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Inviting Democracy to Come

Economic Philosophy of the Gift

1. Introducing

One of the beginnings of what is to unfold is Derrida's unease with the totalizing logic of reciprocity – in *'Given Time I'* (1992) he adds: a gift – always awaited and never fully present. Framing democracy within such references thus involves considering democracy through the *economy of the gift* and, with it, its inherent paradoxes, through an *economic philosophy of the gift* as explored here.

For Derrida, the moment a gift is acknowledged as such, it already risks being (re)inscribed within the circle of reciprocity. And yet, it is precisely this impossibility, the impossibility of pure giving, that opens up the radical potential to which the gift gestures. In this sense, democracy as gift – if there is a gift – is not a matter of optimistic awaiting, nor a *justification* for political deferral, but an invitation to also remain open to uncertainty, to cultivate a readiness for surprises, and to move forward in attunement to what may arrive as unbidden, as yet unrecognizable, perhaps even dissonant.

Drawing on Derrida's reflections on the structure of the gift, as well as his engagement with Austin's *performative* (with performativity, for Derrida, already preceding any particular speech act), this essay traces the edges of reciprocity (often equated with economy) and of democracy – also alongside the edges of trusting. Trusting here is not merely what shows itself as epistemic risk-taking. Rather, it is something that emerges as a performative force or even as something given *in advance*: something that begins before weighing potential costs and benefits, consisting in the very movement of its own beginning. In this way, the essay seeks to expand the register of democratic stances to include (hyper)phenomena (cf. Waldenfels 2012) and structures that may precede them – structures of excess, of performativity and of interruption, for instance.

Although not explicitly thematized, a particular temporality productively haunts this essay – *'Given Time'* is Derrida's title, after all. Herein, time does not unfold as a linear sequence of discrete *'now-points'*, as merely chronological, but emerges as something far more entangled and disrupted, productively haunted by its own contradictions and repetitions: as *anachronic* (cf. Derrida 1995a). Such a more anachronic temporal orientation discloses how organizations – (representatives of) organizations who seek to position themselves pro-democratically – cannot simply move from a certain past (as suggested, for instance, by Fukuyama's [1989] notion of the *'end of history'*) into a future, or into fully formed ideals (cf. Derrida 1995b). Rather, what is inherited, for instance in the case of philosophical concepts, appears in the form of retrospective projections that can

always expose the anachronic aspects of temporality: that is, time *simply* being »out of joint« (Derrida 1995a: 94).

It is in this light that I write toward *democracy to come* (cf. Derrida 1994; 1995b; 2005), not as an ideal (deferred), nor as reality alone, but as the space in between, where possibilities open up. Just as Derrida turns toward philosophy to come: neither wholly divided from the metaphysical heritage nor as its mere continuation (cf. Derrida 2005; 1995a; 1988). Derrida re-approaches heritage in ways that remain attentive to its interruptions, its ghosts, and its promises to always perfect itself (cf. Derrida 1994).

For organizations, this temporal orientation entails a readiness to let something happen to them – a form of opening that cannot be reduced to strategic calculation or short-term gain. In *Plato's Phaedrus*, as appreciated by Enkelmann (2010: 131), freedom would cease to be what it is if it were entirely shaped by the objectively given or confined within the bounds of subjective consciousness. From there, Enkelmann turns to Popper's (1992) vision of the democratic constitutional state, one that survives not through fixed achievement or defense, but through its openness to ongoing transformation. Accordingly, Enkelmann concludes – echoing the orientation of this essay and the horizon of democracy to come:

»What democracy is cannot be iconographically determined by any historically achieved state as though it were already final. Were that the case, it would have only one remaining trajectory: to once again be lost under threat« (Enkelmann 2010: 132, own translation).

2. The Ambivalent Gift

2.1 Interrogating the Logic of Reciprocity

A frequent starting point for writing about the gift is Marcel Mauss's seminal ethnographic inquiry, *Essay on the Gift* (1990 [1924]), in which he draws on earlier anthropological work by Franz Boas and Hunt (1921) and Bronisław Malinowski (1922). Practices like the Kwakiutl potlatch and the kula ring exchange continue to play a role in debates on gift economies – also accompanied by thoughtful considerations of their constraints (cf. Bracken 1997; Smith et al. 1987).

