



# Reciprocity's dark side

Negative reciprocity, morality and social reproduction

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## Abstract

This article proposes the concept of negative reciprocity as a necessary and substantive aspect of the general concept of reciprocity. We contend that the concept of reciprocity is useful only when conceived simultaneously in its negative and positive forms as they are articulated in historical processes. If treated in all its complexity the concept of reciprocity might help us to understand the ambivalence often present in social relationships. Reference to a moral domain is the central tenet that differentiates reciprocity from exchange. Reciprocity is based on a shared morality in its positive form and on the break, transformation or suspension of the moral order in its negative form. We base our discussion on the ethnographic account of the social relations that supported circulation of resources in the Auschwitz concentration camp. However, a comparative perspective indicates that the negative reciprocity pervading Auschwitz's social relations is an extreme example of a broader category of human interaction in no way unique.

## Keywords:

Auschwitz • concentration camp • economic anthropology • exchange • gift • morality • mutual obligation • power • reciprocity • social reproduction

Reciprocity poses thorny analytical problems even though it has received a great deal of attention ever since first Malinowski (1961 [1922], 1971 [1926]) and later Mauss (1968 [1923–4]) became interested in social interaction involving exchanges of goods and wealth with the creation of special bonds and obligations between people. Reciprocity is a concept which is still commonly used. It appears to reveal the reason behind a whole set of resource transfers (or what we interpret as 'transfers') involving both material goods and intangible ones such as prestige, power, and so on. However, the concept is unclear given that no effort has been made to define it in detail since the work of Gouldner

(1960) and Sahlins (1965).<sup>1</sup> Apart from the beneficent and 'un-capitalist' aura surrounding the term, it is difficult to say what contribution it makes to an anthropological and historical theory of social interaction. One should ask whether reciprocity is a useful concept at all. Is it different from the general concept of exchange? Does it revolve around balance or imbalance? What is the substance of the concept? These are just some of the issues still awaiting an answer. Reciprocity has probably thrived because its very vagueness seems to work when analyzing ethnographic material and apparently sheds light on the lives of these men and women we observe as they try to come to grips with their reality. However, we consider this to be insufficient justification for retaining the concept. Nevertheless, it is only fair that we give reciprocity one last chance.

### THE WATERMARK OF NEGATIVE RECIPROCITY

We shall center our reflection on reciprocity by examining what might be termed the 'dark side' of this social force: negative reciprocity. The idea of 'taking' seems to be an implicit idea in the concept of reciprocity, both from the point of view of its theoretical construction and in terms of ethnographic and historical descriptions. However, contrary to classical postures concerning a 'social contract', we do not believe that negative reciprocity should be framed in terms of an absence or transgression of reciprocal relations generally beneficial to 'society'. What seems really interesting to us is the recurrent articulation of negative and positive interacting forces, the tension between beneficent and maleficent processes, simultaneously creating homogeneity and heterogeneity and capturing the ambiguity of the real. By reinforcing the predatory notion of reciprocity we want to highlight the inextricable link it has with its positive facet. The theoretical value of the concept lies for us in its capacity to explain the mode and occurrence of this articulation.

In order to ground our theoretical insights we have chosen to rely on an 'ethnography' of Auschwitz that Paz Moreno has been working on for over eight years. It may be unnecessary after Bauman's masterful *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) to justify the use of the Auschwitz reality as a 'significant and reliable test of the hidden possibilities of modern society' (1989: 12). We would like, however, to introduce further elements of significance. Bauman highlights that this extreme 'sociological laboratory' reveals the hidden possibilities of the instrumental rationality of modernity as expressed by social distancing, bureaucratization and calculation, leading to the production of moral indifference that enables efficient and organized extermination of human beings by other normal human beings. His argument rests on a contrast between instrumental rationality and pre-societal morality, a universal (individual) morality based on proximity – being with others – and on responsibility for the other as a pure gift, constituting intersubjectivity and preceding reciprocal obligation (1989: 179–84). It is, then, this universal morality that is silenced by the rational instrumentality at work in the Nazi period. Confronting prevailing ideas of morality as a product of society's collective constraining forces, he asserts that 'society – in addition, or even contrary, to its "moralizing function" – may, at least on occasion, act as a "morality-silencing" force' (1989: 174). The Holocaust, then, would be for Bauman the development of the inherent possibilities of rational modernity, neutralizing or suppressing pre-societal responsibility for the other in proximity.

What we want to show through the ethnographic minutiae of social life in the

Auschwitz camps is that the concept of reciprocity, if recovered in all its complexity, might be able to highlight a different part of that reality: a set of hidden possibilities which are not directly tied to modernity as such but to the reproduction of structures of domination and exploitation. We want to insist on the ambivalence of reality (Bauman, 1991), on how the process of circulation of resources described as 'organization' in Auschwitz produced simultaneously differentiation and solidarity, and created a sense of communality in some parts of the social fabric while structuring extreme individualistic self-interest in others. Furthermore, social actors experienced reality in an extremely unstable environment. Finally, this situation took place in a context of intense physical propinquity that nevertheless does not seem to have fostered the 'proximity' that, for Bauman (1989), implied a pure gift of responsibility for the other. But neither was the sentiment of mutual obligation totally absent or suppressed. We see tension in meaning and fact between giving and taking, claiming and getting. A posteriori, in the memoirs, we see the attempts of survivors to fit into mainstream moralities their actions in the camps. However, in their descriptions of the camp reality, 'organize' signified everything, something close to a good–evil moral compression, to paraphrase Harvey (1989).

