

Towards an Ethic of Giving¹

Peter Sloterdijk

The debate is over. The time has come for a provisional summing up. One conviction the vast majority of critics of my ideas share, generally without concertation, is that the changeover from a budget based on compulsory taxation to voluntary contributions or gifts from members of the public would lead to an immediate collapse of society or, at least, a catastrophic shortage of all resources at the disposal of the state. A few months ago, some such fantasies were circulating in Germany, in leading articles and conversations at parties.

This observation can be recorded as one result secured from the discussion: that the statements made by most contributors reveal them to be steeped in the blackest pessimism about the nature of social cohesion in our collective life. Sunday discussion panelists are highly complimentary about the competence with which members of the public communicate their views. But, when it comes to effective giving, all belief in their competence ebbs away and, as a precaution, the emphasis switches from communication to confiscation. Most of the debaters would expect the flood gates to open to that collective egoism which they unanimously assume to exist; to that overriding meanness which they dogmatically accept; and to that asocial nature which they would attribute to members of society if the dubious collectivity of current taxpayers (the “bodies liable for payment” in fiscal jargon) were for one moment allowed the freedom to decide themselves whether to contribute something to society’s cohesion and, if so, how much. Almost without exception, the commentators on my arguments assumed that a culture based on freedom and voluntary giving could only lead to a patchwork of feelgood factors and alms. They believe it would yield nothing like a budget from which a state such as ours could pay for its tasks. They admit you probably would see a few kind gestures, individual givers profiling themselves by impressive donations, a few people of goodwill making their regular sacrifices. But the long and short of it, the dominant feature of the scene, would be a mass escape from the collection plate. For the opponents of my ideas, what we call ‘society’ is, in truth, no more than the sum total of all desertions from society. The very notion of a somewhat less coercive fiscality, based in whole or in set proportions on gifts, feels formally to the critical authors like social winter blowing through the cracks. They sense the chilly death of

¹ This is the fourth chapter of Peter Sloterdijk, *‘Vorwort: Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite’*, Sonderdruck, Berlin: Suhrkamp: 2010, p. 38-53, translation by Metamorfose Vertalingen B.V. / Hugh Morgan. We are grateful to Prof. dr. Peter Sloterdijk for permission to reproduce this material.

society in advance. They are already sending woolen blankets to the crisis areas on the bottom rung of the welfare state. They feel these blankets would be necessary as cloaks if the charitable coercive regime of taxes and duties were disabled and replaced with a system of free largesse.

Make no mistake: our critical commentators are largely journalists and social scientists of the old left, even of hardline Leninist and paleo-Maoist provenance (in truly ecumenical spirit, they were all invited to give the thumbs-down to my theses). At the dreaded word 'voluntary,' they scuttled to the fore. As if by universal *diktat*, they came out in favor of state coercion, because that is how it has to be as soon as material reality sets in. For them it is a given that coercion is the order of the day, the only method of making the public behave in what the debaters see as the only appropriate way: unquestioning submission to the *octroi* of taxes, without which the coffers of the state would lack the wherewithal. "Fiscalists of all countries – don't be diverted from taking!" is the watchword of Wellwishers International. Now assume, for argument's sake, that these authors were ultimately right in their misanthropic world view. It may well be that social cohesion in all "societies" over a certain size only comes about through external force and its more or less radical internalizations. Did not Hobbes write in *Leviathan*, "covenants, without the sword, are but words"? Is it not true that we ultimately only hold together through fear? Do we not have to perceive a common external threat before we accept responsibility for each other? Do we not need an effective image of an enemy before we engage with each other in genuine solidarity? If such assumptions are permissible, we must also be so bold as to think that we are closest to the truth when we favor ignoble assumptions about what motivates human social behavior: fear, greed, envy, resentment and the desire to belittle one's fellow human beings. Admitting that this is so, is it not politically justified to take this "society of devils" firmly in hand, not only by Kantian intelligent design and pedagogical realism, but also by tax legislation?

