Reciprocity, Reaction, and The Transduction of Social Encounters

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On the tilted geometry of the social encounter

In his introduction to Mauss' 1950 posthumous collection, *Anthropology and Sociology*, Lévi-Strauss (1950) artfully managed to pass the author for a pre-structuralist—or at best, a proto-structuralist (see for example Pace, 1983, p. 151-155; Kaufman, 2007, p. 449). The social is real only insofar as integrated into a system, declared Lévi-Strauss, crediting Mauss himself for such an insight. However, this interpretation (extracted, as it happens, from Mauss' "tortuous *detours*" and "hesitations" in the most "decisive moments") is quite selective, not to say questionable. For it seems implausible to square Mauss' vision of a "total human being" with structuralism, which rests upon a postulate of general equilibrium and, above all, a postulate of localization, whereby structural elements can be identified only thanks to their relative position within a matrix of relations. Both qualifications (equilibrium and localization) are missing from the notion of reciprocity as conceived by Mauss (1924): what makes gift exchange notable, even compelling, is that there is no ultimate certainty of any balance ever being attained; to the contrary, ontological unconditionality and uncertainty in responsiveness are inherent in gift-making (Lee, 2020). Above all, it is impossible to locate the proper "element" of the exchange—for such element looms large as a kind of overall restlessness that haunts the whole situation (Mauss grappled with the word *hau* and its elusive meaning; Lévi-Strauss concluded that he had been "mystified" by indigenous knowledge).

In hindsight, whereas Lévi-Strauss' implicit agenda might have been to suggest that Mauss' thought was *not modern enough* (all while praising him for being a "modernist"), and had to be updated (viz., "structuralized"), we can say that, today, Mauss reads more up to date than Lévi-Strauss himself, precisely thanks to the many unsystematic, at times even quirky, knots in his writings. Considered from this perspective, Mauss' notorious difficulty with finishing

his works may have to do with something more than psychological factors and a domineering uncle, being related instead to the substantive task of tackling a social reality defined by nuanced complications and lack of exhaustiveness (Karsenti, 2011). The notion of reciprocity is a case in point. Fundamental as the requirements for reciprocity are to social life, the geometry of reciprocity is anything but linear, nor automatically proportional, nor stable at any point. As a matter of fact, Mauss (1931) pointed out that direct reciprocity is only *one manifestation* of a more encompassing domain of phenomena, where reciprocity can also appear to be indirect and, sometimes—as he wrote—also "alternate" (p. 141). For instance, between parents and their offspring, "it's what your father did for you that you can give back to your son"; or, in groups where admission is by cooptation, "I cannot repay a member of the Institute for what he has done to me; all I can do (and only once) is to repay another candidate for the 'trouble' I have received". In other words, reciprocity appears to Mauss, not as a way of coupling actors in a balanced way, but as a way of "cutting through" a mass of humans in some manners for a given set of purposes. [155] Reciprocity cannot guarantee that anybody is ever "getting even" at a predetermined interval of time, and it is probably not even designed to primarily obtain fairness so understood. Neither inherently tied, nor essentially opposed, to either altruistic / virtuous or self-interested /instrumental conducts, reciprocity's primary impact is that of inducing a state of alertness towards the *socius*, so as to keep humans irredeemably *open* to the call of the other (Pryor and Graburn, 1980; Myhre, 1998; Adloff and Mau, 2006).

It is here, we believe, that the notion of reaction gains significance. Reaction is, in the first place, what is needed to let the game of reciprocity unfold. Elsewhere (Brighenti and Sabetta, 2024a; forthcoming), we have addressed what we called "the reactive condition", characterized as a general dimension and as an intensive (though not necessarily "nervous" *sensu* Davies, 2018) state of social life. Seeking an alternative theorization to behaviourism, wherein reaction appears as always overdetermined by stimulus (as in the S-R circuit), we proposed to consider the reactive domain as *an underdetermined space* where the fact of social relationality is established, and proven *real* (that is, *effective*) as well as *actually felt* by the parties involved. Simultaneously, we

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155   Mauss is more akin in this regard to Simmel, according to whom "no manner of exchange entirely expunges the tension and struggle involved in social interaction" (Beidelman, 1989, p. 228).

have envisioned the reactive as the domain where the chance of bifurcation (towards positions such as friend *vs.* foe, neutral *vs.* partisan, compliant *vs.* recalcitrant, but also, and consequently, towards different structural and institutional arrangements and patterns) is posed.[156] This way, reaction can be said to provide the *proof* of the social relation, along with the manifestation of the sometimes irruent vitality that comes with it.

