

**AT THE MARGIN OF THE GIFT: THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION  
AND JUSTICE AS “COMPLEX EQUALITY” IN PAUL RICOEUR’S  
THOUGHT**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to rethink the role of recognition as the foundation of the social bond. The main references are the third part of Ricoeur’s last work *The Course of Recognition* and the central section of Marcel Hénaff’s work *The Price of the Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy* on ceremonial gift-giving. The first part of my article focuses on Ricoeur’s critique of modern individualism and on the modern idea of social bond referring to Hobbes’, Hegel’s and Honneth’s speculation. The second section gives an innovative reflection on the social bond, on institutions and on justice. The social bond foundation can be rethought from the ceremonial gift-giving as a charitable giving in which the other is accepted as an irreplaceable partner. Once the bond is settled, there is the hope that it can be pacific and enduring. In this part, I present a personal reflection on Ricoeur seen as a thinker at the margin of the gift. Trust, belief, recognition of human dignity and justice as “complex equality” are the main concepts for a new type of social bond. The possibility of a pacific bond is open but not automatically ensured.

**Keywords:** Social Bond, Gift, Struggle, Recognition, Justice.

Nowadays, in our plural and intercultural society, the demand for recognition inevitably arises and nothing is more urgent than finding an appropriate answer that is inherently connected with the problem of responsibility and justice. The main purpose of my research is to rethink the role of recognition as the foundation of the social bond. Why is recognition necessary for the development of identity and for social relations? What does it mean to be recognized and to recognize others? These two questions are central in the ethical and political speculation of Paul Ricoeur. Even if the

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theme of recognition has been analyzed by several disciplines, it was investigated with a philosophical attention only in his last work *The Course of Recognition*. His book starts with the observation that no philosophical work has ever been published with the title “recognition”<sup>2</sup>. In contrast with the popularization of the theme and the risk of oversimplification, Ricoeur wants to present a philosophical and critical reflection of it. The recognition is described following a triadic structure from identity to *ipseity* and mutuality. The work is divided in three chapters focused on the identification of anything as the thing that it is, on the recognition of oneself as a capable agent and on mutual recognition. This last part of the book is the main reference of my paper.

The research consists of two joined sections:

1) The first part is focused on Ricoeur’s critique of modern individualism in which relationships are marked by struggle and conflicts. Recognition is seen from Hobbes to the *Anerkennung*’s moral foundation in Hegel until the renewals of the Hegelian argument proposed by Axel Honneth as man’s power over alterity<sup>3</sup>. Since human interpersonal relationships are originally characterized by violence and conflict, the social bond can only be artificial. The State and the economic and commercial activities aim to immunize the relationships and to neutralize human contacts. In this conception, justice finds its concrete and universal application only in the State: outside it, there is no justice or abstract justice.

2) In contrast with individualism in modern and contemporary philosophy, this second section presents an innovative reflection on the social bond, on institutions and on justice. In this part, Ricoeur’s thought will be connected with Marcel Henaff’s work *The Price of the Truth: Gift, Money and Philosophy*. Both of them give new meaning to recognition, to the social bond and to justice. First of all, recognition finds its foundation in the anthropological conception of man as originally relational, vulnerable and a debtor<sup>4</sup>. Alterity is no longer an enemy that must be faced, but it is

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2 “There must be a reason that no widely recognized philosophical work of high reputation has been published with the title Recognition. Is it because we are here dealing with a false concept, one that leads authors seeking new insight into the pitfall of a false subject?”. RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 1.