All that belongs to the realm of anthropological speculation, with nothing predetermined about its legitimacy or illegitimacy. Indeed, I wish to explain at once why I consider this all-too-popular anthropology of primary greed to be false through and through, despite the widespread and dogmatically held view of "having nothing to give", and the cozy conviction (in which bourgeois conservatives and the timeserving left converged long ago) that the motivations of human

behavior are generally base. I consider this not only false, but ethically unsound and devastating to the social climate.

Let us assume that, at odds with their publicly proclaimed pro-social and discreetly pro-Socialist options, and more in sorrow than in anger, my critics genuinely hold these views of human nature, of people's unsociable sociability and their alleged inability to act generously. Why, then, do they take umbrage when reminded of the undeniable presence of a generous streak in the make-up of the human soul? All the known evidence indicates that this generous streak is the most prolific source of all giving attitudes, more even than empathy. So why the nervous insistence that giving for the common good is only proper giving if it occurs under duress and threat of punishment? Why the obdurate contention that the recipients of state benefits have an automatic legal entitlement to public subsidy – and cannot be expected to accept that the source of those benefits should be more clearly identified in future?²

At this point, the gulf – for the time being unbridgeable – between the basic assumptions of social anthropology and those of ethics becomes apparent: and that is what sets my thinking apart from most critics' objections. Our realist friends most definitely do not believe that anything good or trustworthy can ever come from voluntary initiative, either in social affairs in general, or in tax matters in particular. Because of their unbelief, the unbelievers have not yet even noticed my counter-argument to their professed skepticism. Their commentaries always by-pass the crux of my reflections. Almost uniformly, theirs has been a monotonous, knee-jerk reaction: that the sole contribution to the debate, from the author of the essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, has been an insidious form of tax avoidance for the rich! For these authors, voluntary giving is synonymous with parsimony. Of course, their opinion is based on their own, unmistakable observations, because they are children of the socio-psychological *status quo*, which tends to foster narrow-mindedness in us. Their belief brooks not a shadow of doubt: in reality, my allusion to generosity can only mean an avoidance plan! On this assumption, backed by an automatic tendency, from the outset of the debate, to pessimistic thinking, my critics have refused even to take note of my leading assumption, let alone refer to

² Cf. Wolfgang Kersting, *Von denen nehmen wir nichts geschenkt*, ["We take no gifts from them"] review of: *Angriff der Leistungsträger? Das Buch zur Sloterdijk-Debatte*, ["Bodies liable for payment on the attack [Attack on those who are able to pay????] ? The book about the Sloterdijk debate"] published by Jan Rehmann and Thomas Wagner, Hamburg: Argument 2010, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (16 August 2010, p. 24).

it or, where applicable, justify their rejection of it. All I meant was that a thoroughly developed donor culture on a free and thymotic basis, guided by psychopolitical intelligence, need not allow society to drop below its current level at all. Indeed, it would possibly perform better than the system we know at present. Above all: the alternative project, after metamorphosis into an expanded, discreetly personalized culture of giving with highly developed motivation, would become far more lively, human and effective than the stifling, anonymous, inefficient, wasteful and coercive routines, so prone to exploitation, can ever be.

I would like to return to this contention, which went unheard in a noisy debate: that only a voluntary system can restore moral vitality to the population as a whole – even if such a system would initially only account for a small fraction of public spending and would continue to operate parallel to coercion-backed taxation for an indefinite period of time. Only a changeover to a culture of giving, with recognition of givers, can free the public from the moribund state of their wellbeing. People who side with the givers offer a moral wake-up call to live. That is the truth, and those who do not know it from their own experience have not yet begun to exist as moral subjects. They are stuck in their previous life, in which we are always waiting for someone else to do something for us.

