MONEY'S SOCIALIST POTENTIAL – A MAUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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It is rather common among anthropologists to assume that Marcel Mauss – gift theoretician, socialist, and self-proclaimed political economist (Mauss 1924) – would have embraced several recently circulating economic ideas that can be subsumed under the label "sharing economy". These ideas claim to be able to correct short-comings of the current neoliberal free-market capitalism through the abolishment or sidelining of money (see Hahn 2012). They are not only proposed as viable means to reduce massive wealth inequalities but also hailed as solutions to the urgent ecological problems of our times. The assumption that Mauss' economic theory supports a primacy of non-monetary sharing activities, a "gift economy", is, however, short-sighted. In contrast to this, his discussion of the Bolshevists' failed attempt to get rid of money (Mauss 1997) and his reluctance to propose a "gift economy" as a feasible alternative to a monetary market economy regulated by the state and intermediary associations such as trade unions (Mauss 2002: 98-99), professional associations each possessing their own ethics (Mauss 1969a) and worker- as well as consumer-cooperatives (Mauss 1901, 1920, 1997: 541-542) illustrate that Mauss was rather critical of utopian ideas that were trying to overturn an economic system based on money and a free market:

"It was even more absurd to assume that in order to bring socialism into being it would be necessary to destroy what constitutes an economy to begin with, namely the market. […] it is the organization of the market, not its oppression, that socialism – i.e. communism – must look out for. […] The majority of socialist theories have […] predicted that future societies would be able to get rid of money. The communist experience has proved the contrary." (1997:541-542)[4]

Mauss, however, did perceive money as a highly ambivalent concept. Money is, on one hand, a "good" medium producing and mediating the information necessary to organize an economy, i.e. a medium providing information about economic actors' demands and about their willingness and ability to take risks in order to make profits.[5] On the other, money potentially turns into a "bad" catalyst of unjust relations between members of different social classes. This second property originates in another crucial "paradox of money", namely that, at least in capitalist economies, money is used as a medium that indexes simultaneously the demands of its owner and the "price" of every person, i.e. the value of its labor power, its credit standing, and the multiple insurance contributions each person has to pay in order to enjoy insurance coverage. This bifurcation of money's indexing ability is a precondition for the bifurcation of capitalist societies into actors who invest, i.e. capitalists, the finance sector and insurance companies; and actors in whom the investors invest, i.e. workers, debtors, and insurants (Mauss 1969b: 111, Polanyi 1957).[6] The peculiarity of Mauss' politico-economic ideas is now the assumption that the ambivalent nature of money can be exploited for socialist goals. He suggests that money's "good" property can be used to ward off its "bad" trait, i.e. money's ability to bring forth and solidify social, political, and economic inequality can be tamed by organizing money's potential to provide information in a collective, socialist, and more just way. In other words: Mauss attempts to exploit money's neoliberal virtues (its ability to produce and mediate information) for the fight against neoliberalism's vices (unjust socio-economic relations). Mauss' theory thereby occupies a unique position in the scholarly and politically enacted fight between neoliberals who claim that money is a necessary but "neutral" medium for an economy's organization (Hayek 1945), and socialists, communists, or some adherents of a "sharing economy" who claim that money itself is the root of all evil.

But what economic activities or ideas are subsumed under the rather elusive notion "sharing economy"? It is helpful to distinguish at least two different types of economic activity: on one hand there are proper *sharing activities* where either the burden of the price to buy an object or the burden of finding capital for an investment is shared. Examples of the first type include pro-

[4] All translations are my own. For a German translation of Mauss' articles on money see Mauss (2015).

[5] On the *Socialist Calculation Debate* see Auerbach/Sotiropoulos (2012).

[6] Ultimately Mauss, like Marx and proponents of the *German Historical School of Economics* (e.g. Hildebrand 1922), views it as highly problematic that the class structure of capitalism prevents workers from raising enough capital in order to invest.

fessionally organized car-sharing (for example *Zipcar*) or shared flats; an example of the latter is crowdfunding. On the other hand there are *redistribution systems* whose participants get rid of goods they no longer use by either selling, exchanging, or giving them away freely (for instance on *eBay*, *craigslist*, *Swap.com* etc.). Leaving aside those profit-oriented activities that consider more and more types of goods in terms of the capitalist logic of renting these out to people who do not possess the means to buy them (from apartments to cars to tools), privately organized expenditure (buying one car for five persons) and privately organized investment (crowdfunding), which combine the purchasing and investment power of several individuals in order to at least partially mark their demand in the market, build upon the same principles as and share the main objectives with consumer-cooperatives: to open up markets for people who do not possess the means to enter them. It is nevertheless rather short-sighted to assume that any *sharing activity* proceeding along these lines is inherently more socialist than the individual purchase of a good. Without proper political and social institutionalization these *sharing activities* forego the potential to become visible as being anchored in the political will of associations constituted by several economic actors and thereby miss the chance to challenge the capitalist equation of "1 individual human being = 1 economic actor".