Somehow the complex interplay of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, as described and endorsed by Mauss, continues to hold relevance. Mauss understood such reciprocities as deeply embedded in religious or sacred communal life, extending into economic activity that, in his reading, could not be disentangled from social and moral relations. Engaging with descriptions provided by contemporaries such as Malinowski, Mauss observes that, »people succeed in substituting alliance, gifts, and trade for wars, isolation, and stagnation« (Mauss 1990: 105). Similarly, for Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]), the principle of reciprocal exchange, expressed in phenomena such as gift-giving, constitutes a universal social structure, where complementary value is traded to sustain systems of alliance.

According to Mauss (1990), the gift has a symbolic function, an address between giver and receiver, in which the latter is obliged to *respond*, to do something. A gift cannot help but to provoke *guilt* (for instance, in the form of moral duty, or social recognition). Therefore, according to Mauss, the gift is reciprocated, and Mauss is intrigued by how this dynamic might be extended to reflect modern market economies. And scholars continue to do so, for instance by illustrating how the gift economy is intertwining with the modern economy (cf. Priddat 2021), or by arguing for the integration of relational dimensions in organizational behavior, business interactions, or ethical leadership (cf. Baviera et al. 2016; Manske 2021).

The anthropological genealogies of the gift, particularly those by Mauss, set the stage for Derrida's questioning of the logic or the norm of reciprocity and of exchange becoming primarily or exclusively constitutive of the economy (and beyond). They also reveal the gift (e. g., women given in marriage, women as objects of exchange) as already marked by ambivalence (cf. Bracken 1997; Smith et al. 1987; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1976; 1992).

2.2 Beyond Reciprocity

The *gift* or the *given* (*le don*) remains a recurring theme both within and beyond academic discourse, with the notion of gift marking its particular ambivalence: as both present and poison. As Derrida (1981 [1972]: 131) notes already in *Plato's Pharmacy*, in agreement with Mauss »the etymologists are right in comparing the *potio*, ›Poison‹, series with *gift*, *gift* [›gift,‘ which means ›present‹ in English, means ›poison‹ or ›married‹ in other Germanic languages – Trans.]«. As Holland (2013: 103) immediately adds: »The reference to marriage is not gratuitous« here. The remark resonates most pointedly in the German term *Mitgift* (dowry), as a matrimonial offering and a constraining inheritance.

»Nothing is less assured than the distinction between *giving* and *taking*, at once in the Indo-European languages we speak (...) and in the experience of an economy—(...) all these values remaining precisely to be re-elaborated from the precariousness of that opposition of the gift and of the grip, of the gift that presents and the gift that grips or holds or takes back, of the gift that does good and of the gift that does bad, of the present [*cadeau*] and of the poison (*gift/Gift* [...])« (Derrida 1987: 176, Derrida's emphasis).

Still operating within this distinction, Derrida (1992) seeks to move away from the gift that takes back, that is also something *bad*, that is already tainted – »and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt« (Derrida 1992: 12). Instead, he gestures toward a more excessive conception of giving, one without anticipation of return, as Derrida writes, »[t]he donee owes it to *himself* even not to give back, he *ought not owe* (...) and the donor ought not to count on restitution« (ibid.: 13). Here, a mode of excess is evoked – one that women, since Pandora, have come to symbolize (cf. Joy 2013), often without their own consultation or voice (cf. Derrida 1992; 1978; Bataille 1957). For Derrida, such excess functions as a means of rupturing the totalizing logic of reciprocity that Mauss discerned at

the heart of the social (according to Derrida) – the all-encompassing calculability, equivalence, guilt or credit that Derrida recognizes as uncontainable within the boundaries of the economic sphere.