However, even the morally mature feel like throwing in the towel if they are always being chivvied into shelling out, while all they receive from the recipient side is the prospect of ever-longer forms, ever-deeper humiliations, ever-chunkier back-payments. In this context, the findings about the state of our society have been evident for quite a long time. The first thing that strikes every visitor, inbound from outside into the prosperity belt, is the moral climate disaster that characterizes our political culture. The incoming traveler cannot comprehend why the richest society in history, in material terms, here and now, is simultaneously the most sullen, dissatisfied and mistrustful there has ever been in peacetime. Those who have caused this climate problem do not want to engage with it. They have no conception of their own moral emissions, and refuse to reflect on their causes and effects. Nevertheless, the reason for the great disgruntlement is nigh at hand: it lies in the systematic devaluation of givers by the organized taker authorities. It is attributable to the chronic humiliation of the broad middle classes whose giving, degraded to tax contributions, facilitates almost everything that holds the social world together. The endemic assumption is that they must be coerced into doing what they would allegedly never do off their own bat.

Whence does this pessimistic sociology draw its certainties?

Pessimism has ever been the excuse of those who, in the interest of their beloved fellow-humans, want to rely solely on coercion. Augustine, Hobbes and Lenin, the master theorists of the rule of fear, follow a common line in this respect. Still, whatever arguments the phalanx of realists marshals in the field, *a priori* there is no reason not to propose free giving for the good of society, like the compulsory taxation figures of the present day, as a regular and, within limits, predictable activity. One barrier is the lack of social imagination; another, greater still, the widespread and comfortable dependence on an anti-democratic anthropology of spite, masquerading as criticism and realism. It is all too easy to forget that every pronouncement about people shapes people. Sooner or later, those who think the worse of them end up seeing the very same 'worse' that they had originally thought. Thinking the worse of people is a self-fulfilling, intrinsic training in wretchedness.

We are touching on the nub of the issue and find that it is also the focus of the second social question.³ The sharpest critics of my ideas are partisans of a 'realism' which passes itself off as enlightened and über-clever, yet remains totally blind to the psychopolitical realities of the modern social system, to name but one aspect here. This supposed realism suggests to them, *sotto voce*, that all social cohesion would inevitably and immediately shatter into millions of greedy autistic atoms, as soon as taxpayers were allowed greater practical freedom to configure their own giving and granted recognition as givers.

Imbued with some obscure disposition, handed down to them from the 1960s and 70s, they still think and feel in terms of the anti-bourgeois, class hatred stereotypes of the 19th century and the 1920s and 30s, as recycled by the Leninist wing of the student movement, post-1967. They trudge the well-trodden paths of pseudo-sociology, whereby a civil society is none other than a mosaic of self-seeking agents of avarice.⁴

³ [note translator] The first social question concerns the reason for the increasing layer of discarded, precarious and 'superfluous' people in an 'affluent society' and the steps necessary to soften their disintegration (Peter Sloterdijk, *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite*, Berlin: Suhrkamp: 2010, p. 30).

⁴ The proponents of this opinion can hardly be aware that their fantasms of individualism and self-seeking relay a well-worn motif of Hegelianism. To them, the problematic hyperbole of Hegel's Philosophy of Right ("in civil society each member is his own end, everything else is nothing to him") has dwindled into a formula for agitation. From their point of view, Hegel's solidly counterfactual approach was a secularization of the Christian inquisition into the ego, which stretches back from Pascal to Augustine.

To outline the theoretical frame of reference of my thinking on the nature of taxation as gift, I would like to add the following comments. When Jürgen Habermas, in his day, made good his escape from the clichés of vulgar Marxism, which was ready for murder again, he won over many students in the 1960s and 70s. He was following a healthy intuition: that a fundamental effort must finally be made to do justice to the citizens of modern societies, as actively communicative beings. This change of attitude was significant to the intellectual survival of the former German Federal Republic, indeed for the non-Communist left-wing intelligentsia worldwide. It paved the way for a cautious reconciliation between the militant socialist camp and the liberal heritage of the *Rechtsstaat*.