3 See: RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, Chapter 3, p. 150-246.

4 See: RICOEUR. *Freedom and Nature. The voluntary and the Involuntary*. RICOEUR. *Fallible Man*.

essential for the existence of the self. The other is recognized in its unique dignity, received and respected in its essential freedom. Consequently, the social bond is based on the free recognition of alterity and on the trust granted to interpersonal and institutional relationships. Ricoeur highlights the connection between community and society, between second-person and third-person relations. On the other hand, violence can arise because of the ontological weakness and fragility of man. Justice is called on to restore and to avoid the uprising of conflicts. The just is the measure of the institutions defined as the structures of living together found in historical communities whose function is the distribution of roles, goods, responsibilities and rewards. The task of political institutions is to enable relationships rather than immunizing or constraining them. In a plural society, justice cannot be univocal nor simply plural: authentic justice consists in the recognition of similarity across differences<sup>5</sup>. Recognition and justice as complex equality are tied together: they deal with interpersonal and institutional relations, they seek social peace and the maintenance of diversity.

The foundation of the social bond can be rethought from the ceremonial gift-giving as a charitable giving in which the other is accepted as an irreplaceable partner. This ceremonial gift-giving exchange entails an obligation to reciprocate, but not economically. This means that even in our imperfect human world, there are experiences of mutual recognition as expressions of gratitude. Finally, recognition is acknowledging a debt by showing gratitude.

Can Ricoeur be considered a thinker at the margin of the gift?

### **Threat of the death and struggle for recognition. The immunization of human relations**

The problems of being-with and being-among the others are central in the political society. Since ancient times, man has never stopped thinking about which was

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5 See: TAYLOR. *Developing Ricoeur's Concept of Political Legitimacy*.

the best way to live in a community, about the end for the singularity and the collectivity and their connection. Approaches to these essential issues change depending on the historical situation, the anthropological conception of the human being and on the role played by religions. Equality and differences, identity and alterity, symmetry and dis-symmetry are the main categories in the social bond.

On what does society find its foundation?

The inquiry about the best political order, in which social diversity and conflicting interests can find an appropriate solution is central in the political philosophy of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Since the social community consists of different classes, each characterized by different values and claims to rule, Plato notices that the risk of danger and the uprising of civil wars are forthcoming. As a consequence, the best political order aims to obtain a long-lasting peace amongst classes without avoiding differences. The social bond is founded on the recognition among the parts: cooperation, peace and diversity are necessarily tied together in the best political society. This essential recognition must be promoted and conserved by the political leader identified with the philosopher ruler. Justice is connected with the recognition of the different classes and it is “neither the right of the strong nor the advantage of the stronger, but the right of the best and the advantage of the whole community”<sup>6</sup>.

Aristotle follows in Plato’s supremacy of the politics conceiving it as a practical science concerning the good actions, the human end and the happiness of the citizens. Politics is defined as an architectonic science that “ordains which of the sciences should be studied in the state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them”<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, since the good and

the end is the same for an individual and for a city-state, that of the city-state seems at any rate greater and more complete to attain and preserve. For although it is worthy to attain it for only

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6 PLATO. *Republic [Book IV, 435b] & Laws*. KORAB-KARPOWICZ, Julian. *A History of Political Philosophy*, p. 46.

7 ARISTOTLE. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, I – 1094.

an individual, it  
is nobler and more divine to do so for a nation or city-state<sup>8</sup>.

As humans are essentially social beings, the recognition of the others is crucial for the growth of the singularity and the subsistence of the political community. In this regard, a society is just if relations among citizens are regulated by proportional equality depending on their contribution and excellence<sup>9</sup>.

The relation between the singularity and the community, the connection between the good for the individuality and the collectivity is overturned in modernity. The big political and religious modern fights imply a new thought on social relations, identity and alterity. The birth of the modern subjectivity corresponds with the *Entzauberung der Welt*<sup>10</sup>, a vision of a disenchanted and secularized world, characterized by the downfall of the last centuries' theological and metaphysical premises. This fall entails the beginning of the rationalization process of the world in which the affirmation of the instrumental reason and the standard of efficiency cause the loss of the finality principle at the anthropological level.

