The Gift of The Nation
Marcel Mauss and the Intersocial Turn of Sociology

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Abstract: In order to question the modernist common sense of mainstream sociology, epitomised today by the charge of methodological nationalism, this article offers an overall reading of Marcel Mauss’s *The Nation*. Conceived during the Great War and written mainly in 1920, Mauss’s work radically re-examined both the nation and nationalism from a regenerated sociological viewpoint centered on the relations between societies. Distinguishing between partial relations of exchange and total relations of encounter, Mauss came to discover the gift as a total social fact, seeing it as the traditional unconscious spring of the federative dynamics that had to be reactivated in Europe to associate its nations in a great ‘Inter-nation’ and avoid the risk of a new total war. *The Nation*, by reviving the original ambition of Émile Durkheim’s sociology to be a way rethinking and reshaping the concepts and institutions of modernity, helps us explore the contradictions and pathologies involved in the concept and history of the nation, in a situation currently marked by the return of nationalism and the quest for a social Europe.

Keywords: gift, intersocial, Marcel Mauss, nationalism, socialism, society

With the exception of Max Weber’s brief and quite preliminary study of 1910, no recognised classical sociologist has managed to tackle the question of the nation and nationalism in all its extent before the Great War (Smith 1983; Vujacić 2001). This astonishing silence nourishes today the charge of ‘methodological nationalism’, according to which nations have been absent from the discourse of classical sociology only because they were present in the background of all its historical-political analysis, as a result of the implicit identification between the category of society and the concept of the nation (Chernilo 2006). The set of features that early sociologists such as Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte have used, since the first half
of nineteenth century, to draw the boundaries of the social would thus have been tacitly borrowed from national criteria. The main such criterion was the notion that society is an autonomous, all-encompassing totality with clearly delimited boundaries to which subjects and groups naturally belong – just like the way in which organs belong to an organism (Baker 1989). Linking nations to states as two sides of the same coin, these genealogical readings have concluded that the cardinal conceptual distinction introduced by sociology, both with and against the Enlightenment, has been nothing but the product of a modern projection, the fruit of an unconscious ‘state-nationalisation’ of human experience, required to organise and impose modernity everywhere (Wokler 2002).

Yet this genealogical suspicion, while not completely without foundation, concerns European classical sociology only in so far as we still read it from the perspective of its American post-war systematisation. As Norbert Elias (1969) has shown, it is indeed Talcott Parsons who ended up imposing internationally the equivalence between ‘society’ and ‘the nation’, underpinning his evolutionist theory of history centered on the process of modernisation. This was the result of a reification, under the idea of ‘the social system’, of the ideal image of the liberal-democratic state, whose members are supposed to be all socialised according to the same core values, norms and institutions, thereby making up a harmonic functional whole. This reification can be clearly grasped if we look at the definitions of ‘society’ given by Parsons and his collaborators, students and followers in encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks and introductions to the social sciences during the golden age of empirical sociology: society is generally defined there as the coherent unit constituted by a self-sufficient territorially bounded homogeneous population and characterised by internal organisation, common culture and endogenous sexual reproduction – that is, according to a state-national imaginary (Wagner 2000).

We cannot therefore consider freeing classical sociology and the social sciences issued from its project from the charge of methodological nationalism, which involves questioning its most fundamental concept, by merely arguing that some authors – first and foremost, Karl Marx – contemplated a political overcoming of modern nation states in a cosmopolitan direction (Pendenza 2014; Turner 2006). Cosmopolitanism is itself conceivable and potentially defensible, indeed, on properly sociological grounds only if it results from a perspective which, by distinguishing firmly society from the nation, can account for the nation itself in socio-historical terms. This is a precondition for any political stance towards the possible and desirable future of nations (Chernilo 2007). It remains, then, to show that questioning nationalism has been, for classical sociologists, the political consequence of a more fundamental theoretical and empirical revision regarding the nation itself, based on the perspective opened by a universal category:
the fundamental concept of political society as understood as a primary dimension of human experience, as irreducible to the modern nation, and as able to support, for the latter reason, the comparative work of anthropology and history (Callegaro and Marcucci 2018).

In this regard, the recently published book of Marcel Mauss, The Nation (Mauss 2013), conceived during the Great War and written mainly in 1920, stands out as an ideal starting point for questioning the modernist common sense of mainstream sociology epitomised by the charge of methodological nationalism; it enables us to rethink both the object and the objectives of the social sciences taken as a whole. Suspended between two eras of sociology, Mauss explicitly tried, indeed, to free the leading idea of political society from the narrow framework of the modern nation state, in order to radically re-examine both the nation and nationalism from a regenerated sociological point of view (Descombes 2013; Karsenti 2010). Read today, The Nation seems, then, to answer to the need which we are now experiencing, after more than 30 years of post-modern genealogical criticism, when trying to elucidate retrospectively the fundamental concepts of sociology and the social sciences, in order to gain a new reflexive grip on political modernity (Karsenti 2013).

Once placed in the framework of an alternative historical-conceptual reading (Chignola and Duso 2008), Mauss’s work opens up a perspective that enables us to reformulate the crucial questions that the historical scholarship from the contemporary field of ‘nation and nationalism studies’, despite decades of impressive development, has not yet succeeded in answering. In The Nation, Mauss endeavoured to understand, explain and orient the nation as an original form of society and to clarify, by way of comparative work, its meaning, genesis and purpose from a sociological perspective freed from Eurocentrism. In so doing, he escaped many of the dichotomies that still afflict historiographical debates on the epistemological (naturalism/constructivism), historical (primordialism/modernism) and political (nationalism/cosmopolitism) levels (Özkirimli 2017). Thus, while we of course cannot take up all of Mauss’s theses and proposals, the peculiar sociological approach that emerges from his work can nevertheless guide us today, to the extent that, by reviving sociology’s original ambition to be a new political science capable of rethinking and reshaping the main concepts and institutions of modernity (Callegaro 2015), it helps us explore anew the contradictions and pathologies involved in the concept and history of the nation in a geopolitical environment currently marked by the surprising return of nationalism.

Imposed by the tragic experience of the Great War, the revision of sociology advanced by Mauss in The Nation can be seen as resting on one main epistemological and theoretical move: expanding on the ‘Note on the Notion of Civilisation’ written with Émile Durkheim (Durkheim and
Mauss 1913), Mauss succeeded in highlighting comparatively the exceptional features of the nation by situating it in an intersocial field made up of the contingent dynamic relations between political societies, both partial and total, symmetric and asymmetric (Terrier 2011). The shift towards the intersocial was required first in order to account for war as a major social fact, which had remained until then almost as unexplained as the nation itself (Joas and Knöbl 2012). Yet the intersocial perspective enabled Mauss, also and mainly, to shed a new light on the irreducible singularity of the nation itself, to the point that he could explain how its inner contradictions were responsible for the recent civilisational collapse. It is on the basis of this revised sociology, characterised by a particular attention given to the historicity of social facts, itself implied by the intersocial perspective, that Mauss finally came to contemplate a political way out of the dead ends of Europe, until the rise of fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War contradicted his expectations.