In our previous work we have stressed in particular that reaction is never simply symmetrical *vis-à-vis* the action it is supposed to "respond" to: for better or worse, reaction brings with it the possibility of escalation, of speed and magnitude shift. In other words, it introduces into situations a series of potential scalar shifts; an essentially tensional notion, reaction gives shape to states where compulsion coexists with indeterminacy. That is how the reactive state keeps the actors engaged with one another: etymologically and literally "dramatic", it unleashes both interactivity and interpassivity (Pfaller, 2017; Seyfert, forthcoming). Even an ostensible non-reaction *is*, in fact, a form of reaction, as epitomized for instance in the "interactive order of meditative spheres" that scaffolds a collective meditation session (Pagis, 2019). A "somethingness" camouflaged behind the appearance of "nothingness", the meditating group is made of uncommunicative, immobile, transfixed, and laser-focused people sharing a precarious "collective solitude". Not at all preposterous, such a gathering is distinctively Garfinkelian, for receptivity toward the range of reactive possibilities often means, in practice, eschewing them, although the chance of seizing them is never entirely excluded either.[157] Extreme as the case of the meditating group

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156   That is, the potential diversion of the social intercourse swerving towards alterative outcomes. Adopting the jargon of social network analysis, one could speak of "Bayesian forks" (White, 1995).

157   Thus, in the example of meditation, the urge to react otherwise always disturbs absent-mindedness: "I said it was very simple to meditate, that it boils down to sitting for a moment, silent and motionless [and yet] your whole body protests and resists your stillness, and you no longer perceive a single one of the subtle, tense equilibria it was so enjoyable to observe. At such times the best thing would be to pay attention to this rebellion, this antipathy, this disgust. If you did, they'd become part of the meditation. But most often when you feel them, instead of paying attention you hurry to get things over with. You get up, go read your mail. Next time" (Carrère, 2022, p. 4). Beyond concentration and distraction, the socio-mental infrastructures of curiosity unbar centrifugal forces (see Campo and Citton, 2024).

may appear, it effectively illustrates one mode of empirical reciprocity. In sum, the situation of reaction presents itself as one rich in potential energy, whereby reactions come to constitute "decisive" moments potentially leading to rapid reorganizations in the social dynamism and the social patterns at stake. Because of the uncertainty inherent in reaction—both content-wise and time-wise—we have suggested to consider reaction as a type of Maussian "counter-gift", epitome of "a dialectical theory of social action" (Vandenberghe, 2024, p. 16). Indeed, the wait for the counter-gift features in social life as a kind of 'deadline' (*terme*) for reciprocation, which remains both structurally underspecified and socially (morally, economically, etc.) compelling.

On reaction, transformation, and transindividuality

Reaction engenders transformations within a social milieu in a way analogous to the movement Gilbert Simondon called "transduction". The latter Simondon (2013 [1964-1989], p. 32-33) explained as a progressive process of structuring, or restructuring, of a given medium through the advancing of a proximal change of status induced by some active "germ" propagating within a suitable medium. Progressing by proximities, through neighbourhoods (*de proche en proche*), transduction can be said to capture the peculiar enchainment of actors as they are caught in reaction sequences that can be interpreted as veritable "individuations in progress". That is also why the situations where reaction matters the most are those where a range of possibilities of transformations—even radical ones—appears to be on the table. Maybe those radical possibilities weren't there in the beginning; maybe it is reaction itself that reveals that, what previously looked like an already stabilized state, can be subject to a sudden reinterpretation through the piecemeal yet rapid movement of transduction. This once again suggests that the moment of reaction is an underdetermined moment with the potential to become a determining one. Conversely, all forms of social domination and control necessarily pivot around making reactions (either by subordinates, or competitors) unsurprising, foreseeable, calculable in advance—in other words, it is easier to govern people who act reliably than people who react badly (see, for example, Padgett and Ansell, 1993, p. 1264; for his part, Foucault first clarified that power operates by systematically locating actions within preconceived fields of intelligibility).