In the modern vision of reality, the anthropological configuration of identity and the inter-subjectivity concept go through relevant transformations. Faced with the fall of the theological and cosmological tie, the individual feels at the same time the limitless of his freedom and a sensation of existential loss. Individuality, conceived as possessive<sup>11</sup> and independent, finds itself in a situation of contrast against the other subjects. Therefore, as Ricoeur notices in the last part of *The Courses of Recognition*, in modernity, the reflection on the inter-subjectivity is marked by the reality of the conflict. Referring to the theme of recognition, the French philosopher describes the two main modern interpretations of the relation – the Hobbesian individualistic interpretation and Hegelian dialectic interpretation – stressing that in both of them the relationship is characterized by the struggle.

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8 Idem, Book I, II – 1094b, 7-10.

9 See: Idem, Book V, III – 1131b.

10 WEBER, Max. *Science as a Vocation*.

11 See: MACPHERSON. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.

Hobbes can be considered the founder of modern politics<sup>12</sup>. The first task of the philosopher is to overturn “the homology between the good for the individual and that of the state, which is in a sense a common feature of every ancient moral and political philosophy”<sup>13</sup>. The starting point of his political speculation is the description of the “state of nature” as a thought experiment, as an imagination of the human condition outside the governmental institution. In this original moment, the individuals are pushed by competitions, diffidence and glory, they clash against each other for the achievement of the gain, security and reputation<sup>14</sup>. The philosopher argues that all humans are equal by nature in faculty of body and mind and that each one of the three primitive passions cannot be considered separately from the others. The first purpose of each individual is to preserve his life (self-preservation) and existence to the detriment of the others. In the state of nature, there is an inevitably conflicting relation among the individuals and in this dramatic configuration, humans have in common the capacity to kill and the possibility to be killed. Man is seen as “homo homini lupus” and the state of nature as a “war of all against all”. Original misrecognition<sup>15</sup> - as a denied recognition and as an exclusion of recognition - is at the basis of the conflicting relation. As a consequence, the only possible social bound in this primitive human condition is hostility. In the state of nature, the notion of justice or injustice has no place: “where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues”<sup>16</sup>.

The fear of death and violent physical pain cause humans to seek peace. Individuals are mutually driven to transfer their rights to a common authority and to stipulate a contract in order to establish a State which aims to protect the rights of all men who compose it and prevent the conflict. The fear is not only at the origins of politics, but it is also its own origin: fear is the force that produces politics.

Since the original human relationship is among enemies, the only way to

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12 See: STRAUSS. *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.

13 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 162.

14 HOBBS, Thomas. *Leviathan*.

15 “One another in this sense is a structure of denying recognition that finds its clearest experience in distrust, and its deepest motive in vanity”. RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 164.

16 HOBBS. *Leviathan*, Book 13, 13.

overcome hostility is the destitution of the relation itself. As long as the state of nature can be defined as a “murder community”<sup>17</sup>, the Hobbesian State demands the “dissociation of the community bound”<sup>18</sup>, it is division without *cum*-division (sharing) and a system that immunizes the individuals from relations. The *Leviathan* is an artificial association in which men can escape the danger of death because they are released from the dread of being touched. In the State, built as the association that disconnects human immediate contacts, the only social relations admitted are the vertical exchange between protection and obedience and neutral relations of commercial activities. The individual identity autonomously constitutes itself outside every bond of sharing with the others. Unlike the natural relation dominated by the misrecognition, in the State the recognition is reduced to the need of useful services of the others in order to make the non-relational auto-affirmation of the subject possible. Once the social contract is made and the State is settled, justice exists as a constant will of giving to every man his own<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding Hobbes’ political philosophy, Ricoeur affirms that the main “fault line lies in the absence of a dimension of alterity in the sequence of concepts culminating in the idea of a covenant”<sup>20</sup>. Hobbes does not recognize the connection between identity and alterity in the idea of right, with the idea that the object of right “is everything that we do that is important to others and that is in our power”<sup>21</sup>.