Having brought out, through his analysis of war, the existence of those total social facts that are as exceptional in the course of social life as they are crucial for its proper sociological understanding, in so far as the political core of collective reality only appears clearly in their wake, Mauss looked for an alternative to the unstable peace of his time by entering the ethnological field from which he soon after extracted the anthropological discovery attached since to his name (Karsenti 2011; Mallard 2019). In search for an answer to the impasse of international relations, he took bold steps forward and anticipated his future Essay on the Gift, incidentally revealing the political significance of anthropology, once oriented by the principles, questions and methods of sociology. An old intersocial tradition waiting to be transformed into an implicit structural principle of social life, the system of mutual exchanges known since as ‘the gift’ appeared in The Nation as the still-available source of the only political form capable of guaranteeing a lasting peace amongst nations by ensuring, if not their fusion, at least their composition.

Thus, Mauss placed the gift, this ‘solid rock of human morality’, at the base of the desired ‘federation’, which he called Inter-nation, alone capable of bringing modern nations closer to the still-utopian ideal of a universal cosmopolitan society marked by perpetual peace.\(^2\) Having placed relational and global social facts, such as war and the gift, at the heart of the contingent dynamics of history, Mauss could thus dismiss the inherited ‘metaphysical idea’ of progress and give a new meaning as well as a new foundation to the idea that politics, always internal and external, can govern societies enough to transform their being, their structure and their constitution – and this, for the worse and the better, as evidenced, on the one hand, by the recent devastating experience of 1914 and, on the other hand, by the quest for a new federal form capable of ensuring peace between nations inside and outside Europe.
This is the perspective that we will try to explore by retracing the argumentative movement that gives its political rhythm to the analysis deployed in *The Nation*. To this end, we must first return to the work done by Mauss to introduce a properly sociological definition of the nation. In Mauss’s socio-historical understanding, the nation is a modern phenomenon which emerged with the revolutions of the eighteenth century but which can be compared to the ancient Greek *polis*. Second, once we have clarified the singularity of the nation in relation to other forms of political societies, it will be possible to grasp how Mauss tried to explain the pathologies of nationalism by placing nations in the intersocial field in which their normal rivalry had given way, during the nineteenth century, as a consequence of their imperialist drift, to the mutual military threats that ended up in their almost complete destruction. Reaching Mauss’s own present, we will conclude by apprehending the grounds of his positive political proposal for a new national and international order: grasping the gift of the nation that makes up a federation will let us hear the stifled voice of a forgotten sociological socialism conceived of as the actual overthrowing of capitalist imperialism.

**Understanding the Nation**

We must start by taking up the inaugural question with which Mauss raised the ‘problem of the modern nation’ for the first time in the history of sociology in its explicit and developed form. From the outset, he rejected the abstract universalism of modern political philosophers, who ‘seek the general laws . . . of any society’ and ‘prescribe for any possible society’. Instead Mauss’s sociological programme was to highlight the irreducible *historicity* of nations as social formation. Far from being the ‘first’ and the most ‘natural’ societies, the nations of which he endeavoured to ‘make the theory’, in order to ‘discern the practice’, had to be considered as ‘forms of common life’ arisen in history and open to a still-indefinite future. While not being primordial, they could not be assumed to be the ‘last’ and the ‘most ideal’ societies (Mauss 2013: 51–52).  

In order to help nations to better apprehend themselves socio-historically, Mauss began, in accordance with a historical-conceptual approach analogous to the one adopted today by comparative sociology (Greenfeld 1992), by presenting the main *semantic shift* of the term ‘nation’. The meaning of the word had indeed changed drastically from its original geographic Latin plural use, referring within canon and civil law to the place of birth, to the modern political collective singular, the nation, which Mauss himself used in the title of his work, forged by those philosophers and jurists – we can think here of the Abbé Sieyès – who had decisively helped lay the groundwork for the revolutions
of the eighteenth century. Mauss, however, was not fully satisfied with the modern legal use of the term, which is why he mobilised sociology in the debate in order to delineate the *social boundaries of the concept*. The meaning of the word ‘nation’ had been in fact so little fixed in the ‘technical language’ of law and political science that it rather tended to float – to the point that ‘nations’ were still confused, in modern educated common sense, with ‘states’ themselves (Mauss 2013: 65–67).⁵

Sociology itself was at stake here. In fact, Mauss pointed out bluntly that the typology of political societies that he had developed with Durkheim had no conceptual space for the nation either, since it entailed a confusion between ‘nations’ and ‘societies with a diffused form of integration’, endowed with the central *imperium* of the state, sociologically conceived as the governing part of the social whole (Callegaro 2018). In order to bring out the singularity of the nation, Mauss had then to clarify first the *category of society* itself, with a view to distinguishing conceptually between different kinds of social totality, only some of which deserve the distinctive designation of ‘nation’. It is the elucidation of the most fundamental concept of sociology – society as such – that enabled him in the first place to avoid the confusion between past states/empires and present nations, thus tracing a conceptual boundary as clear as Aristotle’s distinction between *ethnē* and *poleis* (Mauss 2013: 79–80).⁶

In Mauss’s various preliminary discussions of the category of society, one criterion resurfaced constantly.⁷ In order to identify a political society, the presence of one main empirical feature is essential in the sociological perspective that Mauss took up from Durkheim: the existence of a *constitution* that holds humans and things together by attaching them to the determined group that it creates through to its rules, practices and institutions. The ‘constitution’ of a society is irreducible to morphology, that is, to the material ‘structure’ that frames and distributes a given population in spaces and places – yet neither could it be sought, according to Mauss’s reformulation of Durkheim’s postulate, exclusively in ‘legal’ phenomena – unless one expands the meaning of ‘law’ to include moral rules that go well beyond positive written laws. More than ‘language’ and ‘culture’, the constitution thus conceived in its enlarged normative significance, close to the *politeia* of ancient political philosophy and to the *Verfassung* of critical legal history (Fioravanti 2011), represented for Durkheim and Mauss the social phenomenon *par excellence*: the only one being both ‘general’ and ‘characteristic’ of *any* collective life, in as much as it always displays a sufficient degree of organisation, even when the plurality of subjects and groups making up the whole do not share the same territory, culture or language (Mauss 1934).⁸ In a telling passage of *The Nation*, significantly placed at the heart of his exploration of intersocial civilisational phenomena, Mauss took care to clarify further this basic sociological principle. Knowing that legal facts
always travel across the boundaries of the social that they contribute to institution, he explained that the ‘constitution’ of a society had to be sought in the integrated ‘system’ of existing ‘institutions’, in so far as they express the structure that a society gives itself by the very act of establishing a ‘translation’ of natural facts into moral rules (Mauss 2013: 138). Thus, while recognising that a given institution can be borrowed from one society by another, Mauss insisted on the fact that the specific system of rules that gives it its peculiar meaning and function within a concrete constitution is not and cannot be exchanged, at least as long as one political society does not merge with another.