The question of transformation, we suggest, can be approached from the perspective of a medium theory of social life. All the great Maussian motifs, starting with "totality" seem to us to be evocations of such a unique medium. The social medium is that excitable, intensive medium wherein relations are created and sustained: in a sense, it is the very "stuff" of such relations. Importantly, however, the metaphors of substantialism are to be avoided as inadequate and potentially misleading—rather, it is the notion of "element" that best evokes the reality of the social medium, which differs in nature from a substance because of its non-locality clause, and resembles a process because of its permanent non-equilibrium state. Once considered from the perspective of medium theory, Mauss' analysis of gift and reciprocity can be further illuminated. Far from being an exchange between pre-constituted beings, reciprocity in fact constitutes a new type of being—precisely, it corresponds to the reality addressed by Simondon with the term "transindividuality" (Simondon, 2013 [1964-1989], p. 273 ff.). Simondon distinguishes the transindividual from the interindividual: whereas the interindividual dimension is external to the psychological individual, the transindividual is a *continuation of* the process of *individuation beyond the individual*—as such, it is neither exterior, nor superior to it. The individual, reasons Simondon, cannot by itself solve the problems that are constitutive of its own reality, and it is only thanks to a crisis, to a moment of "revelation", of conversion or, in many cases, of "deep disorientation", that it can progress towards transindividuality. The transindividual forms a domain of reality that can only be accessed once the subject begins to question its own reality in order to deal with the inherent problematics of personhood and subjectivity. Transindividuality thus breaks free from a narrow understanding of reciprocity as symmetry, and can only be envisaged once we consider the existence of society under a different light:

> Society does not really emerge from the mutual presence of several individuals, but neither is it a substantial reality that should be superimposed on individual beings and conceived as independent of them: rather, it is the operation and the condition of operation by which a mode of presence is created that is more complex than the presence of the individuated being alone. [*La société ne sort pas réellement de la présence mutuelle de plusieurs individus, mais elle n'est pas non plus une réalité substantielle qui devrait être superposée aux êtres individuels et conçue comme indépendante d'eux : elle est l'opération et la condition d'opération*

> *par laquelle se crée un mode de présence plus complexe que la présence de l'être individué seul*] (Simondon, 2013 [1964-1989], p. 286).

Rejecting the image of society as either entirely reducible to inter-psychic contacts (Tarde), or as a substantive reality *sui generis* (Durkheim), Simondon comes close to Mauss' sensitivity in our view, which consists in starting from the middle ("totality"), rather than from any extreme (either individual or collective) manifestation of the range, looking instead at the operational unfolding of the various modes of "presence" that become possible in and through the practices of coexistence of a manifold. The reactive might be one of these operational moments, whereby all possibilities of transformation are played out transductively, that is, through events endowed with the capacity of restructuring the medium in light of the potential energies available for effectively operating change. In light of this, reaction has to do with that "discovery of signification", which Simondon placed at the root of the transindividual domain—and it is in this sense that reaction can be taken as a key research site for the study of reciprocity.

On reciprocity and the non-humans

Mauss taught us how important gift-making (together with its reciprocation requirements) is for the cultivation of relationships in social life. To the extent that social life is increasingly recognized as pertaining to not only humans (MacKenzie, 2019; Burrell and Fourcade, 2021; Jerolmack, Teo and Westberry, 2024), reaction research and the study of reciprocity must equip themselves to inquire into events where humans routinely interact with non-humans (whether these are other animals, artefacts, robots or… even spirits and other invisible entities). Regardless of their status, all these heterogeneous associates navigate the vagaries of interaction in ways that highlight the possibilities inherent in the reactive condition and its transductive potentials. The consideration that not only humans partake in the reactive experience may be helpful to remind ourselves of the true scope of analysing the symmetries and asymmetries present in sociability. Issues of reciprocity, reciprocation, expectation, etc. can be discussed within such reactivity framework.