The Hegelian dialectic and the theme of the *Anerkennung* are considered by Ricoeur as a reply to the Hobbesian interpretation of the social bond and sources of politics. In the last part of *The Course of Recognition*, the philosopher does not focus on the *Phenomenology of Mind*, but on the Hegelian earlier speculation in Jena<sup>22</sup>. The problem is to learn if the political order can be founded on a moral demand instead of the fear of death. The notion of *Anerkennung* - or desire to be recognized - satisfies the request in three ways:

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17 ESPOSITO. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*.

18 Idem.

19 See: HOBBS. *Leviathan*, Book 15, 3.

20 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 170.

21 Idem, p. 171. See: ZARKA. *L'Autre voie de la subjectivité*.

22 See: HEGEL. *System of Ethical Life (1802-1803) and First Philosophy of Spirit*.

- 1) at the basis of politics there is an original connection between self-reflection and orientation toward the others, a mutual determination between the relation with ourselves and the inter-subjectivity;
- 2) the dynamic of recognition is articulated from the negative to the positive, from injustice to respect. The recognition is inseparable from the negative dynamic of the process;
- 3) the theory of recognition follows a systematic aspect and a process of institutionalization.

According to Ricoeur, the central merit of the Hegelian reflection is to have the attention focused on the ethical origin of society. However, the development from the natural morality to the ethical State ratified by the right implies an evolution in which the struggle for recognition arises as a reaction to some situations of misrecognition. Conflicts find their solution only in the State conceived as an institution founded on the respect of the laws, on the defense of the individuals' freedom and proprieties. The State incorporates the individual's will in a universal one and it is considered as the individual's will as a rational being. Justice finds its concrete application in the State, outside which there is only abstract justice.

If on one hand Hegel goes beyond Hobbes by admitting a relational and inter-subjective origin of the social bond, on the other hand the Hegelian speculation reproduces the same immunization process of the relations inside the State. Even if Hobbes and Hegel follow different perspectives, both of them conclude that the relations are possible only if they are solved at the higher level of the Leviathan or in the State of right. The theme of the struggle is declined from an extreme point of view (Hobbes) to a moderate one (Hegel). At the end, to the higher level of politicization corresponds the immunization of relationships.

Even in the systematic renewals of the Hegelian argument proposed by Honneth<sup>23</sup>, the idea of "struggle" occupies a central place. Its origin is not the Hobbesian triad of competitions, diffidence and glory, but at its basis there are moral

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23 HONNETH. *The Struggle for Recognition*.

values. The development of conflictual interactions corresponds to the enlarging of the individual capacities: "the course of self-recognition ends in mutual recognition"<sup>24</sup>. Ricoeur gives an interesting commentary on the three models of recognitions and the related negative forms of disregard presented by Honneth's work. Following the early Hegelian speculation in Jena, Honneth individualizes three spheres of interaction that are connected to three modes of recognition<sup>25</sup> which are necessary for the individual's self-realization:

- 1) Love: the recognition in the situation of love;
- 2) Rights: the recognition related to the juridical level;
- 3) Social respect and solidarity: the mutual recognition in the social dimension of politics.

The first form of recognition refers to primary relations - such as erotic, friendly or family ones - which imply "strong emotional attachments among a small number of people"<sup>26</sup>. It is a pre-judicial degree of mutual recognition among subjects that have an experience of their "concrete needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures"<sup>27</sup>. In this model, the forms of disregard are direct violations of physical integrity and the negation of approbation.

The second form of recognition is about the juridical plane and concerns the universal respect and the legal recognition of rights. In this mode of recognition, it refers to the development of moral responsibility, human capabilities and to the extension of human rights "this enlarging and enriching are the product of struggles that mark the inscription in history of these two associated processes"<sup>28</sup>. Regarding this kind of recognition there are several forms of disrespect: humiliation for the denial of civil rights, frustration for the denial of political rights and the feeling for rejection from the fruition of social rights. These situations cause "the loss of respect that a person feels"<sup>29</sup>.