And of course, why not, especially within market-oriented discourses, be drawn to the idea of testifying to the possibility, of a given only, to its fleeting moments: something distinguishable from indebtedness. A gift, in contrast to Mauss, that could resist reinsertion into a circuit of exchange, at least within a Derridean (rhetorical) conceptual frame. Maybe tellingly, in discourses of business ethics or the gift economy, the gift is often invoked to foreground the relational, *excessive* dimensions of human co-existence. Practices such as altruistic (anonymous) gift-giving or donating one's own blood (cf. Archard 2002) are frequently mentioned. And they are also mentioned as alternatives to, or at least hybrids with, more depersonalized, independent, and contractual modes of interactions.

And yet, in attempting to move beyond the totalizing force of reciprocity, Derrida (1992) underscores the impossibility of pure giving, not least when considering how effortlessly an expectation of *return* exceeds the bounds of equitable exchange. A *simple* expression of gratitude – *thank you* – a flicker of guilt or suspense on the part of the receiver, even the refusal of the gift; any of these gestures may suffice to reintegrate the gift into a circuit of reciprocity (including for Derrida, response, recognition, or obligation).

And even if giving were to occur entirely outside the horizon of anticipation – were it to arrive as an *event* (*Ereignis*) – reciprocity would nonetheless insinuate itself into the very structure of experience. Even the purest act of giving can immediately become part of a reciprocal scene, even if the motive was entirely altruistic or the act spontaneous: there is always the possibility that reciprocity (e. g., individual value) becomes part of the (reciprocal) narrative or context. This is the impossibility for Derrida: that the given, insofar as it gives, always risks becoming a *moment* in the movement of exchange. So »at the limit [it follows], that *he* does not recognize the gift as gift« (Derrida 1992: 13), no giving, no giver, no receiver would have to be perceived in order for »the simple phenomenon of the gift [not to] annul[] it as gift« (ibid.: 14).

3. The Given Before Given

3.1 The Economic and Aneconomic

So, can the question of the gift be posed prior to any relation of the gift to the *subject*, before any relation of subjects to themselves (as subjects)? According to Derrida the giving-beings, who recognize themselves as such, recognize themselves in a circular manner, »[a]nd this is produced as soon as there is a subject, as soon as donor and donee are constituted as identical, identifiable subjects, capable of identifying themselves by keeping and naming themselves. It is even a matter, in this circle, of the movement of subjectivation, of the constitutive

retention of the subject that identifies with itself. The becoming subject then reckons with itself, it enters the realm of the calculable as subject» (ibid.: 23f.).

So, for a gift to remain a gift, it must not *present* itself as such; the moment it is recognized – a *subject* giving *something* to another (also corresponding to the grammatical structure of ›giving *something* to *someone*/taking *something* from *someone*‹) – it annuls itself. Yet, this is the paradox Derrida insists upon: The gift is what opens the very possibility of reciprocity, what enables the existence of *do ut des*, by overrunning it. Exchange, for Derrida, relies on a moment that exceeds the logic of exchange itself. However, this does not mean that the overrunning gift, »if there is any« (ibid.: 30), is completely exterior to the circle, completely unspeakable. Rather, this gift remains in relation to the economy. Derrida calls this the *aneconomic* (cf. ibid.: 7): »Not that it [the gift] remains foreign to the circle, but it must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle« (ibid.). Thus, the excessive gift is not opposing, transcending or denying exchange; rather, it marks the excess or unfolding stream that makes exchange possible. It marks a movement, opening and interrupting the circle, without ever being reducible to the circle. By no longer deriving its origin primarily from exchange (nor, for example, from scarcity), the economy – and everything within it – becomes fluid; The question how the world is given becomes part of an economy that concerns us all (cf. Enkelmann 2010: 22, 28).

Trust, for instance, as we shall see below (ch. 3), can be considered as participating in this excessive structure – if we can accept that trust can only begin by itself, *in advance* of any reciprocal consideration, can be given without any immediate guarantee in sight. As Enkelmann (2010: 103) writes: »With trust something can have a beginning that has no other beginning than this trust« (own translation). Notably, this is not the same as *already* considering trust an intrinsic good, as »something that we shall seek for its own sake« (Provis 2001: 37). Although reasoned trust (cf. Ulrich 2009), goods distinguished as intrinsic and extrinsic or benefits for decision makers or organizations (their integrity) may *follow* – returning trust to the circle – these rely on a prior gesture that cannot itself be fully grasped, justified or accounted (i. e., cannot be present). In this sense, trust enacts a kind of originally given.

