportunities or other founding principles of the modern social order. Thus, the boundaries between legitimate particularistic reciprocal behaviour and disruptive behaviour are not so clear as they appear from the above radical examples.

There is a second mode of taking into consideration the inconsistency between reciprocal networks and principles of modern societies, in particular equal opportunities and selection according to universalistic professional competence rules. I take into consideration here only the particular case of the family business even if the problem is much wider from the point of view of sociological analysis and again with ambiguous boundaries between forms of patronage (in some cases even illegal, but promoting the social insertion of specific groups) versus forms of universalism. From the angle of the family business the possibility to recruit members of the kin network is a legitimate form of buying loyalty cheaply, but it is also an obligation which may have a negative impact on the business. There is what I call «the dilemma of the stupid or lazy cousin». A small business may be successful if the relatives employed in the venture are competent enough and hard workers or unsuccessful if they are not. And the rules of the kinship group leaves limited options for selection: often you have to take all or nothing.

There is also a more general aspect of the problem which is clearly reflected in the Italian data on employment of highly skilled and educated workers in Italy. The persistent dominance of small family ventures, which are naturally less inclined to recruit highly skilled workers and managers as they conflict with the family's aims, distorts the relation between economic develop-

ment and growth of education opportunities. The demand for highly educated workers in industry is chronically depressed and the competition for jobs is relegated to the public sector or large concerns. At the same time, a considerable group of young males do not continue their studies as they are drawn away early to work in small businesses (in the late nineties, only 75% of young males in the wealthy northern regions were in high school against an average of 85%). The changing direction of the gender bias in family education strategies (from investing mainly in male education to investing more in female education) is also accentuated.

The positive cooperative resources of reciprocity: social capital and the third sector

If we consider only what has been said up to now, the impression gained is a negative view of reciprocity as a human resource. This is certainly not my intention. Reciprocity, with its limits and obligations, remains the most powerful factor for the creation of collaborative attitudes, particularly now that the highly bureaucratized and standardized forms of organization are declining and less effective. The problem is what forms of reciprocity can develop that instead of being disruptive of some ethical principles of the modern age (like equal opportunities, welfare rights and social justice) effectively enforce them. Here I just mention the two areas of sociological attention in this field that I will develop more in my spoken intervention and in the final draft of this paper.

The first area of debate concerns social capital and explores the possibility that the resource is less unequally distributed than physical and cultural capital and that, particularly in some contexts, it can offset the closures created by social inequalities and discrimination.

The second area to be developed concerns the third sector, non-profit and solidarity economies and how the development of this area of activities, strongly grounded in the development of new forms of reciprocity, may offset the decline of the welfare state within a persisting welfare culture.