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24 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 187.

25 "Honneth's strategy rests on a combination of procedures. First, there is the pairing of a speculative argument with an empirically based theorizing about interactions among individuals". Idem, p. 187.

26 Idem, p. 188.

27 HONNETH. *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 95.

28 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 198.

29 Idem, p. 200.

The third form of recognition concerns the social dimension of politics, in particular the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* which is irreducible to juridical ties. In this dimension of the recognition, social esteem and the social recognition are central. This type of recognition is usually connected to specific fighting forms on the axiological level. The social struggles are justified and motivated by the denial of recognition and the necessary demand for it: “every unique, historical struggle or conflict only reveals its position within the development of society once its role in the establishment of moral progress, in terms of recognition, has been grasped”<sup>30</sup>.

At the end of the first part of the paper, two conclusions can be drawn:

- the speculation on the social bond and the recognition proposed by Hobbes and Hegel can be read under the category of immunization. This condition reaches the peak in the contemporary society in which the crisis of social, institutional and interpersonal relationships is clearly present. In such society, there is no true recognition of the other as it is. Moreover, there can only be a neutral recognition or a non-discrimination for the differences which are effectively not welcomed as they are. In a society marked by economical supremacy, the other is reduced to his economic sustain.

In this situation, some claim another kind of recognition and the revival of a sense of community arises. As Sennet notices<sup>31</sup>, all these private demands contain a dangerous idea of recognition and community: what is recognized are some proprieties among members in a determined aggregation. At the end, recognition and community are wrongly collocated on a private level. This recognition, bordered inside a private community, implies the exclusions of all the others. For these reasons, the main risk of our societies is not only the atomism of the individual but also the dangerous atomism of the communities.

In Hobbes’, Hegel’s and Honneth’s reflections, the recognition is always related to the reality of the struggle. Ricoeur stresses that “a certain sense of unease from developing with regard to the claims attaching to the very idea of struggle”<sup>32</sup>. For

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30 HONNETH. *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 168.

31 See: SENNETT. *The Fall of Public Man*.

32 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 217.

this reason, the philosopher asks: “does not the claim for affective, juridical, and social recognition, through its militant, conflictual style, ends up as an indefinite demand, a kind of “bad infinity?”<sup>33</sup>. This means that the recognition reduced to struggle has an incomplete nature.

### **Gift and social bond**

In modern political philosophy, the hegemony of the egoistic interest and the supremacy of the utilitarianism cause the oblivion of the gift and of its efficiency in the social dimension. Nevertheless, the removal of the gift does not correspond to its disappearance: although the gift has been hidden, it continues to operate in the contemporary reality in several forms which are irreducible to economics. Differently from the State and the commerce, the gift refers to the symbolic exchange which is at the foundation of the social bond. The symbolic value of giving permits the transmission of relations and the existence of the bond.

To the theme of the gift Ricoeur dedicates the last part of *The Course of Recognition*<sup>34</sup> in relation to the possibility of a pacific recognition of the other. In this section, the reflection of the French philosopher shares some important conclusions of Henaff’s work *The Price of the Truth: Gift, Money and Philosophy*<sup>35</sup>. Both of them develop the thesis that “the alternative to the idea of struggle in the process of mutual recognition is to be sought in peaceful experiences of mutual recognition, based on symbolic mediations as exempt from the juridical as from the commercial order of exchange”<sup>36</sup>. The aim is to purpose a political reflection of the gift in the terms of mutual recognition.

Recognition finds its roots in the Ricoeurian anthropological and ontological conception of identity, alterity and their relation. In contrast with every pretension of

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33 Idem, p. 218.