Derrida refers to this structure – an originally given – by invoking the *il y a* – not in the sense of presence of something or someone, but as a ›given-before-given‹. Here Derrida draws on (late) Heidegger's *Es gibt* – a phrase often translated as *there is*, but more precisely: *it gives*. With *il y a*, what is marked is not presence, but an event beyond any fixed *is*, without a specific given, without clarity about the act of giving itself. There is no *who behind* the giving (who gives), and no clearly defined object that is given – only the given *as such*, ambiguously existing (cf. Waldenfels 1997: 407). For Derrida, language operates as this kind of given and the giving (as Heidegger formulates: »Word (...) as the giving [*das Gebende*] as such« [Heidegger 1982: 193] through which Being occurs). It is

what enables the possibility, the appearance – and distinction between subjects and objects – of exchange. And yet, this language is never simply present.

»The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject—and that is indeed what happens with Heidegger when he goes back before the determinations of Being as substantial being, subject, or object. One would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. It is constituted, on the contrary, in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange, the mastery of this *hubris* or of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift. There where there is subject and object, the gift would be excluded. A subject will never give an object to another subject. But the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift. At the zero or infinite speed of the circle« (Derrida 1992: 24).

One might say, words give, just as trust gives (trust). For Derrida, language is a given that never becomes a given – like trust, a gift that can never be claimed or identified as one's own, only repeated and performed in difference (ch. 2.2.2).

3.2 *The Performative Force (of the Promise)*

Derrida's also engages with Austin's notion of the performative. With the performative, Austin had famously drawn attention to those utterances that do something. Derrida (1988 [1972]: 13) follows Austin insofar as the performative does not concern the mere transmission of meaning, but rather the transmission of an original movement, a force, a transformative effect. *Communication*, then, involves, beyond transmitting content, transmitting a force through the impulse of a sign. The performative produces and transforms a situation – something which descriptive, constative statements can also set in motion, though this is not their manifest function (cf. *ibid.*), and something which is different from describing a *pre-existing* situation.

A point of convergence between Derrida and Austin lies in the recognition that the performative emerges from within language itself. However, Derrida diverges from Austin's view that the performative relies on a present (speaker) intention in the stable speech act or in a »total context« (*ibid.*: 14). As Derrida puts it:

»The conscious presence of speakers or receivers participating in the accomplishment of a performative, their conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation, implies teleologically that no *residue* [*reste*] escapes the present totalization. No residue, either in the definition of the requisite conventions, or in the internal and linguistic context, or in the grammatical form, or in the semantic determination of the words employed (...)« (*ibid.*).

For Derrida, the intention that animates the utterance will never be fully present to itself. Meaning is not uniquely enclosed in the speaker's intention. Rather, meaning emerges through iterability – the same utterance or sign can be repeated across different contexts. This iterability is not a flaw in communication but its very condition and possibility. The sign – as exemplified by the signature Derrida appended to a conference text – captures this unstable and performative character of any utterance or inscription. Derrida's signature (or sign) functions only performatively if it can be repeated, if it can detach from its original moment

of production. Just as a gift ceases to be a gift the moment it is recognized as such, a performative would lose its force if it were completely bound to a singular context.

»Writing is read; it is not the site, ›in the last instance‹, of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning« (ibid.: 21).

This suggests, echoing the previous reflection (ch. 2.2.1.), that writing – or the sign – gives itself without exhausting itself in the moment of its inscription or utterance. A sign allows for iteration and repetition, in the absence of the subject(s) who produced it (in context), in the absence of the *momentarily* signified. It carries the structural possibility of being cut off from any *momentary* meaning (intention) and from belonging to a saturable or binding context. The moment of its production may be entirely lost.