These are therefore the ‘external signs’ that Mauss had planned to present in the first unpublished book of *The Nation*. Before coming to modern nations, he had thought to determine the defining element that a sociologist would need to use in order to consider a multitude of human beings living together as forming a given political society. Since not all societies were modern, since some of them were still on the margins of modernity, Mauss’s constitution-based definition was meant to address the criteria of sociality as distinct from the criteria of nationality, as a non-national society could be from a nation. In order to develop and test these universal sociological criteria, Mauss turned to anthropology: his aim was to be in a position to explore non-modern societies without being conditioned at the outset by the exception of the modern nation. It is the requirement of this anthropological de-centering from modern concepts that led Mauss to criticise the ‘vice’ of those sociologists who were already distorting the experience of non-modern societies by considering them ‘under the aspect of modern nations’, because they ignored the ‘novelty’ of the nation (Mauss 2013: 99).

Thus, at the moment of giving some fundamental instructions for fieldwork, Mauss pointed out, in his courses at the Institute of Ethnology, that the ‘armature’ of a society far exceeded its superficial ‘political organisation’, since it included moral and especially religious rules followed in practice within institutions. In light of ethnological findings, the secret of the expanded law of the constitution had to be ultimately looked for in a normative core hidden in the middle of institutions: a core which appeared to be ‘sacred’ (Mauss 2002: 196). To apprehend a constitution, one could consider the system of rules that organise the internal relations of subjects and things within a society, as Durkheim did; yet Mauss believed that the existence of a definite constitution making up a total society could be further grasped empirically from an external perspective by considering the collective resistance to the phenomenon of exchange. As he wrote in *The Nation*: ‘Borrowing is the normal phenomenon, since non-borrowing is precisely what singularises a society in relation to another’ (2013: 125). According to Mauss, all that is social circulates to some degree and in
different ways, with the exception of the constitution, ultimately because this system of rules has something sacred. Already briefly sketched in the note with Durkheim of 1913, mentioned above, this cardinal sociological thesis was then taken up by Mauss in The Nation, before being further developed in the essays devoted to the relations between society and civilisation (Mauss 1968). This thesis implies considering the intersocial as a necessary condition for understanding the social, only in so far as it inscribes at the heart of any civilisation extending across social boundaries a fundamental negativity: it is the refusal to borrow and exchange that ensures the persistence of the irreducible singularity of any existing society, centered as it is on its sacred core.

From this sociological perspective, there was, therefore, no way of knowing whether what presented itself as an association of societies was in fact a new political society, unless it was possible to observe from the outside that the societies brought together by their regular exchanges shared, in addition to the traits of a given civilisation, the determined system of rules and institutions characterising a new concrete constitution, including the secret of the sacred. Developing further a view already advanced by Durkheim in his Professional Ethics and Civil Morals (2001: 47), Mauss considered the possibility, for a plurality of political societies, that they could merge together into a larger whole: a new political society resulting from the overcoming of their mutual resistances and the fusion enabled by a new creation of the sacred. Like Durkheim, Mauss did not have any sociological arguments to doubt the actual existence of a universal human society, despite having already made room for the recent development of a human civilisation on a global scale, which resulted from the growing intellectual and material capital deposited in existing societies and nations by intersocial and international exchanges (Mauss 2013: 125). In The Nation, Mauss’s primary goal with this sociological theory about the merging of societies was not, thus, to explain and justify the future overcoming of nations within a still utopian cosmopolitan society; rather, he made use of his intersocial perspective to account for the emergence of the nation itself in the recent past, during an uncertain era characterised by the extension of the ‘world market’, as Karl Marx had already rightly shown (Mauss 2013: 220).

By rejecting both liberal and conservative ideologies, Mauss pointed out that societies are ‘individualities’ that resist their dissolution into larger societies; however, they are not ‘irreducible’ to the point that any fusion would be impossible. In order to merge into one another, they have to create a new, common constitution, emerging from the background of their shared civilisation. A general phenomenon of human history, this fusion of societies had recently taken place in Europe, in so far as it had to be placed, according to Mauss, at the ‘origin of the great modern nations’
At the end of a migratory process that saw ‘peoples of all origins’ meeting in ‘great urban centres’ and sharing modern ‘forms of life’ (Mauss 2013: 101), social fusion enabled the birth of a new kind of political society. Mauss used here the properly sociological meaning of ‘the constitution’ in order to distance himself from the pervasive legal myth of the ‘constituent power’ – a myth that was as the core of the reduction of the nation to the state, which sociology had to get rid of. Instead, Mauss tried to bring out the potency of the social for the creation of the national. This is clear if we consider the emphasis placed, in The Nation, on the collective effervescent movements through which the philosophical-legal concept of the nation came to take hold of reality: in these movements, the ‘theories of the social contract’ that had been developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had finally given way to actual ‘rituals of pact’. Such rituals were characteristic of the concrete social experience of modern revolutions: Mauss gave the example of France during the ‘great day of the Federation’, 14 July 1790 (Mauss 2013: 69, 97).

By further developing Durkheim’s perspective about collective effervescence, which had already been applied to the French Revolution in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1995: 213–216), Mauss tried to give a sociological account of the self-instituting effort of a nation that becomes aware of itself, and whose existence precedes and extends beyond the state. Distancing himself from modern law and political science, he considered retrospectively the philosophical-political doctrines of natural law as the hypostasised expression of the ‘Idea of the Nation’, once brought back to the social experience that enabled the creation of nations: new constitutions concretely took shape in the massive festivals – a total social fact if there is any – in which an unprecedented politics based on the general will of the people emerged out of religious ritual practices, thereby transforming each individual into a citizen and society as a whole into a unified political body (Mauss 2013: 97–98). It is, therefore, the primary reference to the collective experience of revolutions that allowed Mauss to give back its original social meaning to what was still confusingly called the ‘nation’. This means that the nation itself could only have been lost sight of because this experience itself had been forgotten – in the meantime, the potency of the social had been replaced by the power of the state, to the point of making the nation appear as a by-product of its legislative and cultural activity.

Without ignoring the central place of the ‘democratic regime’ that the revolutionary experiences attached in principle, inside and outside Europe, to the ‘very notion of the nation’ (Mauss 2013: 67), Mauss tried then to gain access to a deeper layer of the concept, going beyond what was visible on that political-legal surface in which the nation ended up being confused with the state. In order to grasp the ultimate constitutional roots of modern political societies, he directed his sociological attention towards
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more intimate and less apparent phenomena. The conditions for a unified apprehension of the nation, which Mauss included in his last definition (2013: 114), were synthesised, in fact, by a rather ordinary social attitude: the curious ‘superstitious attraction’ that brought into the orbit of the constitution all the social facts, whereas in any other social formations the social facts followed the logic of the intersocial circulation (2013: 100). This is the defining sociological feature of the nation, the main external sign that makes it possible to measure the extent to which it is a truly unprecedented phenomenon in history. Never before had the social been made sacred in its totality to the point of rendering untouchable even the most insignificant facts of collective life. By a paradoxical inversion of the predominant liberal opinion, championed at the time by Henri Bergson (1932) and later by Karl Popper (1945), Mauss saw modern nations as societies characterised by their closure towards other societies, to the point that the very existence of their constitution depends upon this self-closure. Working out the consequences of this radical comparison, he opposed therefore the national closure to the free circulation of ideas, practices and institutions showed by all human societies known in history – a phenomenon so fundamental that it lied at the basis of the very category of ‘civilisation’ that he forged with Durkheim.