In this sense, for instance, Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers an interesting illustration of reaction at work. Can AI systems be said to deliver gifts to their users? Our working hypothesis is: *not yet*. To put things in context, one should

not forget that current AI systems are only the starter of a larger meal, whose more substantive course is set to be artificial *affectivity*, and more amply, artificial *life*. Unsurprisingly, the first steps in the development of artificial life have come from some synthesis of "intelligence". For all its elusiveness, intelligence is definitely easier to reconstruct than other fields of the human experience, which however are no less fundamental to social life—such as particularly feelings and emotions. As soon as AI will evolve towards full incorporation of social feelings and emotions, and thus will qualify more properly as an instantiation of artificial life, it will inherently also be bound to express the whole palette of reaction, possibly up to veritable gift-making. In other words, AI already works reactively, but currently lacks the states of emotional reactivity, out of which alone the "transindividual" problem of gift can be posed.

The question of reciprocity is significant, even pivotal, to advanced technology. It is no mystery, to begin with, that robotics has been designed as the prolongation of intra-human slavery: such artificial systems have been built as non-human slaves to serve humans in their needs and whims.[158] This explains the many anxieties that today beguile humans facing AI and robotic systems (and increasingly, AI-powered robots)—essentially, these are anxieties concerning control, mutiny, and replacement. Humans fear that the artificial systems they have created will take away their jobs, acquire independent volition, and perhaps decide to eventually "switch off" (= exterminate) humanity. All these are the anxieties typical of a lord-bondsman dialectic:[159] insofar as AI is conceptualized and designed as a type of slave, its demi-god creators necessarily live in the anguish of an upcoming slave revolt that will undercut their dominance. However, as any practitioner knows, AI systems do not concretely work as slaves. A constellation of other, more complex figurations is involved—including roles such as "assistant", "co-worker", and even "partner". In practice, AI are not commanded in any straightforward manner; rather, interaction with AI systems follows non-linear interactional trajectories: to achieve anything worthy (whether it's a text, a picture, an animation, a model, or a decision), humans must interact *meaningfully* with AI: it is first necessary that humans *believe* in AI for it to work.

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158   Tellingly enough, domestic smart/robotic assistants are usually designed with a "feminine personality", conforming to (and thus reinforcing) gender stereotypes of the *serveuse* and the *bonne* (Strengers and Kennedy, 2021).

159   Butler 2015 is probably the perfect epitome of this aspect.

Crucially, interaction with AI systems takes time, during which the artificial system is *progressively* guided towards some outcome sought for by its human interlocutors. A string of subsequent inputs is mandatory for the system to approximate a satisfying outcome. In practice, it is not doable to force an AI's hand to any significant extent, as one would do in an imaginary relation to a "slave". Because such systems are entirely opaque to their users, one cannot but treat them as an instantiation of the generalized figure of the *socius*. In sequences of human—AI interaction and human—robot interaction (HRI), in other words, one notices the coalescing of the reactive state, with all its inherent uncertainties, potentials, and bifurcations. The very metaphor of "guidance", in this sense, may turn out to be misleading: not always are humans "guiding" AI systems—at times, it may be more a matter of coaxing the system, of luring it into the delivery of certain results, at other times, more a matter of begging for a result—or, alternatively, of negotiating, or just letting oneself go to the playing of potentially serendipitous variations and impromptus the machine can produce. The fact that reactions maintain a margin of capriciousness and inconstancy explains the human experiences of disappointment, frustration, and even rage, as for instance the case of the "smart home" well illustrates (Hine, 2020).