Indeed, in our view, Auschwitz should not be treated by the social sciences as an exceptional social reality, to be dealt with separately. It should not be 'particularized and marginalized, deprived in practice, if not in theory, of more general significance' (Bauman, 1989: xi). As it developed naturally (that is, without supra-natural intervention) in a particular historical conjuncture, it should be viewed as a historical and social reality and be studied as such. Then we are able to see, analyze and compare social relations there with social relations elsewhere in such a way that the extreme case might illuminate obscure zones in other, less stark, processes. Bauman used the metaphor of the Holocaust as 'a window rather than a picture on the wall. Looking through that window, one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible' (1989: viii).

We try to present an ethnographic approach to Auschwitz although we are aware that this requires some methodological clarification about sources and how they have been used. Although there is a great deal of historical research about concentration camps, the documents produced by the inmates themselves and the testimonies of witnesses available from the literal transcripts of the judicial trials are the basis for the ethnographic reconstruction. We can categorize these documents according to their technical characteristics and the methodological problems to which they give rise. First, those written during internment. Generally, the inmates' living conditions excluded the writing of diaries or any similar records that would have avoided the problem of retrospective testimonials – present in all the other materials in question. Nevertheless, some prisoners who worked in the crematoriums devised means of concealing and burying reports which were recovered and published after the camps' liberation. Second, general descriptions of life in the camps written by inmates, often political detainees, who had had access to the Nazis' bureaucratic data, and who had academic training. Their narrative mode is not that of the memoir, and works by historians often merge with this category of description. Examples of such documents include the collective work of the University of Strasbourg deportees (1947), the dissertations on nutrition and mental and physical illnesses written by physicians who had been incarcerated (Cohen, 1953), or the study by anthropologist Germaine Tillion on Ravensbruck (1988 [1946]). Third, all of the

judicial versions based on eyewitness testimony given in various trials (Trial, 1947; Naumann, 1966). Fourth, memoirs by surviving inmates and some writings by Nazis. We will examine this category of documents in more detail shortly. Finally, there exist numerous works, both academic or media oriented (newspaper, television, film documentaries, interviews), where the initiative to collect testimony comes from a third party (Finkelstein, 2000; Novick, 1999).

We have used materials belonging to each of these five categories, but our main sources are memoirs written by former prisoners, a fact which gives rise to specific methodological problems that we need to highlight, although some may be considered familiar problems in ethnography. A first issue is that memory is itself embedded in history, both from the point of view of individual experiential subjectivity and from that of cultural production of hegemonic memories or traditions, especially about events that have acquired an extraordinary political and ideological relevance (Bourdieu, 1989; Portelli, 1989). Another issue is how the anthropologist evaluates the particular relevance of life histories and decides between different and often incoherent versions of the same events.

In our reading of the memoirs, an analysis of the texts as historically produced narratives has preceded their use as ethnographic documents (Guha, 1988). Thus, in each memoir we distinguished between the narrative voice and textual techniques, and the described events. This information, then, was registered in a specially designed form for comparative purposes. At this stage we were able to compare the memoirs and observe their interweaving with respect to reported events, both recurrent and extraordinary happenings, and to highlight the great variety of ways in which these events are interpreted by different authors, or by the same author in different contexts, or are silenced. Furthermore, taking into account the historical context of production of the memoirs required that we carefully consider the chronology of their appearance, as well as their social impact.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in order to produce a body of information that we consider akin to an ethnography we have been extremely critical and aware of the complexities of the documentary material. We think that the richness of the material indeed provides ethnographic grounding to our discussion. But first we want to tackle some theoretical issues.

### **The subtext of reciprocity**

Reciprocity has traditionally been linked to social stability. It appears to be linked to the idea of a social contract and seems to underpin the contract itself, transforming a Hobbesian hell full of selfish, warring individuals into 'a society'. Adam Smith adapted the political morality postulate in the social contract to the domain of transfers of goods, therefore transforming 'the market' into an analogy for 'society' and 'exchange' into an analogy for 'social pact'. In the same way as individuals became equal through the social contract which united them, so too commodities became equivalent through market exchange. Indeed, the issue of value was resolved in the market as commodities were pooled in a single exchange sphere and became comparable in abstract terms.

These Enlightenment thoughts on the origins of society are still strongly present in the concept of reciprocity – a point noted by many scholars (Weiner, 1985, 1992). We would like to stress two points, however. First, the necessary background of negative reciprocity present in Hobbes' vision of man's 'natural state': absolute self-interest engendering generalized violence against all other individuals in social contact.<sup>3</sup> The social

contract transcends the chaotic 'natural' egoistic individualism which is assumed to be man's primitive state. In creating 'society', the social contract creates 'morals', rights and duties towards others: a world of mutual obligation. Thus, social order and moral order are indivisible. But before that point lies only violence and chaos. There is a before and after that are totally opposed in the narrative of mankind's development. The second point to be made is that the social pact, the contract that establishes mutual dependence among free men, is the structural basis of society. These are forces that structure society, rather than just sporadic manifestations of affinity. Moreover, they have become the substance of western thinking about society.