As Derrida (1988 [1972]: 12) emphasizes, »[e]very sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), can be *cited* (...) in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts«. This does not mean that the sign functions outside all contexts; rather, it points to »contexts without any final or absolute anchoring center« (ibid.). This is, how writing detaches itself from the hermeneutic deciphering, which it can always interrupt. Non-saturable contexts enable, for instance, something like ›Abracadabra‹ to function meaningfully (cf. ibid.). Instead of contexts contained in speech acts, it is the capacity for repetition and difference which constitutes context.

Derrida also refers toward his understanding of performativity through the figure of the promise: A promise is something that I commit myself to in the future, a future that may never arrive, a future beyond my control. Yet it is precisely this uncontrollability that enables the promise to be a promise. Before it is fulfilled – or even if it never is – the promise already takes effect. Its performative force lies not in completion but in the force of anticipation. It transforms the relationship in the very moment it is given (uttered), without the origin of the promise lying primarily in the intention of the person giving the promise. Rather, the very possibility of making a promise comes to me from the concrete other in the singularity of the situation, and from language itself, which makes promising possible. Language promises before one promises to another, and language speaks already as another (cf. Röttgers 2012).

As Derrida addresses his listeners, when speaking about the gift:

»I suppose that I know and that you know what ›to give‹, ›gift‹, ›donor‹, ›donee‹ mean in our common language. (...) This is an unsigned but effective contract between us, indispensable to what is happening here, namely, that you accord, lend, or give some attention and some meaning to what I myself am doing by giving, for example, a lecture. This whole presupposition will remain indispensable at least for the *credit* that we accord each other, the faith or good faith that we lend each other, even if in a little while we were to argue and disagree about everything« (Derrida 1992: 11).

4. Trusting as Beginning

If we take Enkelmann's (2010) example of the division of labor, we are reminded that each *stranger* contributes a fragment to the *whole* not simply out of obligation, but because of a shared assumption that others will act just as responsibly in their own respective spheres. Enkelmann then already anticipates the conventional narrative by arguing that this systemic interdependence cannot be fully explained – let alone sustained – by contracts alone. As he writes, contracts can formalize expectations and ensure compliance through potential sanctions, »but they only organize trust—they do not replace it« (Enkelmann 2010: 101, own translation). Contracts are secondary formations; they cannot bring forth the very trust they need.

Apart from asymmetries – whether stabilized by contracts or temporarily tolerated – the characterization of *trust in generalized reciprocity*¹, as distinguished by Frémeaux et al. (2025) from asymmetrical forms, could resonate with Enkelmann's thinking. Instead of hinging on immediate returns or deferred compensation, trust in generalized reciprocity rests on shared belief that contributions to the *common good* – to »common good-oriented entrepreneurship« (Frémeaux et al. 2025) – will, over time, be reciprocated in ways that may remain invisible, and never fully knowable.

As Frémeaux et al. (ibid.) emphasize, trust in general reciprocity is what enables genuine cooperation and the formation of formal entrepreneurial alliances – not despite uncertainty or invisibility, but through it. In interfirm and entrepreneurial contexts, Frémeaux et al. (ibid.) position generalized reciprocity as presupposing a readiness to engage with alternatives, to consider multiple solutions to conflict. This orientation allows difficulties in organizations to be seen not as signs of eroding trust, but as opportunities to clarify and reaffirm the shared values that unite small businesses in a common project.

Though Enkelmann (2010) and Frémeaux et al. (2025) may appear to diverge – around the notion of ›trust in trust‹ – they converge where trust is not a derivative of certainty. For Enkelmann, trust is the speculative foundation of cooperation. It is what we might call a credit relation projected into the future – a point of exposure or ›Va banque‹ (›All in‹, ›Es gilt die Bank‹) according to Enkelmann (in reference to Beck 1986). Trust, in this sense, is an existential investment in something that does not yet exist but may come into being precisely through the act of investing.

This insight aligns with Frémeaux et al.'s insistence that generalized reciprocity is not reducible to vague overconfidence. For them, trust is rooted in the active

1 According to Frémeaux and Moneyron (2024: 631), the term generalized reciprocity refers to a phenomenon in which actors »receive from people other than those to whom they themselves give, thus encouraging them to give in turn to people from whom they have received nothing«, thereby »producing a cascade of generosity (Fowler & Christakis, 2010)« (vgl. Frémeaux et al. 2025).