In the shorter or longer run, the intense reactivity in HCI and HRI is bound to arouse emotional states across those artificial systems that have sufficient "margins of manoeuvre" to restructure themselves to any significant extent, due to the very amount of social work performed. At that point, the component of reciprocity will be revealed as paramount in arranging the social relations crafted by hybrid, human-computer-robot encounters. The current development of social robotics seems to confirm this. This branch of research and development is concerned with the design and implementation of robots capable of establishing "meaningful affective coordination with human partners" (Damiano and Dumouchel, 2023, p. 63). Up until recently, the main orientations in this field have tended to fall into two opposing camps, namely, a weak and a strong program: whereas the weak program would content itself with robots capable of producing passable simulations (i.e., displays of emotions sufficient to trigger in humans psychological projections about the robot having certain feelings), the strong program would aim to build artificial systems that are effectively passible of substantive emotional states. However, the distinction between weak and strong approaches has been called into question by a more recent 'relational turn' in social robotics: by this third orientation

emotions are conceptualized essentially as *coordination tools* for interaction. This follows insights from phenomenology (Szanto and Landweer, 2020) as well as primatology (de Waal, 2019). In the development of interactional human-computer "affective loops", the point is no longer to ask whether a computer can have emotions, but whether it can coordinate with its human user through a "robotic architecture that allows the robot to perceive and recognise emotions, and to express in return emotions that are 'tuned' to the users' affective expressions" (Damiano and Dumouchel, 2023, p. 69).

Relational social robotics thus understands emotions, not as psychological states, but as modes of social coordination between interactants. More specifically, interaction becomes truly "emotional" when it is no longer just the human being who projects a series of human feelings onto the robot, but when the robot also becomes fully able to recognise human emotional expressions, and react "appropriately" through attunement. Obviously, the whole problem lies in understanding what is to be meant by "emotional attunement". For instance, if the robot recognises that the human is scared, should it send expressions of reassurance, or instead of sweeping domination? If it notices that the human is angry, should it send back expressions of humility, or rather of irony and belittlement? If the human expresses sadness, should the robot partake in that sadness, or counterbalance it with a dose of good humour and nonchalance? Which of these choices constitutes an attunement, and which signals a failure to attune? And, to the extent that emotion is relational, interactional and circular, who is supposed to attune to whom? The point is that the "correct" course of an emotional interaction is not generally specifiable, and Frankensteinian nightmares of sorts (as recently fictionalised for instance by the Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos with his *Poor Things* [2023]) appear to be practically unavoidable.

Intriguingly, the Maussian problem of reciprocity remains central to these predicaments, insofar as his theory necessarily pushes us beyond the structuralist imagination of interaction (i.e., the "generalized exchange" model). Here again we are also led back to Simondon, for whom emotion manifests what, within the individual being, still remains in a pre-individual state: "emotion is incomprehensible to the individual because it cannot be rooted in the structures or functions of the individual as an individual" (2013 [1964-1989], p. 305). To make sense of this, it must be recalled that, for Simondon, the individual is never a complete or definitive reality, but always something that has come into being through processes of individuation that unfold within a pre-individual

reality. Consequently, emotions plug into the basic reality out of which the individual has emerged, thus questioning it down to its foundations. Emotion is revealed as more than a coordination tool for interaction: it is a veritable "disparation", as Simondon calls it, i.e. the gap between an individuated being and the pre-individual charges of potential it still carries within itself, available for further individuations to come. Among these further individuations there lies the chance for *transindividuality*: that is why the individual must be crossed from part to part in order for the virtualities of the social medium to become actual and effective, psychologically as well as sociologically.

By these lights, the work of reaction has to do with the establishment of critical moments that gesture beyond simple interindividuality, towards the region of transindividuality proper. For his part, Simondon assumed transindividuality to be a species-specific phenomenon; but nothing prohibits us from imagining today formations of transindividuality where such crucial prolongations beyond individuality come to include different forms of life (provided, precisely, that they are forms of *life*, and not simply physical or mechanical objects). It is through conditions of disparation—that is, of emotional crisis and an ensuing quest for new meanings—that forms of artificial life will one day become apt at "transindividualizing" through unique reactive "discoveries". The case of social robots illustrates the transformative aspects of reaction outlined above: only through the cultivation of emotional reactivity unfolding in prolonged social frequentations will social robots be able, one day, to access a domain of hybrid, human-robotic transindividuality. If the ambivalence of the gift diagnosed by Mauss ("gift, Gift") has to do with its transindividual constitution, then gift-making will become available to social robots only through emotions enabling them and "their" humans to probe hybrid realms of transindividuality.

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