Both these ideas are more or less explicitly stated in the first analytical uses of the reciprocity concept (Durkheim, 1933; Malinowski, 1971 [1926]; Mauss, 1968 [1923–4]; Polanyi, 1971 [1944], 1977), as, too, is the tension with market exchange. Reciprocity is the institutionalized force that creates social cohesion and refers to a system of morality. Thus, while observed actions generally involve individuals in mutual interaction, reciprocity goes further than this mutuality. Reciprocity necessarily requires that action is embedded within the institutional framework of society, a point stressed by Polanyi (1971 [1944], 1977). In addition, this social force is revealed through the recurrent transfer of resources (such as goods, services, people, knowledge and power) between people. Hence the uneasy tension with the concept of market-based exchange. What, then, is the difference between the mutual transfers one observes between individuals and reciprocity? The answer is that in the second case, the transfers are not simply motivated by (material) interest but are also the product of a moral order: 'We shall see the morality and the economics at work in these transactions'<sup>4</sup> (Mauss, 1968 [1923–4]). However, economic considerations will remain present, often playing a central role: reciprocity is then seen as the main way goods are distributed and circulate in non-mercantile forms of exchange.

### **Gouldner, Sahlins and Bourdieu: reciprocity as a continuum**

Perhaps the most exhaustive efforts to systematize the concept of reciprocity were made in the 1960s. We shall not analyze these texts in detail since they are sufficiently well known (Bourdieu, 1980; Gouldner, 1960; Sahlins, 1965), but it is worthwhile highlighting and comparing some of the issues arising from their respective viewpoints.

In a fundamental article Gouldner defined the concept of reciprocity as 'a mutually contingent exchange of benefits between two or more units' (1960: 164). He also indicated that in reciprocity relations the parties affected had rights and duties which went beyond merely 'complementary' ones (i.e. where one party's right is the other's duty). Rather, in his view, reciprocity constituted a general principle of mutual dependence and recognition of a shared moral norm: 'You should give benefits to those who give you benefits' (1960: 170). Nevertheless, the most interesting feature of Gouldner's analysis is, in our view, his emphasis on the 'disruptive potentialities of power'. This belief was based on his observation of the significance of power differences in determining equivalencies or 'quantitative variation' of the benefits exchanged by the parties concerned. Indeed, he went so far as to consider reciprocity as part of 'the larger class of unequal exchanges' (1960: 165), proposing a continuum which stretches from exchanges involving equal benefits to those in which one party receives nothing in return. This last case, which Gouldner associated with exploitation, would be socially disruptive since it

violates shared and universal moral values: namely the norm of reciprocal benefit for, 'if a social system is to be stable there must always be some mutuality of gratification' (1960: 168). This principle would restrain the powerful in exploiting others, making them redistribute some benefits in order to maintain a type of social organization which serves their interests (Gouldner, 1960: 174). Here, the idea of social cohesion traditionally linked to reciprocity now appears to be one of social reproduction in which a given system of inequalities is reproduced, a view close to the one Bourdieu (1980) was to develop later.

Sahlins (1965) developed a well known typology of reciprocity which described the relative balance or equivalence of exchanged benefits as a function of the social distance between the parties (as measured in terms of the frequency and intensity of their social relations prior to exchange). This approach allows the social value of exchanges to be weighed against their purely economic value, also varying proportionally with social distance. Sahlins' model thus provides a spatial dimension to social structure and a socio-spatial projection of morality: 'a tendency for morality, like reciprocity, to be sectorially organized in primitive societies. The norms are characteristically relative and situational rather than absolute and universal' (1965: 153). Sahlins establishes a continuum within the class of reciprocal exchanges determined by social distance which, in turn, has a clear spatial expression. Thus the center point represents 'balanced reciprocity' with 'generalized' and 'negative' reciprocity as the positive and negative extremes of the polarized continuum.

A feature of this model we want to stress is the idea of relative morality and its spatial projection, in particular, the possibility of various moral codes instead of a universal one. Sahlins, like Gouldner, incorporates the idea of negative reciprocity but, unlike the latter, does not consider it as a potentially destabilizing force acting from *within* society, but rather as a kind of interaction which occurs either on the fringes of a society or outside it. For Sahlins, the swings between the two extreme polarities of reciprocity are related to social distance and to the morality applicable in a particular sector rather than to power differences.<sup>5</sup> Gouldner, on the other hand, considers that a universal moral code of mutual benefits weakens the potentially disruptive variations produced by power differences.