The sacralisation of the social in the national expressed for Mauss a properly religious phenomenon, since religion itself consisted, according to Durkheim’s approach, in the sacred itself. This is what he pointed out clearly in The Nation by emphasising the presence of a collective belief that invests every aspect of collective life with a national significance. It is a community of belief that Mauss brought to light from the unconscious history of liberal-democratic politics by revealing the impact of the national appropriation of the social that had shielded from circulation not only the system of law, but also language, customs, manners, arts, sciences and even techniques, including those of the body. ‘Everything belongs to us’ – such has been the singular social spirit of the nation, at least at its origins. The societies that emerged from the revolutions have thus conceived themselves as worthy of this name, ‘nation’, only in so far as their citizens, animated by the same Idea, managed to appropriate the social in its totality, extending to its ideal symbolic boundaries a same sacred core linked to the ideal of freedom. A single social fact or a single dimension of collective life would have been insufficient, in the past, to identify a society; now, in the national context, even the most minute things, once nationalised, could become a criterion of nationality and could be used, correspondingly, to determine the boundary of the nation.

This is the comparative sociological concept that Mauss planned to use in order to classify and explore a wide range of political societies – from those that could be considered nations only on the basis of the ‘ridiculous
fictions’ of European political-legal principles, based on state sovereignty, all the way to those who had to be acknowledged as such despite the fact that they did not conform with the trajectory and experience of Western Europe, the ‘empire of nations’ (2013: 85–87). In framing this comparison, Mauss took great care to preserve the political unity of the concept of ‘the nation’ – in contradistinction to the current pluralist approach spread by the history of ideas, which operates with the questionable opposition between civic and ethnic conceptions, linked, respectively, to France and Germany (Schnapper 1997). Yet he still could take advantage of his intersocial approach and make room for a vast plurality of ‘variants of the national’, each of which alters the idea of the nation because it carries out in its own way, although often in interaction with Europe, the same fundamental dynamic of a nationalisation of the social. In a spirit close to contemporary concerns for alternative modernities (Gaonkar 2001), Mauss came then to oppose the temptation to bring all nations within the frameworks of ‘European social types’, inviting us rather to open the socio-political concept enough to welcome the way in which non-European nations were going to ‘create their own original institutions’, as proven already by the hybrid constitutional cases of China and Japan (Mauss 2013: 85–89, 112).

As evinced by the passing references to the ‘ordinary resistance’ of young nations fighting for ‘true independence’ against the oppression of ‘another civilisation’ (Mauss 2013: 111), the interactive creative process of nationalisation which took place between Europe and non-Europe concealed, however, the political problem of the international order. In order to bring it out, Mauss had to enlarge first his narrow vision of the intersocial, which is proposed today by historians as a major epistemological advance (Werner and Zimmermann 2004). It is the one that reduced the logic and dynamics of external relations to the sole circulation of social facts, that is, to symmetrical exchanges of ideas, practices and institutions determining identity and difference through borrowing and refusals to borrow (Mauss 2013: 124–125). It is in the framework of an enlarged intersocial perspective, making room for inter and total social facts, symmetric and asymmetric, peaceful and violent, that Mauss came to account for the drastic change of the nineteenth century, as it turned exchanges between nations and societies into the domination of European empires over their colonies. In the second explanatory part of The Nation, Mauss thus ended up clarifying the ambivalence of ‘nationalism’ itself, in so far as it contained both imperialism and its subversion, the cause of war and its possible remedy.
Explaining Nationalism

Once he analysed the phenomenon of exclusive attachment to the national totality, Mauss proceeded to explain the nature and correct the excesses of nationalism. In each facet, whether economic, literary or linguistic, of the process of the total appropriation of the social, he recognised indeed one aspect of the same overarching ‘nationalism’ (2013: 94–95, 105). Having gone through all the practices of appropriation that enabled nations to work to their ‘individuation’, or better, to their ‘singularisation’ (2013: 94–95), Mauss came to consider, however, this form of nationalism as a sort of well-founded delirium, following once more Durkheim’s sociology of religions (Durkheim 1995: 228). Against the cosmopolitan prejudices still shared today by many liberal and Marxist historians, he tended to consider the ‘fetishism’ practised by each nation with regard to its own literature, its science, its technology, its morals, its traditions and so on as a sort of ‘natural fatuity’ inevitably implied by the process of singularisation (Mauss 2013: 107).

In order to grasp the integrated system of social facts which resulted from the political-religious self-instituting work of nations, with their internal, almost natural nationalism, Mauss made use of the nowadays-outdated political-philosophical concept of ‘collective character’. Contrary to the thesis advanced by Marx in the Manifesto, Mauss pointed out, according to an argumentative line shared with Otto Bauer (1924) and Hermann Heller (1925), that the ‘formation of the great nations’, far from resulting in the ‘destruction’ of collective characters, had rather led to their striking ‘accentuation’ (Mauss 2013: 112). The process of singularisation, in other words, could not be separated from the political project of creating a ‘national character’. This project operated according to a specific circular logic, which required believing in the national origin of all its components in order to nationalise them integrally. Mauss thus placed nationalism at the heart of a self-enclosed, politically produced totality, all the more definite in its margins in that its elements had to draw the ‘frontiers’ of nations (2013: 114).

Joining the deepest layer of the experience still contained in the concept beyond its political-legal surface, Mauss brought then to light the source of the spontaneous nationalism of nations which made the expression of the general will possible, namely the ‘total education of the whole of the people’ (2013: 113). Considered as a foundational phenomenon of any collective life in general, education appeared to him as the main factor that forged and maintained an ideal community of citizens, which is why he considered it as the secret of the nation’s self-creation. It is on this element, which found its expression in the transition of education from past unconscious transmission of collective characters to their present conscious formation, that the sociological explanation of ordinary nationalism
ultimately rested. While mainstream historical modernism has emphasised state action and highlighted the crucial role played by the organised transmission of culture (Gellner 1983), for Mauss the political education implied by the nationalist constitution of nations far exceeded ‘compulsory instruction in state schools’, as central as it had indeed been in the shaping of their collective characters (2013: 114).

Looking at nations from a resolutely sociological angle, that is, with a focus on the collective practices that unfold within social institutions, Mauss turned, for his final explanation of ordinary nationalism, to the unperceived phenomena of modern social life – for instance, the transmission of ‘maternal language’ to a child by his parents in order to provide him with a ‘complete education’: this ‘linguistic effort’ showed in his eyes the active presence of a ‘will of the people’ to intervene in processes left until then to ‘unconscious variations’ (2013: 105). When seeking to clarify not the construction but the creation of the nation, Mauss avoided considering it just as a cultural by-product of state schooling; instead, he emphasised the political self-making of the people carried on in ordinary social spaces such as the family. In other words, the nation is not a mere legal and cultural artefact that floats above daily experience: this is because it takes shape in and through the intervention of the people in the process of nationalisation of the social, breaking the established division between ‘gens and populus’ by constant efforts to ‘create for itself’ a ‘collective character’ (2013: 111–113).