Regrettably, Habermas did not pursue his chosen course through to its end-goal, the real problem. He never reached the point of recognizing that people achieve fulfillment, not only in symbolic, but also in material communications and communions with each other. Habermas' one-sided focus on linguistic exchange led him to say nothing about the decisive factor in communicative action, which is material giving and taking. Abridged to symbolic interaction, as stated, communication theory could not reconnect with the "materialist" or economic analysis. It was almost understandable that *Die Zeit* wrote of "world power Habermas." The exaggeration was excusable on his 80th birthday. It might, perhaps, have been genuine if the author had followed his theory of communicative action through to one of active giving and taking. It seems to me, though, that Habermas never wanted to admit that the "communication" which goes on between us is never purely an exchange of sentences claiming to be true, but equally, if not more, about the handover, return and passing on of goods in both the material and the symbolic meanings of the word.⁵

Acts of giving undeniably entail an excessive number of asymmetrical and unattributable factors. Habermas' greatest adversary, Derrida, had built his ethical reflections on this insight – which is why he constantly referred, in his late work, to giving (away), gift, donation, intake and assimilation. He referred to friendship, inheritance and related phenomena. All these topics derived from one, basic observation: in every human exchange, when giving takes the lead, it

⁵ Furthermore, the reference to our statements laying 'claim' to truth embodies a worrying distortion of what happens in communication. Speech is not so much about claiming truth for one's own message or argument. Rather, it is about offering the truth, opening access to truth for other people, and disclosing hitherto hidden subject-matter which, one has more or less good reason to believe, ought not to be withheld from one's fellow-citizens.

cannot be overtaken. Justice is inconceivable without the symmetry of giving and receiving. It can never be imagined without inequality and one-sidedness. Accordingly, the “response” can never be limited to a mirror-image return of a received gift. The “proper response” can only take the form of further giving, which recreates an asymmetrical relationship. Besides, Derrida never made any secret of wanting to free the old left from its conceptual stagnation and devise a new logic of social cohesion based on the giving virtues. He had therefore taken the risk of showing how generosity – in the form of unconditional giving – embodied one of the supreme forms of positive one-sidedness. In one aspect, such one-sidedness is thoroughly human and ‘normal,’ as mothers and good Samaritans demonstrate daily. At the same time, it has a second, ‘transcendent’ aspect which lies outside all calculable relations of exchange and equivalence. Certainly, no other idea could provoke the book-keepers of the old left more effectively. No wonder they closed their eyes to these potentially epoch-making notions. Whatever the reason, Habermas himself was always too cautious to follow the more perceptive thinker into the chasm of mediation between asymmetries.⁶

Pessimistic thinking has old-left circles in our country firmly in its grip, and the situation is no better elsewhere in Europe. The reason is not only the insufficient acceptance of Derrida’s initiatives but, indirectly, because of those initiatives. Paradoxically, the center where givers are ignored lies on the left wing. Paradoxically, because the traditional left had to be especially alert to ‘exploitation,’ in other words for giving that was received without thanks. However, the traditional left always looks for the unthanked and the unrecognized where they were discovered in the 19th century – in the underpayment of the paid workforce and in the underestimation of the contribution made by all kinds of “others” to the success of social life. The proponents of this tradition to this day have no hesitation in addressing the many millions of direct taxpayers in the broad middle swathe of contemporary society as their old category of

⁶ Further to my comments on this thinker, see “Derrida, ein Ägypter. Über das Problem der jüdischen Pyramide” [Derrida, an Egyptian: on the problem of the Jewish Pyramid], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2007, and “Der Denker im Spukschloß. Über Derridas Traumdeutung” [The Thinker in the Haunted Castle: on Derrida’s interpretation of dreams], opening lecture of the international conference “Derrida’s Ghosts” at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples, 7 October 2009. The occasion was the fifth anniversary of the philosopher’s death. Axel Honneth sought to make up for the inadequacies of Habermas’ theory of communicative action by shifting the emphasis to the riskier theme of ‘recognition.’ Through this, the General Economy gained ground, to the extent that recognition implies a giving gesture in the symbolic register. Honneth’s over-defensive reaction to the materialization of recognition in the actual gift might mean that he can see no way out of the system of “idealistic” symmetries.

automatic enemies. The many medium-sized business owners, the self-employed and the new creatives who are now among the weightier contributors to the public coffers: all are simply the greedy, hopeless, thieving bourgeoisie. The old left reaction is to expect that everything is possible from these groups and their activities. For them, the only impossibility is that people in prosperous, widely differentiated and individualized societies might have something left over for each other, even if they never lose sight of self-interest.