Sahlins, however, later published an article (1979) in which he stressed the articulation of various types of reciprocity linked to kinship obligations and the access to wealth and power in Melanesia. He pointed to the ability of certain individuals to accumulate resources they would then distribute with generosity in order to gain greater regional support and prestige. The big man's political success was thus dependent on his capacity to accumulate a distribution pool and, therefore, on 'the capacity to force a greater production from his supporters' (1979: 276). The dividing line between generalized reciprocity and extortion was often a thin one which, in the end, rested on whether the big man could successfully appeal to a common moral norm he shared with his kinsmen. The interesting thing here is the articulation between forms of political generosity and the legitimization of claims over resources, and the tension between acceptance and rejection among those contributing to the accumulation of a distribution pool.

Bourdieu (1980) proposes a further nuance in the reciprocity continuum. In his model, there is a gradual change from 'the symmetry of gift exchange to the dissymmetry of ostentatious redistribution which is the base of political authority' (1980: 210).

Bourdieu's contribution is the idea that 'as we recede from perfect reciprocity which implies relative economic equality, the amount of counter-prestations that take the form of typically symbolic testimonies of gratitude, homage, respect, moral debts and obligations, increases necessarily' (1980: 210). This transformation of economic capital into symbolic capital allows the reproduction of systems of domination, by hiding material interests and legitimizing relationships of economic dependence and exploitation in terms of an all-embracing moral order. It is what Bourdieu defined as 'unacknowledging' (*méconnaissance*) of the exchange systems involved in gift-making processes. The form of gift-giving and its gratuity is the distinctive feature of this 'unacknowledging' which obscures the interested function of the act (Bourdieu, 1980: 191). In a position which is somewhat close to Gouldner's, Bourdieu considers the redistributive aspect of reciprocity as a means of enabling the social reproduction of relations based on domination and exploitation. We also need to ask to what extent the process of production of unacknowledgement is linked to a discourse in which the forces involved are extremely unequal. Probably, the production of a 'common discursive framework' that explains 'reciprocity', or gives a 'reasonable' framework of meaning to particular flows of unequal material transfers, is based on the historical development of particular structures of political, economic and cultural differentiation (Algazi, forthcoming; Roseberry, 1989, 1994).

### Breaking with the concept of reciprocity

Weiner's work has been extensively commented upon by Godelier (1996), who stressed the importance of 'keeping' as a factor of social identity, as opposed to the notion that society is exclusively based on exchange. In Weiner's work (1976, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1992), the fundamental contribution is the break with the concept of mutualism and dyadic links (which owe their origin to the liberal contractual substrate of reciprocity as the basis for social cohesion) which were still – either implicitly or explicitly – present in the concept of reciprocity. Weiner's vision is clearly a long-term one, that of the social reproduction of inequalities. Her analysis of the circulation of wealth in the Trobriand Islands reveals findings which are similar to Mauss' total prestation concept, but stretched in time, spanning generations in which dependence relationships between clans, men, women and spirits are articulated through possessions which are either put into circulation to establish links or are kept to establish social differences (Weiner, 1980, 1985, 1992). The absolute value of inalienable possessions (i.e. those which create and regenerate identity and social differences, those which build up the field of forces in which the remaining unequal exchanges are effected) is authenticated by particular cosmologies which validate social differences and hierarchy (Weiner, 1992: 102–3). There are therefore 'special cultural conditions' (1992: 150) which establish a reference point for deciding which possessions must be put into circulation and which must be kept to ensure social and cultural 'regeneration' in order to overcome the transformation forces of time. It seems to us that a shared moral order is once again proposed here (these cosmologies which authenticate and validate a given social order) together with a notion of social reproduction (or as Balandier put it, 'the illusion of social reproduction'), of stability and permanence which all societies create in order to face the challenge of permanent change (Balandier, 1975: 209). However, here too, one can appreciate a feature which rounds off the practice of making gifts with a negation: that which is not given,

that which is kept. This does not strictly fit existing definitions of negative reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Sahlins, 1965), but we can say that the practice of withholding involves a certain negative element: to keep out of circulation. Yet again, one has to bear in mind what is kept in order to understand what is given.

While Godelier (1996) indicated that one should add KEEPING to the two key actions of GIVING and RECEIVING, we consider that a fourth action – TAKING – should also be added to what could be referred to as the reciprocity complex. If we pair these off, in a structuralist manner, stressing the mutual relationship established among agents, we get two opposed sets: GIVING:RECEIVING – TAKING:LOSING. Whereas KEEPING implies no immediate relations between agents, it does act as a mediation between people and between humans and supra-human beings. Considering, instead, the subjects of the action yields another set of pairs: the active one of GIVING:TAKING and the passive one of RECEIVING:LOSING, with KEEPING being an act with a passive essence.<sup>6</sup> If one then goes beyond mutuality and structural pairs, and observes these relations and actions as complex long-term processes aimed at the social reproduction of systems of inequality, sanctioned by moral orders (whether shared, confronted or alien), one can appreciate the need to include negative reciprocity as an integral element in the whole complex process of reciprocity. Moreover, and this is what our ethnographic case of Auschwitz wants to show, we might have to develop theoretical concepts able to deal with ambiguity. Concepts that can be used to understand processes that simultaneously create homogeneity and heterogeneity, produce difference and community (Roseberry, 1989), sustain giving, taking and balanced barter in a context of extreme and forced physical proximity. The tensions involved in the transfers of resources and the production of meaning express ambivalent realities that a term such as ‘organization’ tries to convey for all those involved with the camp’s everyday reality.