(re)making of shared values. Shared values enable actors to interpret setbacks not as failures of trust, but as moments that reveal and refine the moral infrastructure that binds them. Similarly, Enkelmann (2010: 102) argues that behind every individual's action lies not simply interpersonal trust, but a collective hope or desire – trust that becomes systemic, no longer dependent on individual memory, reflection, or strategic calculation. It circulates as a force, as an offering of something one does not possess, but gives and participates in nonetheless – not much unlike speculative investments in market dynamics.

Trust, then, is what allows something new to begin – something that could not begin otherwise, and whose origins cannot be specified. I may not know, or even wish to know, when my trust took root – not in the same way that the question of whether the wall will hold forces itself upon me during an earthquake. Trust is a speculative leap beyond the past – never fully detached from it, but also never entirely determined by any projected outcome. Frémeaux et al. show how trust (in general reciprocity) opens new relational and economic spaces, and Enkelmann (2010: 102) argues that it is only through trust that something can emerge which defies the existing »laws of being.« To echo Deleuze (1994): difference, repeated, becomes creative. Trust may be precisely also this: a force that repeats without merely reproducing, a dynamic that resists stabilization. It is then something we enact – an incipient, collective movement.

5. Prospecting

As previously discussed, trust here is less a rational wager or bet – since what is at stake may be too valuable to gamble with – and more an ontological than an epistemological *risk* (perhaps closer to a mode of anxiety). If there is such trust that begins by itself (with strategic calculations potentially following), it is this trust that can ground the possibility for democratic positioning by organizations – and nourish the space for such stances to be articulated, and crucially, to be listened to openly.

When considered through the lens of the gift, democracy is not considered as something we simply inhabit, possess, or safeguard. It resists being fixed as static or fully present. So, why not then, frame democracy more often in terms of trust and promise? And equally, why not also frame it in terms of the gift – not as something fully given or recognizable, but as something that already exceeds, and is preceded by, that which cannot be entirely grasped? This is not to say that *democratic gestures* cannot be recognized and acknowledged; rather, it is to suggest that their initiations may also elude capture and continue to carry the potential of surprises.

And yet, this does not preclude the possibility that democratic stances by organizations may yield returns – reputational for instance – just as their democratic stances may also have detrimental effects, both internally and beyond. Still, under

the figure of the given-as-given, there is a prior given – a shared ground – that may precede, considerations of return, for instance. In addition to (supposedly distinct) economic considerations and the value orientations that organizations can advocate and negotiate publicly, there remains an open residue: that is not fully controllable or *available* to organizations, that prevents them from knowing what meanings they may evoke when taking a stance – when resisting anti-democratic tendencies or movements – in contexts that always resist full fixation.

Still, Derrida's conceptual scope should not become totalizing – subsuming too much under reciprocity only, or under the binary of giving and taking / reciprocity and non-reciprocity – at the risk of obscuring the nuanced, oscillating dynamics of situated and relational practices. To what extent are phenomena or logics of generous response still possible (cf. Hénaff 2010)? And which systems both constrain and produce modes of gift thinking (cf. Joy 2013)?

As it continues to resurface, the gift remains an ambivalent figure. Carefully considered – and not in a simply affirming sense – »the gift (...) still has currency in the western mindset (...) « (ibid.: 1). As discourses on the gift have proliferated – at times embracing (female) gratuitous expenditure or notions of superabundance – critical attentiveness to context has often receded. Constructions of the gift frequently circulate without full recognition of those historically implicated in its logic: for instance, those given (in marriage, or exchange, for instance), or those expected to give endlessly (often women). In constructions of the gift, no matter how intriguing, »the difference between gift/commodity is expanded as a metaphorical base on which difference itself may be apprehended«, as Marilyn Strathern (1988: 7) notes. This prompts deeper reflection: In weaving the myth of the gift, how far does the scholar risk obscuring the very social and epistemic structures in which their own position is embedded (cf. Weiner 1976)?

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