Mauss thus brought ‘the people back in’. In his sociological perspective, nations appeared as societies ultimately created in the daily practice of an unnoticed politics, the one that sought, in and through the total education of the new generations, to make something national out of the slightest social fact. It was not so much, therefore, the performative production of the nation through ordinary discourses that Mauss emphasised; rather, he focussed on the practical self-formation of subjects, which occurs at the intersection between the individual and the collective. It is precisely this intersection that the idea of collective character makes thinkable, as illustrated by the nation’s hold on the individual body itself: everyone learns, from the surrounding social environment, specific, distinctive bodily techniques. As Mauss (1936) argued in a later essay, the existence of such techniques of the body makes it possible to identify from afar the nationality of a given person, which finds an expression in the different ways of walking, meeting and greeting.

Irreducible to a natural entity, the nation thus conceived did not have yet to be considered, in Mauss’s perspective, as a cultural product more artificial than the spontaneous political-educational work of which it was in fact the result. The unfinished object of an open process, it had to be mainly apprehended as the determinate collective subject of a definite project: that
which had been carried on by the people, or rather by the heterogeneous social mass having transformed itself into a people by having worked to the formation of the relatively homogeneous general will to be democratically expressed in the deliberate formulation of laws. Modern nations thus appeared to Mauss as collective entities, forged by the people, that had come to play an ever more important role on the stage of history due to the peculiar ‘political culture’ (Karsenti 2012) contained in the collective character that had been shaped by everyday nationalist action.

To sum up, Mauss began by presenting nationalism as the internal normal condition of modern politics. This was the condition to account for the aggressive, both retrograde and xenophobic, variety developed during the nineteenth century. In the introduction to The Nation, he had announced that the ‘urgent task’ of ‘political theory’ was to offer a diagnosis and a palliative to this form of nationalism with a view, in particular, to explaining the causes of the Great War and to preventing its return (2013: 72). This ‘abscess’ that had to be extirpated was connected, for Mauss, with the spontaneous nationalism of the people only in the following way. During the nineteenth century, the ‘sophisms of political interest’ had succeeded in imposing everywhere the same ‘paralogism’ according to which the nation was not the cause but rather the effect of an already given natural collective character (2013: 101, 107). Separated from its original social and political source, nations came thus to be attached, by nationalist politicians and historians, to particular traits of a character that were increasingly naturalised, to the point that in the end ‘race’ took the place of the ‘people’. It is this form of artificial nationalism, resulting from a naturalisation of the nation driven by political interest, which needed to be explained with a view to gaining a grip on the process that had ended up with the catastrophe of the Great War and the worst form of colonial exploitation.

To deploy his sociological diagnosis, Mauss entered further into the intersocial field, until he reached the phenomena of ‘total relation’ between societies. In them, the internal links between the different dimensions of society appear and unite all of a sudden, in so far as the social totality is confronted with another social totality – a whole is confronted with another whole. Avoiding the tendency, dominant at the time, to analyse specific institutions separately, Mauss developed a theoretical framework based on the analysis of inter and total social facts. As a result, he established, in The Nation, the first elements of a general sociology of war and peace (2013: 165–166).15

Studying another almost unexplored region, Mauss first drew the outline of a sociological perspective on war, on the basis of a radical comparison between non-modern and modern experiences. While emphasising the need to explain why human animals are so ‘singular’ that they kill their fellows, not by a vital ‘interest’ but by social ‘obligation’, he insisted
especially on the change of the ‘form of war’ itself, produced by the metamo-

morphosis of societies in history (2013: 165–166). Questioning yet another
liberal commonplace, Mauss came to conclude that war had to be under-
stood not as an anthropological but as a social fact, indeed as an intersocial
total fact. Even though it was not a recent phenomenon, war had nonethe-
less reached its definite character at the time of the constitution of modern
nations. Violent encounters between groups are as old as humankind, yet
in modernity they have become an acute ‘crisis’ in which ‘a whole society
confronts a whole other society’ (2013: 168): This is due to the fact that
nations, due to their peculiar constitution, have gone further down the road
of social integration than any other society. In this comparative framework,
Mauss came to emphasise the extreme contrast between the primitive form
of war, which was in fact merely a vendetta, a ‘small expedition’ of a clan
against another, and the modern form of armed confrontation, which was
war properly called: a ‘struggle for life and death’ of a ‘people against
another people’ (2013: 173).

Even though it had occurred after a century of apparent peace, the out-
break of a total war between nations should not have come as a surprise.
This possibility was contained in the very constitution of European nations,
and this would have been clear to all if the matter had not been obscured
by liberal ideology. According to Mauss, these singular forms of societ-
ties had indeed been built ‘in, by and for war’, since the invention of the
‘national army’ by ‘revolutionary France’. The idea had thus circulated in
Europe as a consequence of a ‘military threat’ already made palpable by the
Napoleonic adventure, which forced the other existing societies to organ-
ise themselves as so many ‘armed nations’ (2013: 172–173). However,
between the possibility and the reality of war (a war that could only be
total, since nations had totalised the social), an explanatory gap remained
which needed to be filled by exploring further the changes of nationalism
itself. Mauss followed the trail he had blazed by adopting the intersocial
perspective, and thus could lay bare the interests that were at stake in the
political naturalisation of nations. The nations, in fact, ended up modifying
their form and even their spirit. They originated in an initial concern for
political freedom within ‘well-delimited frontiers’, but later ‘appetites for
conquest’ and for ‘violent domination’ came to light, which had so far been
rather characteristic of empires (2013: 90).

This metamorphosis destabilised the clear-cut conceptual distinction
Mauss had drawn (with the help of Aristotle and as a correction to the
typology he had initially proposed with Durkheim) between, on the one
hand, pre-modern state empires and, on the other, modern nations. Mauss
thus consciously endorsed as a legitimate sociological category the politi-
cally loaded concept of ‘imperialism’ (Helge and Neumann 2011), which
Weber (2019) had already used to characterise the twist of liberalism,
and which was common in socialist circles since Vladimir Lenin’s (2010) famous thesis about the highest stage of capitalism. From Mauss’s perspective, ‘imperialism’ was sociologically useful to characterise not only the future political temptation of the young nations that menaced, like Italy, the liberal order established in Europe by the ‘great democracies’ (2013: 90–91), as the rise of fascism would soon demonstrate, but also the past and present reality of the ‘great modern nations’ themselves, in as much as they were embarked on the ‘barbaric adventure’ of ‘modern colonisation’ (2013: 186–187). Another phenomenon as old as humanity, colonisation had been transformed by Europeans nations into its modern conquering form, whose aim was not to gain a privileged position in terms of economic exchange, but to affirm ‘sovereignty over a territory’. This conquering trend had altered in turn the very constitution of the nation, engendering those ‘colonising nations’ that had exterminated, exploited and/or administered Indigenous populations, as showed, for instance, by France in the West Indies, Algeria, Morocco and Senegal (2013: 185–186).