### Reciprocity and redistribution

Mauss (1968: 265) cites a Maori proverb: ‘Give as much as you take and all will be well’.<sup>7</sup> Mauss uses this proverb in his conclusions (*Conclusions de morale*) in which he tries to show that the norm setting the obligation of generosity upon the wealthy should be recuperated in order to make our market-oriented societies more human (more moral). However, he ignores the logical sequence of actions contained in the Maori proverb: first take, then give the equivalent. We believe that much of what has been written about redistribution and the generosity of chiefs – the gift which creates loyalty out of debt – also ignores that logical sequence. In order to have something to give one might have directly produced the goods. Such is the case of the produce from the gardens that Trobriand men work for their sisters and which they transfer to their sisters’ husbands (Malinowski, 1977 [1935]). It is also possible for one to get others to produce the goods – this would be the case of the crops from the manorial lands of feudal lords. Lastly, one can take goods away from others whether by theft, plunder, robbery, fraud or ‘legitimate’ dispossession.

As Sahlins (1979) rightly noted, the degree of persuasion or coercion exercised by a particular person to accumulate resources in order to show generosity at the right moment depends on other factors of social organization (in particular a capacity to institutionalize and establish systems of hierarchy in particular historical conjunctures). In any case, for those contributing resources for redistribution, boundaries between

reciprocity, tribute and plunder are often blurred, and definition will depend on the extent to which historical subjects share a hegemonic moral order or oppose it. As White (forthcoming) accurately commented in connection with the gifts of feuds in the Middle Ages, someone's good lord was simultaneously another's bad lord. Giving to some meant taking from others (usually the weakest members of society, e.g. widows and orphans) and hence one's view of a lord's goodness and generosity was basically a question of perspective: 'giving feuds was inevitably balanced by taking feuds' (1998: 18).

We will make one last observation regarding redistributive generosity. From the classical viewpoint, a gift imposed obligations on the receiver, creating links of dependence and loyalty, legitimizing power and building a moral order by turning economic capital into symbolic capital (as Bourdieu would put it), thus providing the underpinning for hierarchy. Although such redistribution might legitimize power and provide moral authority, it is based upon relations which are already unequal and which allow some to use the work of others in order to accumulate wealth. This kind of political generosity needs to be articulated through more or less institutionalized and more or less violent modes of claiming the resources of others. It is precisely the material or symbolic capacity to claim resources or to take them away which determines one's capacity to give. Those who give are the same ones who take.

Moreover, the capacity to claim that can be placed in the category of negative reciprocity is also present in classical examples of generalized reciprocity, such as that found in groups of hunter-gatherers. Any careful reading of ethnographies or the examples contained in Sahlins' Appendix (1965) reveals a clear message: generalized reciprocity (giving something to those who need it without expecting anything in return, a diffuse morality of sharing and responsibility for the other) is usually produced in response to requests or demands which (we are told) cannot be refused. The claim is the starting point for the process, but the ability to claim in the first place is based on the right to participate. This is particularly interesting because it reveals why individuals in these groups act in a predatory manner during severe crises, even towards their closest kinsfolk (Firth in Sahlins, 1965: 223; Turnbull, 1973): when their demands are refused because of the dearth of resources, they simply take what they want. This expresses the generalized right to claim others' possessions, the right to participate in a common social fund. We shall see an extreme case of such behavior in the ethnographic analysis of Auschwitz further on.

The dynamics of 'generalized' reciprocity and redistribution work differently, however. In the latter case, claims are made on the basis of some instituted difference (e.g. kinship, power, relationship with the supernatural and so on) whereas in the former case, they are made on the basis of common participation (relatively undifferentiated) in a pool of resources. Evidently, both types of behavior are based on a moral order and should not be considered mutually exclusive. As Sahlins (1979) indicated, they can be perfectly articulated, or they might respond as Bloch and Parry (1989) suggested, to different spheres of 'moral economy'. What we want to highlight in both cases is that the action of 'claiming' (whether implicit or explicit) cannot be divorced from the action of 'giving'.

Finally, the idea of justice is also relevant to the concept of reciprocity. Protest (violent or peaceful, organized or chaotic, reformist or revolutionary) by certain groups against a hegemonic order considered to be 'unjust' has been the subject of numerous scholarly

contributions (Hobsbawm, 1965; Moore, 1978; Thompson, 1971). Barrington Moore (1978) stated that 'without the concept of reciprocity – or better, mutual obligation, a term that does not imply equality of burdens or obligations – it becomes impossible to interpret human societies as the consequence of anything other than perpetual force and fraud' (1978: 506). He indicates that social co-operation needs 'to be created and continually re-created' (1978: 507) and that while coercion, fraud and force all play an important role, the discourse of reciprocity employed by the dominant groups is the necessary mystification of exploitative relationships (1978: 508). To understand historical subjects' reactions 'it is always necessary to find out how people themselves judge their situation' (Moore, 1978: 457). In this respect, what counts is not an equal relation, but rather the assessment of equivalence based on some shared moral order. The material (or symbolic) value of transferred items is less important than the moral assessment of such transfers, which is applied over long time scales and is related to the whole cosmological order implied in the continuity of a given society. It is in this context that a notion of reciprocity takes shape which, according to Moore, is 'the fundamental idea behind popular conceptions of justice and injustice, fairness and unfairness' (1978: 509). The breakdown of this 'shared morality' which sustains the notion of a 'fair inequality' or 'proportional justice', or alternatively, the perception by one group that another group is not acting in accordance with the established moral order, would pave the way for revolt.