Adherents of a sharing economy, however, rarely refer to socio-economic problems as the main target of their activities. They rather claim to offer an alternative to capitalism's allegedly irrational belief in continuous growth that, supposedly necessarily, causes irreversible ecological damage.[7] By performing activities such as sharing food or even "stealing" food thrown away by supermarkets they attempt to contribute to a "degrowth" of our economic system (Latouche 2007). Instead of using money's demand-indexing potential, they abstain from using money at all. The logic behind these activities neglects that capitalism's inherent unity with financialization is built upon the principle that money not used by its "owner" – at least as long as she stores it in a bank account – is used by other people. It is thus at least questionable to view *redistribution activities* that deliberately function without money – for instance food banks or sharing platforms – as economic activities at all: they neither enforce the production or non-production of goods nor index the demands or the willingness to take risks.

In contrast with this, suggestions favored by Mauss – the introduction of additional property concepts beyond that of property owned by individuals, i.e. national property, property belonging to a specific local or professional group (Mauss 1997: 546); alternative taxation systems (Mauss 1922b) that would make sure that the rich once more become the "financial guardians of their fellow citizens" (Mauss 2002: 88); workers' participation in the decision as to how a company's capital is invested; or the combination of individual actors' purchasing power through the formation of consumer-cooperatives – are intended to balance the socio-economic inequalities brought forth by differences between the abilities of members of diverse social classes to inform others of their own demands and investment potentials. The problem is therefore not that markets for goods, capital, and risk exist, but that some economic actors are structurally unable to participate adequately in these markets, because they do not possess the medium necessary to do so, i.e. money. Precisely because buying something – as much a "total social phenomenon" (Mauss 2002: 3) as giving a gift on the Trobriand Islands (Mauss 2002: 27-39) – and investing – as much grounded in the competition between actors as the destruction of wealth on North America's Northwest Coast (Mauss 2002: 42-59) – play a crucial role in the constitution of a society with a common destiny and shared expectations (Mauss et al. 2006, Aglietta and Orléans 1998), everybody's full participation in the economy constitutes a human right (Hart et al. 2010).

Far from being such a universal right, the degree of participation in the capitalist economy is to a large extent a function of an individual's position in the net of capitalist power relations. These power relations become manifest in a fundamental difference between capitalists' and non-capitalists' abilities to (1) index their demand/investment potential, and to (2) access or creatively shift their debts on the financial market – a necessary part of any functioning market economy because it generates prices for taking risks that subsequently organize investment (Marx 2004, Sotiropolous/Milios/Lapatsioras 2013, Keynes 2007, Mauss 1922a). The main problems of a monetary market economy that does not function properly and justly are therefore consequences of the specific arrangement of the politico-economic relations between members of diverse social classes, and Mauss'

[7] Cf. the *Convivialist Manifesto* (2014) for an explicitly Maussian argument along these lines.

chief goal was to replace these oppressive capitalist power relations with a socialist alternative: syndicalistically organized factories which would nevertheless continue to depend on taking risks by lending money from communally organized credit unions (Mauss 1997: 543)[8] at a price established by the mechanisms of a free market, whereby society itself would become the "main dispenser of credit" (Mauss 1997:543).[9] In other words: Mauss did not want to replace the freedom of individual entrepreneurs with the coercion of the state, as he accuses the Bolshevists of doing (Mauss 1997: 547-556), but rather he believed in a social and economic superiority of political and collective associations whose members decide voluntarily to unite themselves with one another in order to increase their economic influence and productivity.

By way of conclusion it can be said that, from a Maussian perspective, money does not necessarily impede the emancipation of the poorer segments of a society, but – if its ability to mediate and produce information is socialistically exploited – it offers an excellent and democratic entry point from which to change our societies to the better. As a "fetishistic" (Mauss 2006:259) entity mediating and at the same time producing a society's expectations, money seems to be doomed to be viewed either as a demonic device leading to encompassing poverty or as a soothing savior bringing forth a more just society. In contrast to this rigid dichotomy, Mauss' main politico-economic insight, namely that money must always be used in specific ways, of which some can be beneficial to our society while others might not, can ignite hope for a more just, as well as more human, future economy.

[8] Recently my colleague Kai Koddenbrock told me about the interesting idea of establishing so-called "debtors' unions", collective organizations that combine the aggregate power of debtors to achieve shared goals (debt relief, better interest rates etc.) by diverse collective actions (collective non-payment, providing legal advice etc.), see for an example: http://edudebtorsunion.org/wp/.

[9] If the society as a whole becomes the main dispenser of credit, each individual is by definition liable for any defaulting debtor and defaulting on one's own debts transforms from an individual violation into a problem that must be solved collectively (Graeber 2011).

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