34 Idem, p. 225-246

35 HENAFF. *The Price of the Truth*. See in particular: Part II. *The World of Gift-Giving*.

36 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 219.

egotistic auto-foundation, Ricoeur thinks that the subjectivity is ontologically open to alterity<sup>37</sup>. For this reason, the subject can constitute himself only in the dynamic relation with the others. Hence, the relationship is not the primarily place of the conflict or simply of a neutral exchange which should be functional to particular private interests, but it is a structural need of the subject. In this context, alterity is not an enemy to face in conquering power, nor an indifferent presence, but it is a constitutive part of the self.

How can alterity have this role toward identity? Since the subject is ontologically finished, frail and vulnerable<sup>38</sup>, it needs to be recognized by the other because only in this way can it activate its human fundamental capacities and enter the social fabric to be part of it. In authentic recognition, the subject is received in its proper dignity and irreplaceability. Therefore, the recognition is a warm relationship characterized by gratuitousness, interested in the care for the other, in the preservation of its freedom and in the possibility of its expression<sup>39</sup>. As Ricoeur notices in his essay *The Socius and the Neighbor*<sup>40</sup>, the life of the individual cannot be limited to direct relationships such as friendship or family relations, but it is connected with all the others that are part of the social reality through the mediation of institutions. This means that recognition is not limited to primary relations, but it has a social involvement. In the demand for recognition, the affirmation of our human dignity is in question and the role of institutions is to understand and support this request.

As Henaff, Ricoeur investigates the social recognition referring to the theme of ceremonial gift-giving seen as a mutual recognition and a state of peace (only in Ricoeur). In our culture, there are three models of states of peace: *philia*, *eros* and *agape*. This last one “seems to refute in advance the idea of mutual recognition, inasmuch as the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its pure form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return”<sup>41</sup>. The paradox of the gift and the gift in return opens the possibility to a new interpretation of the mutuality of the gift founded on the

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37 See: RICOEUR. *Oneself as Another*.

38 See: RICOEUR. *Freedom and Nature*; RICOEUR. *Fallible Man*.

39 See: BOTTURI. *Identità e riconoscimento*, p. 163-194.

40 RICOEUR. *The Socius and the Neighbor*, p. 98-110.

41 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 219.

idea of symbolic recognition. Ricoeur's reflection on this paradox crosses explicitly with Henaff's one. The main aim of the latter in his work *The Price of the Truth* is to separate the practice of the gift from the economic sphere, from contractual relationships, from the archaic form of trading exchange, and from the moral gift<sup>42</sup>. As a consequence, the ceremonial gift does not belong to the economic order, to the moral order or to the juridical one. As to what concerns first, many thinkers make a mistake in interpreting the gift exchange as a kind of barter or commerce. Ceremonial gift-giving is neither a moral action motivated by generosity, compassion or charity, nor a juridical relation or a contract.

Ceremonial gift-giving has an essential relation with the phenomenon of the recognition<sup>43</sup>. The ritual of opening gifts is a procedure of recognition that implies identifying, to accepting and to honoring the other. The mutual gift is the primary gesture for mutual recognition among humans, it keeps the effective reality of the authentic recognition. As Ricoeur affirms referring to Lefort,

the idea that the gift must be returned presupposes that the other person is another self who must act as I do; and this return gesture has to confirm for me the truth of my own gesture, that is, my subjectivity... human beings thereby confirm to one another that they are not things<sup>44</sup>.

The gift has an ostentation character and operates a public recognition. The ceremonial gift cannot be anonymous or private but must be public and known, since its aim is to permit a reciprocal and public recognition and to create and strengthen the social bond. Following Henaff's proposal, Ricoeur notices that revolutionary is the shift of the emphasis “from the relation between giver and recipient to seek the key to our enigma in the very mutuality of the exchange “between” the protagonists, calling this

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42 See: HENAFF. *The Price of the Truth*, p. 110-116.