Hobsbawm (1965) showed how rebels always appeal to a moral order, whether to a traditional one which they feel has degenerated and has to be restored to its former glory, or to a completely new order of reciprocal relations which they consider to be fairer. Thus the thefts of the social bandit are not considered criminal by a part of society but rather as legitimate claims within a just redistributive process. Negative reciprocity in this case does not respond, as Sahlins would have it, to *social* distance (related to proximity), but is rather the product of *moral* distance. It is the moral distance between the parties involved which legitimates and underpins 'taking' in order to 'give'. The purely 'negative' view of this kind of reciprocity simply reflects the hegemonic perspective which those in power hold. Although 'organization' in Auschwitz holds partially such a rationalization (a means of heroic resistance and revolt), its complexity precludes a hasty categorization as the form of negative reciprocity that refers to social justice.

The ethnographical analysis on reciprocity in Auschwitz concentration camps provides a whole range of nuances and complex articulations regarding different orders of morality, transfer of resources and power hierarchies. We believe the Auschwitz case also shows the usefulness of a concept of reciprocity that incorporates the fundamental negative side of reciprocal relations. Our analysis will center on a concept expressing agency – 'to organize' – that was pervasive in the everyday reality of the camp. Around this concept, transfers that were central to inmates' capacity to survive could be made sense of. Organizing was the only mode to access whatever resources were available at any time. The term 'organize' seems to convey a sense of order, but it was the ordering of an environment both bureaucratic and unpredictable, where, paradoxically for the inmates, practically everything had been categorized, ordered, organized, while chaos remained pervasive. Neither was there any clear moral reference for the evaluation of possible action. What the term seems to express, in fact, is the saturation of social relations with total ambivalence as to the framework of mutual obligations that

supported both haphazard and recurrent flows of transfers. But, rather than proving dysfunctional, this ambivalence was absolutely crucial to the reproduction of the Auschwitz predatory social system.

What we have found in trying to understand and explain the reality of 'organization' in the camps is that the only theoretical concept that could be of any help was that of 'reciprocity', but only if we could make it retain the tension and ambiguity between give and take, in a highly differentiated social field fraught with contested – or suspended – moralities.

### RECIPROCITY IN THE AUSCHWITZ CONCENTRATION CAMPS<sup>8</sup>

The system of social organization most commonly found in Nazi concentration camps followed the dual administrative structure established by Eickel at Dachau (Sofsky, 1995: 43–61). On the one hand were the SS and guards, on the other, hierarchical groups of prisoners acting semi-autonomously and headed by inmates acting as officials. The prisoner-officials wielded almost total power over other prisoners although they were strictly controlled by the camp authorities and at the mercy of the camps' uncertainties (Czech, 1994: 363–78).<sup>9</sup>

Any old-timer in the camp could immediately spot why a prisoner had been put in Auschwitz, how long he had been there and even his country of origin simply by looking at the triangle, numbers and capital letters on the inmate's prison clothing.<sup>10</sup> This information made the bureaucratic running of the camp easier for the authorities. However, it only served as a rough guide for the prisoners themselves due to the heterogeneity of the categories they were put in. For example, the red triangle worn by political inmates tended to create mistrust rather than solidarity since it included dissident Nazis, ultranationalist Poles, Polish civilians rounded up in the street and a wide range of left-wing activists from all over Europe, many with irreconcilable ideological disputes. The relations between prisoners were extremely complex, depending on variables such as national status, criminal record, type of work, housing barracks, connections, languages spoken, and so on. Task allocation by camp authorities rested on a mix of diverse discriminatory practices as well as arbitrariness and mere luck. Prisoners who were allowed to work under cover were more likely to survive than those forced to work outside in all weather. Some of the prisoners survived because they performed tasks related to their jobs in normal life. Others pulled through because they had either managed or been lucky enough to change jobs continually. The kind of barracks in which prisoners were housed also expressed a spatial hierarchy: there were barracks for 'Aryan Germans' (whether political or criminal inmates), others for the so-called 'aristocrats' or 'personalities' (kapos, registry employees, members of 'good commandos' [work parties] such as those in the factories and warehouses) and yet others for ordinary prisoners (Pawelczynska, 1979).

In addition to the hierarchical distinctions imposed by the camp authorities, there were other lines of classification produced by the inmates themselves. A prisoner with a low number tattooed on his wrist indicated a higher status because survival was almost certainly due to better work and connections. The camp hierarchy emerged from this complex classification system, with the 'aristocrats' at the top, a great mass of starving prisoners in the middle, many of whom, racked by illness, hunger and other inmates' predatory practices, ended up totally demoralized, as the bottom group, the so-called

'Muslims'. The 'Muslims' were virtually walking skeletons who had lost the will to live and stood no chance of surviving Auschwitz. They represented what everyone wanted to avoid becoming. The social universe in which prisoners led their lives was completely uncontrollable: constant hunger, harsh climate, bad water supplies, typhus epidemics and other hazards made the death rate appallingly high.