Given such a dogmatic, fundamentally negative attitude, it only makes sense that the social pessimists have pinned their hopes exclusively on the expansion of authoritarian fiscality. These lovers of coercive power stand, with the other agents of state overload, as the source of the most threatening wrong development in the system of public finances of our time. One lucid commentator described their mission as the “governmental charities.”⁷ They are the ones advancing the pattern of the disease of coercive fiscalism. This is the objectively reckless state indebtedness in all industrial countries, which actually should have been classed as criminal long ago, and is driving them ever-closer to collapse. They have taken it so far that the avoidance of state bankruptcy looks like a political utopia nowadays.

Still, it will not be possible to claim, one day, that the well-meaning fiscalists did not know what they were doing. The maxim of their action is open to the light of day: they see their own, high morality as worth demoralizing the rest of society for.

It seems high time to me to break with the misanthropic fantasy systems of reactionary left-wing origin, no matter how noble their original motives may have been. We have been through enough to be able to open a new chapter in the book of human co-existence in modern society. One guiding principle which I see as essential must head the new chapter. I have reiterated it several times in the subsequent interviews and essays, and emphasize it here: the human being is a creature shaped by a desire to have, and there is no economic theory which does not number this among its axioms. But the human must always also be deemed a sharing being, whose affective repertoire is also determined by empathy, pride, generosity and an inclination to give. To describe the human being merely as a bundle of lower desires and deficiencies is to head into dangerous error, in both ethical, anthropological, sociological and, not least, economic terms, because of its self-fulfilling effects. It is to make the human a nasty, poor

⁷ Wilhelm Röpke, *Die Lehre von der Wirtschaft* [Economics of the Free Society], 11th edition, Erlenbach-Zürich and Stuttgart: Rentsch 1968, p. 249 (first published 1937).

being, dominated by fear, according to Hobbes, or motivated by hatred of fellow-humans, according to Pascal, by acquisitiveness, according to Proudhon and Marx, by envy and covetousness, according to Girard, and by inherited deficiencies, according to Gehlen. The gloomy, conservative realist images of humanity find their justification in narrowly defined contexts. Despite problematic primary effects, they can trigger enlightening side-effects. Hence they are inseparable from the main current of modern thought.

A more rounded view will accept humans as dual beings, in whom shortfalls clash with excesses. The psyche acts in a permanent parallelogram of greedy and proud impulses: in Greek phrase, the field of tension between eros and thymos. Eros is at the taking pole; it strives to appropriate, heedless of propriety. Not without reason, it is the god of mass culture today, in which everything revolves around boundless desire. Under its influence, the elite are reduced to celebrity, and celebrity looks like the reward for greed. Thymos, on the other hand, remains what it always has been: inclined to giving and following refined motives or a rationale of prestige. That is why it is closer to the high culture and aristocratic code of chivalry of past social orders. However, innumerable examples from the bourgeois era bear witness to the possibility and reality of generosity in the interaction between ordinary people. They demonstrate the presence of generosity even among the poor, and the poorest. Yes, more recent psychosocial research actually shows that it is poorer people who least wish to be denied the opportunity for generous behavior and solidarity. The adventure of higher morality is only comprehensible through the civilizing power of thymos – especially when backed by the expansion of the empathy zone.⁸

So there is no need to brood over the animal spirits in the economy, oft cited again of late.⁹ The ruling spirits boil down to the two primary impulses: the erotic desire to have; and the thymotic desire to give. Both come in multiple sub-forms, due to the resistances of the real. Students of these fundamental forces and their mutations gain a reliable guide to the labyrinth of both economic and non-economic passions.¹⁰ The ancient philosophical psychology knew this, and

⁸ Cf. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilisation: the Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity Press: Campus 2009.