Before destroying their very structure, the Great War broke out amongst nations whose constitutions were already deeply altered. This was manifested, in the field of external relations, by the existence of a widespread imperial tendency to reduce other societies to the status of colonies subordinated to empires. While anticipating ‘future revolts’ on the periphery, as reactions to the ‘pillaging’ of the ‘soil and work of the natives’ (2013: 188), Mauss managed to grasp the active powers that had recently led Europe and the world on the verge of catastrophe. European nations were caught between prestige and profit. Their imperial race could only end in a deadly confrontation, since the parallel interests of state and capital converged in the necessity of war. The crucial legitimising function played by the naturalisation of nations could fully play its role here. It allowed the gaining of the support of the masses in the enterprise of occupation and spoliation of non-European societies, which was the counterpart to the disposition to fight and conquer other nations in Europe. Having generated that wholly ‘modern thing’ which is the ‘disdain of the mixed race’ (2013: 187), imperialist European nations had also menaced each other with ‘annexation’: a ‘violent form of fusion’ that required, as Mauss noticed, ‘nationalising the conquered provinces or nations’ by ‘taking away their laws, language and civilisation’, that is, by destroying their collective character (2013: 190, 194). The ‘fear’ of ‘annexations’ played a decisive role for Mauss in the violence of the Great War, in that it left no other alternative to freedom than the disposition to fight to the death.

Total war could not be fully understood, then, without considering the will of the ‘rapacious capitalists’, who were directing nations behind the scenes with a view to enforcing the rule of exploitation and accumulation (Mauss 2013: 61, 234), and without analysing the mentality of the ‘ruling
classes’, whose principles and traditions made the establishment of peace not only costly but utterly impossible (2013: 90, 183, 206). While clarifying the political path in which capitalist interests flowed, Mauss focussed his diagnosis especially on the intrinsic limits of the international order, which was still tied to the legal framework of sovereignty. Beyond the Machiavellian mores of diplomats, accustomed to intrigues and cunning, he pointed out indeed the traditionally modern conception of the state as the main cause of war, in so far as it had justified a sort of ‘state of nature’ between nations (2013: 206–207). Despite the attempts to think and develop it, the so-called ‘international order’ was still conceived, in fact and in principle, by reference to the relations between states, in which the social hardly existed as long as war and peace were ultimately reduced to mere ‘relations of force’ (2013: 184).

In such a context, in which ‘nationalism’ appeared in fact as the shared civilising mission of European capitalist imperialist states, there could be no other peace than a fragile standstill of the armies, ‘independence’ before and after the war being a word for a pact between unequal forces, which boiled down to a mere subordination to the strongest. The establishment of a ‘true international law’ therefore required urgently bringing out its unthinkable foundations by taking distance from the inherited principles of modern political thought, which were ultimately grounded in Thomas Hobbes’s conception of state sovereignty. Relying on the effects produced on the masses by the experience of war, according to a Kantian dialectics evoked more than once in The Nation (2013: 173, 207), Mauss thus strove to open the conceptual space that would enable European societies to conceive peace not as the precarious agreement in a permanent state of war between states, but as the stable consensus ensured by the independence of nations, guaranteed by their reciprocal recognition. It is this peace by ‘composition’, as expressed by the Sanskrit etymology of the word santhi, that Mauss tried to think and promote. It presupposed a previous destitution of the absolute sovereignty of states in favour of the relative independence of nations, responding to their mutual interdependence with the seal of an ‘alliance between equals’ (2013: 182).

‘Another nationalism’ resulted from this search for a peaceful order, capable of inverting the conquering logic of imperialism by accomplishing the constitution of nations on the higher level of their reciprocal recognition: one that could be called with good reason ‘inter-national’. Mauss, deploying all the consequences of the intersocial perspective that he had just introduced in sociology, went as far as to look for the source of the conceptual change that modern political thought needed in the traditional practices of so-called ‘primitive societies’ – primitive societies to which, incidentally, the ‘civilised nations’ had shown their most barbaric side. Indigenous societies were apparently doomed to extermination, and they
were marginal, even confined to the colonies themselves; and yet their life, their relations and their hidden intersocial customs contained *in nuce* the principles of a new form of international relations. Moving from diagnosis to prognosis, Mauss took the temporal distance necessary to imagine and to promote the achievement of the national principle on an intersocial level. With the help of history, he leapt from the most remote past to a present in which socialism had already become sociological enough to receive and to assimilate, for its own sake, the civilising lessons of the ‘primitives’.

**Building Internationalism**

The last domain of the intersocial that Mauss set out to explore was the ideal realm of universalist ideals. To this end, he revisited the unfinished history of international law, concentrating on the Church and the workers’ international (2013: 197ff). In this context, Mauss’s reflection began with an attempt to break the very conceptual framework of modern political thought with a view to opening the path for a different peace. Because of the pervasiveness of imperialism, the only option left to him was to look for a radical external alternative. In order to bring nations back onto the path of reason, he went back further in time, thereby leaving the shared horizon of European modernity. Counting on the emergence of a ‘public opinion’ that would exert pressure upon the ruling classes and thus facilitate the realisation of the ideal of international law, Mauss strove to satisfy the ‘proclaimed desire’ for ‘perpetual peace’ by bringing out its social principle, hidden in a very ‘old tradition’ (2013: 176–177). Once again, anthropology played a crucial role here under the guidance of sociology. It is by looking in the mirror of the Other that Mauss sought to anticipate the future of modernity and to contribute to the development of a modern civilisation finally freed from its own barbarism.

Anticipating the main discovery of his *Essay on the Gift*, Mauss paved the way for a new composition of nations by considering the associative dynamics of poly-segmental wholes. Because they were foreign to the phenomenon of war in the strict sense, and rather familiar with the phenomenon of the vendetta, clan-based societies allowed one to think of peace as something different from a mere ‘cessation of hostilities’. They showed what peace really meant and how it could be brought about. The principle of composition had to be searched into the logic of alliance between opposing clans, in so far as they substituted their deadly clashes with the ‘reciprocal hospitality’ and the ‘settled jousting’ that enabled at times a tribe to emerge from smaller groups. We recognise here the political source of the ‘pure’ type of gift, which, as Mauss later emphasised in his further reflections on the *potlatch* (Mauss 1925) that complemented the rather cursory
ones he presented in *The Nation*, was the basis of co-operation between the clans. This pure type of gift allowed the clans to ‘oppose without massacring each other’ (2002: 106). It is at the points of junction between the parts, constantly running the risk of falling into the endless chain of murder and vengeance, that the traditional practices of gift-giving find their place. This was the constitutional feature of non-state, pre-imperial societies: composing the parts without integrating them through an interplay of ‘separations’ and ‘alliances’, which proved that the segments brought together were not ‘unified’ but rather ‘federated’ (2013: 179).

Aware of the singular features of nations, it is to the creation of such a federation through a chain of gifts that Mauss entrusted the provisional issue to the impasse of international relations, once considered from an inter-social perspective. The coming federation had thus to guarantee the ‘series of alliances’ that would facilitate the establishment of ‘different peaces’. This was the only realistic step on the still-utopian path towards ‘universal peace’ (2013: 179). Although he underlined the constitutional fragility of federations, manifested by the fact that the political societies having taken this form never managed to be ‘permanent’ except when the federation prepared a ‘large fusion’, Mauss nonetheless drew the lesson of the ‘primitives’ for Europe. Since the ‘spirit of peace’ is above all a ‘spirit of federation’, it was necessary to set up as soon as possible the conditions of these gifts that could enable the creation of a federation of nations (2013: 180–181).