Nazi administration in the camp deliberately aimed at reducing prisoners to a monad by breaking their social ties. On arrival in the camp, prisoners were stripped of their names, belongings and, in the case of the Jews, of family and friends too. This treatment produced atomization and dehumanization among them and was seen by the Nazis as essential for the smooth running of the camp (Höss, 1978: 57). The system's efficiency was based on differentiation between prisoners although, seen from without, all inmates seemed to share the same fortune. The brutality of the kapos and other position-holders was mostly an adaptation to a system that made having a position the most valued possession and a mechanism for improving the chances of survival. But, even though prisoners worked in semi-autonomous units, positions were at the mercy of camp authorities, changing circumstances and sheer chance. The atomization, brutal and systematic killing and the ruthless exercise of power by one group of victims over another did not mean the absence of social relations, however. In the long run, the antagonistic behavior model fostered by the camp authorities also created social relationships. Paradoxically, it led to the creation of networks of mutual dependence articulated through a system of favors between prisoners who knew one another (even if only since their arrival in Auschwitz). The scale of these alliances varied. The upper tiers of the networks included prisoners, civilian workers and members of the SS. For ordinary prisoners, alliances were based on the creation of 'small families', sometimes strengthened by political, religious, language or national affinities, or simply by sharing a barrack or the same work. The only universal constant in these alliances was the will to survive. The conditions affecting life in the camp determined the stability of these relationships, which in turn depended on one's ability to maintain one's position. These alliances, though based on mutual dependence, grew in a climate characterized by mistrust and competitive struggle between prisoners, with the Nazis exercising total control over their victims' lives. Accordingly, one cannot consider them as constituting a form of resistance or, indeed, as improving the lot of prisoners as a whole.

The hierarchical organization, the atomization of the prisoners, their antagonism as well as their mutual dependence, all conspired to make camp victims disassociate their actions from the consequences these had for the maintenance of the entire system. The prisoners were made to believe that their behavior was important, that they could act in a rational way, that there was something to salvage: their own life. The paradox was that this rationality of the individual's behavior was disassociated from the rationality these actions had for the maintenance of the social system of the death camps (Bauman, 1989: 149; Levi, 1989: 32–60).

### **Europe's biggest black market**

There are relatively few studies that take into account the large amount of goods that circulated in concentration camps. For German industry (both public and private) the camps were a source of slave labor (Ferencz, 1979; Sereny, 1995; Speer, 1969). But apart from worker exploitation, Auschwitz was also an enormous warehouse where the

personal belongings of victims from all over Europe were collected, classified and distributed. While on the outside war economy restrictions were in force, in Auschwitz the belongings of thousands of prisoners were contributing to support the German war effort. Clothing and useful articles were sent to citizens of the Reich. Foreign currency and gold were sent to the State Bank in Berlin and through Swiss banks were exchanged for other currencies and even used to alter foreign exchange rates (Lebor, 1998).

In the large Auschwitz warehouses – known in camp jargon as ‘Canada’ – the prisoners themselves were in charge of classifying, packing and distributing the goods confiscated by the Reich. Though they were under the supervision of SS officers, the latter had no direct access to this immense, valuable stock of goods. These goods soon found alternative channels of circulation, both inside and outside the camp:

The constant handling of goods on an unimaginable scale slowly generated an economic and social world within the camp, with privileged and unprivileged groups, ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ trade and a fluctuating market. SS officers of all ranks willingly turned a blind eye to this burgeoning activity since they also benefited from the generosity of the . . . prisoners. (Laks, 1991: 102–3)

The ‘prosperity’ enjoyed by the camp from Canada’s wealth depended on the arrival of new victims, the belongings they carried with them and the countries they came from. The paradox at Auschwitz was that the increase in the number of victims who died in the gas chambers favored the other prisoners. Apart from the Canada warehouses, at Birkenau, there was a special category of prisoners isolated from the rest of the camp. They were the members of the ‘*sonderkommando*’, workers in the gas chambers and crematoriums. Their mission was to carry out the execution of Jews, gypsies and all prisoners declared ‘unfit’ during the periodic inspections made in the camp: ‘the “sonder” . . . always found jewels or gold hidden by the victims that were to be gassed. Thanks to this gold they were able to buy what they wanted from the Canada workers’ (Birnbau, 1989 [1946]: 91). One of the few survivors,<sup>11</sup> Philip Müller tells of his paradoxical situation:

On the one hand we had to be isolated from the rest of the camp, on the other hand, the strict observation of this isolation was supervised by other prisoners. Clearly this opened wide the doors to large-scale corruption. Every day prisoners came from the camp supplying their business partners in the *Sonderkommando* with cigarettes and alcohol in exchange for diamonds, dollars, watches, gold teeth and other valuables *organized* after gassings. There developed an illegal trade of undreamed-of dimensions where anyone who still had hopes of staying alive bartered anything that would sustain life. (Müller, 1979: 62; Höss, 1978: 130–31)

The circulation of goods in the concentration camps occurred on such a scale that, contrary to popular belief, the first legal investigations of the operations took place long before the Allies liberated the camps. Konrad Morgen, an SS judge, was appointed to investigate the misappropriation of goods ‘belonging’ to the SS at the height of the camp’s activity as an extermination center: a case of generalized corruption (Naumann, 1966: 104–5, 257–9; Trial, 1947: 487–515). His investigation focused on the fact that

several camp authorities were appropriating goods belonging to the Reich for their own private benefit. Morgen never managed to complete his investigation, but his findings bear directly on what camp survivors termed 'organization'.

