

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2005, xi + 224 p. Index. Paperback.

This book is an excellent review of the latest literature on solidarity and on gift giving, bringing together anthropological and sociological approaches to one of the fundamental projects of both disciplines. That project, as I see it, is to understand how social units stay united – and the forces which drive them apart.

At first reading, the book is a bit frustrating since all nine chapters were originally published separately – or in the case of the final two chapters, given as a presentation when the author was appointed in 2003 to the Chair of Social Solidarity at Utrecht University. Several chapters remain stand-alone papers, with overlapping references and ideas. Reading Komter's book at times becomes a kind of treadmill, where the reader on the spot longs for progress. Still, there are several new vistas and new insights for the patient reader.

Komter's thesis is simple: most of the anthropological theories about gift-giving may be interpreted in terms of preserving solidarity, an explanation, she acknowledges, originating with Marcel Mauss, nephew and student of Emile Durkheim. There is clearly a kind of functional argument here, supported by several citations of Talcott Parson. To state it bluntly (more bluntly than she does) the function of gift giving is to support the survival of social groups. In Part I she argues her case through an analysis of anthropological explanations for gift giving and exchange, most of which, she argues, imply social solidarity. Then in Part II she explores directly the concept of solidarity and shows how it is aided by gift giving. In both sections she uses data from her own empirical studies of women and families in the Netherlands.

She admits that there may be some purely psychological motives for gift giving, based on pure selfishness – you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. From a more idealistic perspective, she cites Mauss's spiritual interpretation of Maori gift behavior. Komter tends to agree with him even after discussing several other explanations, including some which see Maori religious gifting ceremonies as another form of solidarity ritual, albeit involving a kind of universal solidarity (59-64). As a third exception to the solidarity explanation for gifts, she admits that some gift exchanges

may be a disguised form of purely economic exchange although insisting that most such exchanges serve also to reinforce bonds of solidarity.

Can Komter demonstrate that theories connecting gift giving and solidarity also explain conflict and exploitation? Indeed she can, and this may be the strongest and most original of her contributions. She shows, partly from her own research on the family, that by selectively deciding who is eligible to receive gifts, people define the boundaries of their own group, and deliberately hurt other people by not giving them gifts. This both enhances their own group solidarity while strengthening out-group hostility. At the end of the book she pleads for an extension of local generosity to the rest of the world in order to lessen international conflict (207-208).

Is this a book which will appeal more to anthropologists or to sociologists? Yes. Komter is Head of a Department of Social Science and clearly is comfortable in both disciplines. Indeed, part of her motivation for the book may be to present her book as a way of increasing academic solidarity.

Does this book add to the literature on gift giving and solidarity? Komter claims that except for the early classical theorists such as Durkheim and Mauss, few anthropologists have associated the two concepts (x). It is not clear to me that she adds much to those original classical theories except to use them as a way of interpreting later theories. The exception is her plea, noted above, to extend the concept of solidarity to larger social systems. Perhaps this insight, to see theories working at several social levels, suggests a future direction for theory construction and research on both solidarity and gift exchange.

In spite of the somewhat repetitive arguments in several chapters, I would recommend Komter's book as a supplementary text for teaching, where repetition as review may be helpful. Her sprightly, somewhat colloquial approach to writing, makes the book quite accessible at a first year level for either anthropology or sociology students, especially as an introduction to classical theory. Certainly it could be used as a text in theory or methods classes in order to show how classical theory, combined with more modern approaches, still generates useful research. It would be especially useful in an interdisciplinary social science program to lay bare the common foundations of anthropology, sociology – and psychology.

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