Having taken from the start the nation to be as ‘homogeneous’ as a ‘primitive clan’, even though nations are ‘composed of equal citizens’ (2013: 98), it was all the more obvious to draw this conclusion, from a sociological perspective, that nations seemed *prima facie* destined to reject any process of fusion. A Europe conceived and organised as a single political society was incompatible with the marked fetishistic singularity of nations.

We see, then, the step that had to be made, for Mauss, in order to embark on the path of a *realistic* international peace. Driven by the desire of the social mass from whose midst had come the prophets of a new future, nations could hope to enter a new composition, in Europe, only by way of a new federation. The condition for this was that they should engage first in the practice of gift-giving and establish a form of exchange that, clearly distinct from the utilitarian principles of the capitalist market, would work according to the logic of *excessive spending even to no avail* – a logic later analysed by Georges Bataille (1933) far better than any other author.

At the very moment when he was about to introduce the last turn of his enquiry, Mauss pointed out then that a ‘stable state of peace’ could only be granted by rendering nations ‘masters’ of their ‘economic destinies’, as this was the primary condition of the required ‘mutual services’. Realising at last the idea contained in their democratic regime, they had to cease being led by ‘imperialist’ and ‘conquering’ classes, and to ‘discipline their
capitalists’ to the point of ‘destroying private interests’ (2013: 241–242). Governed by the people, each nation had then to fulfil the expectation of peace by directing the conscious appropriation of the social towards one main dimension: the material base of the constitution, which is contained in the means of production and housed in the depths of territories. The true social meaning of the nation, from a sociological and socialist perspective, was hidden in this last appropriation, as it revealed what this new social formation ‘really’ was: a community of citizen-workers who enjoy their resources in common and share the ‘exceeding part’ by way of the mutual services of their reciprocal gifts.

It is in this modern political context that the conclusion of the Essay on the Gift must be placed. After having considered the crisis of civil law and the one of Homo economicus, Mauss did more in it than transferring into Europe the social logic of gift-giving brought from the outside, as it had to convert hostility into hospitality by substituting war with celebration. Having explored all its possible bearers, Mauss saw ‘popular classes’ as the massive group that was actually forcing capitalists to conform to the obligation to give something back in compensation for the time labourers spend in the workplace. Through this subversion of the liberal notion of ‘progress’, Mauss came to extract from the heart of the masses the primitive requirement of the obligatory counter-gift that had to be introduced into civil law in order to materialise social justice. Gift and counter-gift could be thought of as the missing foundation of the social rights under construction, ensuring the return by the state of the ‘accursed share’, as Bataille would have it, accumulated by capitalists after the exploitation of workers. The internal counterpart of external solidarity answered therefore to another conflict, which had to be removed from the risk of war in order for justice to ensure the ‘peace of the whole’. A global politics thus appeared in this sociological perspective, which had to conceive and promote solidarity integrally by removing the spectre of external war between nations through the overcoming of the internal war between classes. Its source was ultimately to be found in the sacrifice of common wealth, accumulated and redistributed in order to be spent and wasted.

By trying to ground the search for peace and justice in a unique principle of solidarity, both external and internal, based on the chain of gifts and counter-gifts between classes and nations, Mauss was advancing a radical sociological reformulation of socialism. Thus, we now understand why he devoted the third and final political part of The Nation to reconstruct the history of socialism, which, in Mauss’s own times, had eventually become the conscious correlate of sociology. In order to identify the conditions of possibility of his positive proposal, Mauss again found inspiration in Durkheim’s (2010) lessons, in so far as they allowed grasping socialism in its internal relationship to sociology since the former and the latter’s
'simultaneous birth' in the work of Saint-Simon and his school (Mauss 2013: 260–261). By studying not only the doctrines that anticipated the future, but also the institutions that aimed at making it present, Mauss’s history of socialism had to finally clarify the situation from and for which The Nation had been written, as nations potentially had a future in which their spontaneous nationalism would be purified from the pathology of capitalist imperialism.

Mauss clarified the historical significance of socialism’s birth by bringing it back to the genesis of a politics all the more positive, as its leading figures endeavoured to give to the nations a ‘sense of the social’ hitherto absent. Socialism had been historically nothing but an effort to clarify the social sense of the nation grasped from the privileged perspective of the working masses. It had thus transformed modern politics into a form of knowledge destined to grasp the social history of nations, in order to give back to the people a faithful image of the ‘totality’ of its ‘institutions’ as well as of its real ‘interests’ (Mauss 2103: 258–259). Born within the nation to sharpen the perception of society within and beyond the nation, socialism had ended up creating the ‘social science’ of which Mauss took up the project inherited from Durkheim, in order to revise and reaffirm it in a disconcerting present. He could expect all the more to exert an influence on the movement as socialism had itself decidedly turned, since 1870, towards sociology. Having adopted a ‘scientific and positive attitude’, socialists had indeed been forced to integrate social facts into their systems, to the point of conceiving theory as nothing but an expression of the ‘movement of society’. As demonstrated by the efforts made by the socialist intellectuals who were trying, throughout Europe, to free socialism from the dogmas of Marxism, the ‘potency of social facts’ was now clearly perceived, especially because of the emergence of the ‘institutions of the working class’: trade unions, mutual organisations, and producer and consumer co-operatives (Mauss 2013: 263–264).

It is the social potency of the massive working nation that, according to Mauss, was triggering the growing socialisation of the economy, the possible overcoming of capitalism, and the emergence, eventually, of an international order freed from capitalist imperialism. By inscribing himself in this historical turning point, Mauss introduced only one major change with respect to the sociological understanding of socialism developed by Durkheim in his lectures. From the beginning, socialism had emerged as the self-organised movement of the masses, yet it now clearly appeared as being intimately related to the democratic affirmation of the nation itself, provided that the nation was now understood as a collectivity resting upon a great organised mass of workers. Just as internationalism had to be grasped as the set of ‘forces, ideas and institutions’ aiming to ‘regulate the relations between nations’, socialism had to be ultimately apprehended,
for Mauss, as the movement that aimed to regulate the relations between classes in order to give to the masses of the working nation the means to ‘govern the whole of economic life’ (2013: 252).

The ultimate condition for the establishment of a form of solidarity on which to base the new national and international order was clear. In order to define and realise socialism by reference to all the collective groups that were already concretely nationalising the economy, it was crucial to avoid taking the state as the real subject of this last appropriation of the social. For Mauss, the real subject of socialism, in fact, was the nation itself, and not the state, a nation now realistically understood as a plural community of citizen-workers in the process of conquering a ‘new domain’ (2013: 247). This decisive conquest was doomed to remain unfinished as long as common sense and politics were not freed from the ‘notion of sovereign state’. This imaginary concept obscured indeed the sense of the social, to the point of slowing down the force of socialism and to make it impossible to envisage the nation as a ‘vast co-operative’ made up of a web of federated co-operatives (2013: 392). Only this vision of the nation as a federated reality existing below the State could make it possible to go beyond the State and contemplate a future social Europe thought as federation of nations.20

In order to build a peaceful and just national and international order, it was therefore necessary to recognise first the nation itself as social form, as Mauss tried to do in his main sociological work, making it ‘sovereign’ enough to achieve true democracy by placing the government of economy in the hands of the people, to better sacrifice the ‘accursed share’ of capital during those *potlatches* between nations, which that had to prefigure the future festivals of humanity on the level of a regenerated Europe.