⁹ Cf. George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy*, Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009.

¹⁰ Cf. Nigel Thrift, *Pass It On: Towards a Political Economy of Propensity*, in: *Emotion, Space and Society I* (2008), Nr. 2, p. 83-98.

both the contemporary psychologies of the unconscious and the current social psychologies have forgotten it, relying instead on the abridged dogmatics of the deficient being and a distorted anthropology of desire and envy.¹¹ So it should be clear why we do not progress towards a political ethic for the 21st century, as long as we continue to cling to the dogmatic anthropology of misery, understandable though this reflex may be. It is a reflex which misleads into seeking support from the untenable. As far as ideas are concerned, traditional social democracy, understood in party-political terms (I have always seen this as the system to which I relate) is floored, because it has been unable to conceive new socio-ethical ideas. For too long, it was unable to expand its vocabulary. It has not learned to integrate the lexis of generosity into its language and conjugate the verbs of giving. It is no longer at home in contemporary psychological and psychopolitical facts. It remains fluent in the old dissatisfactions, but limps along the ground of the giving virtues. I wish it would soon recover the ability to walk upright. While it wishes to profile itself more clearly as the “party of the little people”¹² again in future, there is continued reason to fear its capability to be right for the times. It is no longer sufficiently familiar with the very large numbers of people in our hemisphere who have come through the worst and are looking around for projects, alliances and scenes in which they can realize their social imagination, their business awareness, their proud and creative impulses. For too long, traditional social democracy has listened to a ‘realistic’ sociology and to a truncated social philosophy dictated by righteous indignation. The further leftward you look these days, the more reactionary are the concepts that look back at you. At one time, Germany was the

¹¹ Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* [Rage and Time], Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006, p. 9 - 73, especially p. 51 ff., where I refer to the premises of an economy of generosity, following from Nietzsche and Bataille. By nature, my thoughts center on an area first outlined by Marcel Mauss, and in which Jacques Derrida has more recently set new benchmarks. I may point out that the generous Socialist, Marcel Mauss, is the author who has the last word in my Spheres Project (1998-2004). At the end of Volume 3, I introduce a historian who expresses the suspicion about the Spheres overall that their author actually wanted to write a universal history of generosity. The Spheres Project, he supposes, must be a long paraphrase of Marcel Mauss’s categorical imperative: we should move out of ourselves and fulfill ourselves in giving, both voluntary and compulsory, because it poses no risk. Mauss’s moral principle was that humanity can learn the art of sharing. His classic work *The Gift* deals with this. Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphäre III, Plurale Sphärology, Schäume* [Spheres III, Plural Spherology, Foams, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2004, p. 885.

¹² Sigmar Gabriel said this at an SPD party conference in September 2010.

world's leading exporter of political falsehoods which, to a great extent, became reality. Now, production is barely enough to meet domestic demand.¹³

I think I have expressed my option clearly enough:

the second new social question¹⁴ can only be answered by overcoming the second overlooking of givers in present-day political culture, just as the old workers' movement overcame the overlooking of the older entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. No-one is going to believe this will happen by itself, overnight. The coming century will feature a titanic struggle between the rationale of generosity and the calculations of demeaning thought. If the generous ethic can win this battle, it will be because it is favored by the growing pressure of interdependencies between global players. The global society will either be a patchwork of thymotic communes, or will not exist.