43 “Human recognition of the other, whether person or group, always takes place through the gesture by which one holds out a mediating object to the other, presenting the other with something that one is giving as a part of oneself and venturing into alien space. This gesture states the following: first, we recognize you as fellow humans; second, we accept you as possible partners; finally – once relationships have been established – we wish to remain bonded with you in the future”. Idem, p. 132.

44 RICOEUR. *The Course of Recognition*, p. 227. See: LEFORT. *Les Formes de l'Histoire*.

shared operation mutual recognition”<sup>45</sup>. In ceremonial gift-giving, the intention of the individuals is to be reciprocally accepted and recognized through the gift. In the logic of the ceremonial gift, the objects given are symbols of the relation itself and they publicly prove the bond among the subjects. The mutuality consists of the trust that has been established through the gift and the relation.

Even if Ricoeur is a debtor and shares Henaff’s speculation on ceremonial gift-giving, at the end of *The Course of Recognition* he presents a different interpretation of it. As Ricoeur says,

the transition from the theme of struggle to that of the gift was linked to a question having to do with the always incomplete nature of the struggle for recognition. It was a truce at the heart of this endless conflict that the actual experience of a ceremonial exchange of gifts was invoked as a special form of states of peace<sup>46</sup>.

The philosopher thinks that ceremonial gift-giving is the extension of the agape in contemporary society as a peace bearer. As a consequence, “instead of the obligation to give in return, it would be better, under the sign of agape, to speak of a response to a call coming from the generosity of the gift”<sup>47</sup>.

I think that the Ricoeurian reflection on the ceremonial gift turns out to be problematic: Ricoeur joins the ceremonial gift with the idea of agape, generosity and a state of peace but then, at the end of his book, he affirms that “the experience of the gift (...) is inseparable from its burden of potential conflicts, tied to the creative tension between generosity and obligation (...) the struggle for recognition perhaps remains endless”<sup>48</sup>. This is the first motivation to think that Ricoeur is a thinker at the margin of the gift because his argumentation on it can be read as a contradictory synthesis between the model of the struggle and the model of the gift. If the struggle for recognition is endless, the gift cannot be simply called a state of peace. It is true that the gift is an

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45 Idem, p. 236.

46 Idem, p. 259.

47 Idem, p. 243.

48 Idem, p. 246.

alternative to the conflict, but ceremonial gift-giving preserves the possibility of the conflict because the individuals bet on the trust of the other and the exchange can give rise to both the recognition and the misrecognition. The ceremonial gift is inherently connected with the possibility of the struggle: this process is a risky bet or a challenge that consists in a seductive (conduct-to-self) offering based on the trust and the will to found the bond.

Secondly, the Ricoeurian speculation on the gift in *The Course of Recognition* stops without investigating the effective role in the foundation of the social bond and its operativeness. To present an in-depth analysis on this point, the Ricoeurian ethical, anthropological and political reflection must be related and enlarged by the theory of the gift that unites some authors such as Caillé<sup>49</sup>, Godbout<sup>50</sup> and Hénaff. The awareness of our ontological openness to others and the necessity of the relationship lead up to identifying the foundation of the social bond with the “*endettement mutuel des hommes*”<sup>51</sup>. The foundation does not come from some shared qualities or capacities but from our original debt towards the other. This debt can be understood, with the idea of an American feminist philosopher who says “we are all equally some mother’s child”<sup>52</sup>; this means that we are all necessary and originally with and among the others. Society finds its roots not in a shared plus, but in a minus, not in common qualities but in the common debt in which we all are implied. We are all “given by” and “lacking from” and we live in a chain of reciprocal donation. Our social existence can be conceived as a “*mouvement communiel*”<sup>53</sup> among individuals who, in the awareness of the debt and in the gift of themselves, want to live tied together. The gift and the recognition of the others based on the conscience of the debt are the social glue. The possibility of the gift is settled in our ontological nature and the event of the gift implies our conscious choice. The social bond is not an artificial instrument for pursuing individual interests, but it is the end of every authentic human action because the

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49 CAILLÉ. *Antropologie du don*.