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Notes

1. Developed first by historians of the social sciences, inspired by Michel Foucault’s genealogy, Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history and Quentin Skinner’s contextual history of ideas, in order to free historiography from the reified social of sociology (Cabrera 2005; Sewell 2005), this reductive account has been taken up by sociologists themselves at the cost of a radical self-criticism whose ultimate consequences have been drawn by Luc Boltanski (2009) and Alain Touraine (2013), among many others in recent years.

2. It is no wonder that the sole reception in the field of nation and nationalism studies has resulted in a critical account that, by reducing Mauss’s analysis to a variant of standard sociological objectivism, misses its peculiar synthetic perspective. See Brubaker (2004).

3. Bernard Stiegler has creatively appropriated this conceptual invention by Mauss, and constituted even a political collective that designates itself as such. See Stiegler (2020).

4. While Mauss seems to have anticipated here the modernist perspective championed by Ernest Gellner, the agreement on the fact that nations are a ‘contingency, not a universal necessity’ (Gellner 1983) hides, as we will see, an opposition concerning the nature of the nation considered as a historical creation based in turn on an different way of understanding the place of the collective will and consequently the role of politics in social life. Mauss’s sociological perspective prevented him, in fact, from seeing nations as the by-product of the nationalist engineering of state elites.

5. Supporting the mainstream perspective of modernism, this confusion has become a commonplace in contemporary social sciences, even in sociology. Pierre Bourdieu (2012) himself made it the base of his explanation of the genesis of the state, centered on the creation by law of the social conditions for
the acceptance of law: In his analysis, the nation appears under the name of
the State, which the State must produce in order to produce and reproduce
itself.

6. Mauss relied more than once on the analogy between the city and the nation
from the perspective of Durkheim’s sociology understood in its relation with
Aristotle’s political philosophy. While it allows questioning the opposition
between ancient and modern, this parallel nevertheless leads Mauss to some-
times consider the ancient city as a nation. This shift in meaning, contradicting
the inaugural historical-conceptual delimitation of the nation, can be justified
only by the adoption of an implicit philosophy of history, making the modern
nation the heir of the ancient city thanks to the mediation of Roman law. It is
one example of the many oscillations that mark Mauss’s reasoning.

7. The definition of ‘society’ needed to determine the limits of the nation as a
social formation is missing from the manuscript of La Nation, but it is pre-
sented at the beginning of Mauss’s Oxford intervention on nationalities (Mauss
et al. 1920) and is further developed in several subsequent essays, whenever
he had to reaffirm the principle placed by Durkheim at the base of any social
science (Mauss 1927).

8. We measure here the difference between the minimal definition given by
Durkheim and Mauss, designed to embrace comparatively the whole of social
experience well beyond the sole modernity, and the nationalist definition
adopted by Parsons and others. If we had to indicate a mark of the change of
‘sociology’ it is here that it should be placed. By obliterating the fundamental
concept of the constitution, one changes the very idea of society, leaving room
for a conception of the structure authorising an objectivist vision, whereas the
reference to the rules followed in practice required taking into consideration
the perspective of concrete actors within their meaningful institutions.

9. As it is the case of the potlatch itself, that curious institution which sets ‘the
whole tribe in motion’ (Mauss 2013: 138). This indication is enough to place
the gift in the irreducible field of the intersocial: the potlatch itself circulates in
exchanges that are not necessarily gifts and counter-gifts. It is for this reason
that Mauss designated this field by taking up the ancient term commercium,
in so far as it referred not to ‘economic relations’ but to ‘reciprocal services of
any kind’ (Mauss 2013: 125–126).

10. This sociological perspective, based on a material concept of the constitu-
tion, would of course lead to a different analysis of nation-building processes,
seeing in any modernist enterprise, based on the legal fabrication of a nation
by territorial delimitation, an initiative destined to fail. It would therefore be
necessary to measure the contribution of Mauss to legal comparative studies,
especially in the recently opened field of constitutional transplants, borrowings
and migrations. See Perju (2012).

11. The sociological analysis of spontaneous nationalism is close here to the
Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen later identified by Sigmund Freud (1930).

12. This concept was still used in the 1940s by such an eclectic sociologist as
Gregory Bateson (1942), but it was finally discarded after Claude Levi-Strauss’s
criticism in favour of the more confusing idea of ‘culture’ (Terrier 2011).
13. A move that some anti-elitist approaches in some contemporary scholarship also demand (Thompson 2001).

14. In recent years, authors have proposed to see in this process a quite banal form of nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002).

15. While the ambiguity of the ‘total social fact’ has often been underlined (Tarot 2010), the context helps clarify its meaning, in so far as the ‘total’ had been already used to define the new modern form of war. In 1917, Léon Daudet had thus qualified the Great War as ‘total’ because it involved, as never before, the ‘extension of struggle’ to ‘the political, economic, commercial, industrial, intellectual, legal and financial spheres’, in such a way that not only ‘armies’ but also ‘traditions’, ‘institutions’, ‘customs’, ‘codes’ and ‘minds’ were fighting – in short, entire peoples. It is in reference to this use of the total, taken up in Germany by Ernst Junger to define the new form of mobilisation, that Carl Schmitt (1940) came to develop his concept of the ‘total state’.

16. While opposing imperialism, Mauss was much more indulgent with administrative colonialism, as can be evinced from his brief discussion, in The Nation, of the new ‘humanitarian’ doctrine according to which European nations, such as France and England, had to colonise for the good of the societies put under tutelage, in order to faster their national constitution (2013: 188–189). For a genealogical reconstruction of this ‘generous colonialism’, see Mallard (2019).

17. Although he never explicitly elaborated the connection between socialism and indigenism, Mauss nonetheless identified its principle in the gift itself. Without knowing his work, it is with reference to traditional community exchange practices that José Carlos Mariategui (1928) worked in the same years to a possible regeneration of Marxism, looking for the future in the presence of a remote communal past.

18. In this regard, it is unfortunate that the editors did not include in the published volume the chapter that Mauss had dedicated to the League of Nations. It would have enabled the reader to understand how he saw the gap between the ideal and the real on the very level of the aspirations already at work in practices and institutions. Mauss indeed saw the League as a first step in the direction of the still-missing ‘medium term’ between the universal and the particular, which had to be the ‘federation’, demonstrating by the facts, related in particular to ‘international labour legislation’, that the idea of ‘national sovereignty’ had already lost its ‘absolute’ character, public opinion having now realised the ‘moral interdependence of societies’ (2013: 37, 182, 398).

19. It is on this excess of the gift in relation to the equivalence of market exchanges that lies the difference between the sociological perspective of Mauss, taking up and relaunching socialism on new bases, and the apparently analogous vision of the neoliberals calling for the development of a supranational federation going beyond sovereign states, a direction which has been taken by the European Union after the Second World War. On the internal connection between neoliberal federalism and the European Union, see Biebricher (2019).

20. It is this limit of the imaginary associated with the sovereign State that Cornelius Castoriadis has also highlighted with regard to the current dead ends of the European Union. See Castoriadis (2013).
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