Social awareness can only regenerate itself on a broad front if it manages to generate a changed social climate, from the bottom up, which leaves center stage to the real giving bodies of our day. These are no longer the good old proletarians, who drew the short straw in relation to the factory owners, until they learned to assert their interests in powerful combinations. Today's unemployed, marginalized and precarious will continue to be found, for the time being, on the side of the beneficiaries of state aid, although it is important to map out ways by which they can return to the giving side. Society is now being enriched by the effective givers at all levels of society who, in the last resort, support the full weight of social structures on the financial, knowledge and empathy networks. These givers are the small, medium and big payers of direct and indirect taxes, the sponsors, the donors, the volunteer helpers, the networkers, the brainstormers and all known and unknown creatives in all areas of reality. The defamation

¹³ On this point, and only this, I concede that Antonio Negri is right in his book *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, Berlin: Edition Tiamat 2009, where he bids farewell to all versions of the established left. A decade ago I held a discussion with Negri and Yann Moulier-Boutang on satellite TV (there was a direct link from an auditorium of the Pompidou Center to Rebibbia state prison, near Rome), in which we swapped ideas on the shared conviction that the main motive for current political theory was to work out an ethos for a left wing, beyond resentment. The newspaper *Humanité*, in its 3 April 2000 edition, reported on the debate organized by the gauchiste journal *Multitudes*, with extensive quotations from what Negri and I said, under the headline: *Comment penser une gauche qui sorte du ressentiment?* (What would a left wing be like if it broke free of resentment?) The discussion of this has not moved on from this point, either in France or Germany. On the contrary, the reactionary left wing has become further entrenched, and the world financial crisis since September 2008 has furnished it with pretexts to regress further into superseded thinking.

¹⁴ See footnote 3 on the first social question.

of old and new givers, such as the well-intentioned but foolish and rotten phrases ‘class struggle from above’ should be a thing of the past. For the reactionary, fantasizing left, the better-off may still represent their foe of choice; they may quietly continue to nurse their resentment and draw their revolvers whenever they hear the term “bodies liable for payment.” Realists and freer spirits direct their gaze at the gigantic reality of the giving middle, the upper segment of which rubs shoulders with the well-to-do. It would be better for everyone if many of the rich were to join this middle ground since they, too, by virtue of their giver qualities, feed into the pool of the common wealth.¹⁵

The countless players in this arena form the set of groupings which are entitled today to lay claim to representation by visionary political thinking – just as the industrial proletariat of the 19th century had a well-founded right to intellectual representation by the theorizing *avant-garde* of their day. In the early 21st century, Marx would lend his voice to the forgotten, giving collectives of the contemporary system. He would note soberly: although all parties vie to speak for the center, the real center today is unrepresented. It is hardly better organized than a sheaf of papers in a wind blowing from all directions. In truth, it now forms the multitude, the creative plurality, of which nostalgic, diehard Communists such as Negri, Hardt, Žižek and others dream, not unsympathetically, but with conceptual helplessness. With incorrigible romanticism, these authors continue to look for the creative many on society’s presumably subversive lower rungs. They are loyal to the firm conviction that a new ‘revolutionary subject’ can only proceed from the dissent of the humbled and offended at the *status quo*. If they cling to an outdated folklore of radicalism, they fail to understand that the object of their search lives where they never look: in the eroding center of the working population. To be the center today means to risk, to be crushed between two ingritudes. Yet even the romantic seekers of the lost ‘radical politics’ and those who counsel a ‘drastic redistribution’¹⁶ should sooner or later be able to perceive that the giving center is now the core of the principle of the social.

¹⁵ In summer 2010 Bill Gates and Warren Buffett launched their historically unprecedented Giving Pledge, whereby the world’s super-rich would donate half their assets for projects for the common good. It attracted world attention (though in Germany it provoked rather scornful dismissal). It underpinned the recently mooted ideas of philanthrocapitalism by concrete examples. Cf. Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, *Philanthrocapitalism. How the Rich Can Save the World*, New York: Bloomsbury 2008.

¹⁶ As expressed by Chantal Mouffe, *Exodus or War of Position: Which Future for Radical Politics?* Vienna: Turia and Kant 2005, p. 58.

As for the mechanical exploitation of the productive by the hydra, what is necessary has been said. Here, too, there is nothing new under the sun, as long as the sun cannot shine elsewhere. The new idea has been coined: it is high time to think of social cohesion as starting with giving. The giving virtues are the only renewable energy sources which, if tapped, can effect root-and-branch change in human life.