50 GODBOUT. *Ce qui circule entre nous*.

51 ABEL. *Paul Ricoeur: La Promesse et la Règle*, p. 37.

52 KITTAY. *Love's Labor*.

53 BATAILLE, CALLOIS. *La Sociologie sacrée et les rapports entre «société», «organisme», «être»*, p. 139-163.

individuals understand that their life is possible only with the other. In this context, the gift exchange is the performer of alliances and it is between the extremes of the interest and the pure gratuity. There is a desire of a conscious sharing and an attempt at reciprocity. In the logic of the mutual gift, the asymmetry is preserved: everyone is at the same time exposed to the risk of not being reciprocated and to the rising of violence. The bet on the bond is not closed in the reassuring borders of similarity and affinity, but it is open to the meeting of the unknown, *à l'alterité à venir*.

If individuals are relational beings and originally connected to alterity, why is there always the possibility of relations being characterized by violence, misrecognition and self-denial?

I think that we can find an answer by referring to the Ricoeurian first phenomenological, anthropological and ontological reflection presented in *The Symbolism of Evil* in which the theme of the fallible man is connected with the symbolism of evil. In this book, we can find an important anticipation that will be central in the explanation of justice and the political paradox in Ricoeur's last works: the grandeur and the culpability of men are constantly linked. Violence is possible because in each interaction among agents, by acting everyone exercises a power over the other. The power-of-acting can degenerate in an oppressive power on alterity that implies the rising of evil and violence. This is possible because man is frail, at the same time minded to good and prone to evil because of its ontological configuration. Evil is not a substance, it is not being but doing, a bad use of our free will. The appearance of evil in our world is caused by the original sin committed by man and that will be an open wound during our presence on Earth. The Ricoeurian anthropological conception is beyond the opposition between pacific or irenic relations, beyond a negative anthropology or the conception of the human being as absolutely good-natured, but the human being is characterized by a dialectical structure between good and evil.

In this conception, justice is the highest category of the practical level and it is called to face the uprising of conflicts or to solve them. This theme is connected both to recognition and maintenance of general social peace. Justice is the primary aim of

institutions which must not immunize the relations or protect the neutrality of contacts, but they have to offer a service to the community and to the individuals and to make their historical realization possible through the application of justice. In our plural society, justice cannot be univocal nor simply plural but as Ricoeur says in *The Just*<sup>54</sup>, it can be seen as a “complex equality”. This means that justice, such as recognition, should be seen today as the seeking and the creating of resemblances through the differences. We are all equal as human beings (all child of a mother) but we are at the same time different from each other (I have a different culture, a different color of skin, a different religion, etc.). Therefore, actually conceiving a norm of reciprocity implies redefining the structures of social cohesion and regulation which should render the integration of different types of identity possible in the same social group. These structures should also guarantee everyone has the same accessibility to the social bond.

## Conclusion

Following Ricoeur’s and Henaff’s reflection on recognition and the gift, two main conclusions can be drawn:

1) First, the philosophical and critical speculation on recognition highlights that the foundation of the social bond cannot be conceived neither as necessarily related only to the reality of the struggle, nor as absolutely pacific and irenic. There is a structural tension between recognition and the possibility of its denial, between the seeking for peace and the eventuality of the conflict. This dialectic finds its roots in the anthropological conception of man as originally relational and vulnerable, at the same time minded to good and prone to evil.

2) Secondly, the authentic social bond does not aim to immunize or neutralize human contacts, but its end is to maintain social diversity and to make available the recognition as a primary and structural need for the human being.

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54 RICOEUR, P. *The Just*. Trans. David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Cultural diversity, internal or across societies, should not be seen as a source of conflict but as something generally healthy and positive. Recognition and justice as seeking similarity across differences imply we should continually reinvigorate our norms through a public dialogue, rediscovering the importance of our political participation.

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