## ORGANIZATION

### Definitions

Kitty Hart, a Polish Jew who titled one of the chapters in her memoirs 'organize or die', describes her first encounter with organization. She had just arrived at the quarantine barracks when a prisoner approached her and asked,

'You want to buy a scarf' 'What do you want for it' I asked. 'Two pieces of bread or one of sausage'. She answered that they hadn't yet been given rations and asked how she had gotten the scarf. 'I organized it' was the answer: This was my first encounter with the most important word in the Auschwitz language: 'organization' was the key to survival. It meant to steal, buy, exchange, get hold of. Whatever you wanted, you had to have something to barter for it. Some people spent every waking minute 'organizing': stealing from their fellow prisoners, bribing others, swapping a crust of bread for a can of water, a crumpled sheet of notepaper for a more comfortable corner of a bunk. (Hart, 1981: 63)

Italian philologist Giuliana Tedeschi defines it like this:

War and prison life have always generated new vocabulary. In the German camp in those years the word *organisieren*, 'to organize,' was appropriate. 'Organizing' meant swapping your bread for a sweater, your margarine for a teaspoon. Anyone who snatches a piece of soap left by another prisoner in the shower or *Waschraum* is 'organizing' . . . There is no end to the ways prisoners organize, at everybody's expense. And anyone who doesn't organize is dead. (Tedeschi, 1992: 49–50)

Sephardic doctor Marco Nahon gives the word a further twist by including donations in his definition:

'Organize' is a sacred word at the Lager. It signifies everything. 'To organize' is at the same time to receive as a gift, to barter for goods, or borrow from a friend, and to steal from another. In short, organizing is synonymous with possessing – no matter how. (Nahon, 1989: 91)

The musician Simon Laks, one of the aristocrats in the camp, gives a very broad definition which takes into account the existence of different degrees:

To organize, or organize oneself, means to get anything you can by any means. Either by using what you have (cigarettes), or by begging, bartering, stealing, blackmailing, brute force, even murder. You could organize a crust of bread or ten loaves, a filthy piece of cloth or brand new silk lingerie, one cigarette or a thousand cigarettes. (Laks, 1991: 103)

From these definitions we can begin to understand the complex system of social exchanges that existed in Auschwitz. The term 'organize' includes a wide range of transfers and social situations characterized by the use of different value systems. It covers the entire spectrum of negative reciprocity, from different types of robbery to barter, but also covers forms of generalized reciprocity such as gifts and favors, while also referring to the articulation of two 'markets' as such (the 'domestic' and 'foreign' trade systems of the camp). Thanks to the social relations which developed in the camp itself, negative reciprocity coexisted alongside small mutual help groups which formed regularly to organize more efficiently, and even with institutions such as the hospital, which was maintained by donations (Vrba, 1964: 164).

We may now inquire as to what sorts of social relationships were supported or produced by these material flows. What feelings of mutual obligation – or its negation – grounded these transfers in a meaningful framework for the agents? In what follows we present the ethnographic evidence as it can be gathered from the memoirs.

### **The material basis and social relations of organization**

All prisoners arriving at Auschwitz were subject to the same initiation ritual: they were stripped of their clothes, shoes, packages, jewels, personal belongings, hair and even their names. Then they were given either a uniform or some old clothes and wooden clogs. Prisoners were forbidden to keep any personal belongings. During their first meal, they would realize they had nothing to eat with, while other prisoners had spoons and bowls which had been organized:

When you first get into the camp, you're incapable of organizing. You're shocked by the word every time you hear it, you hate it, and you ask yourself how it is that others have got things you haven't, how from having nothing they have been able to store away things. (Tedeschi, 1992: 50)

But the organized goods couldn't be kept for very long. There was a rule forbidding ownership of anything and during frequent surprise inspections, the majority of prisoners, who hadn't been forewarned, would have their hard-won articles taken away (Szmaglewska, 1947). Having possessions was strictly forbidden, yet certain implements were necessary for survival. Bowls and spoons were one obvious example. Another was razor blades. Men were forbidden to own razor blades, yet they were expected to be clean shaven. Most organizing centered around food and clothing but also around work, lodging and even luxury goods for the aristocrats of the camp.

In the rigidly structured and bureaucratic environment of Auschwitz, hierarchies were the backbone of the social system. A highly differentiated hierarchical structure regulated power relations and the circulation of goods in the camps. Goods did not circulate openly for everyone to access; rather, they followed and reproduced strict hierarchical power lines. Luxury goods and services were limited to SS authorities, civilian workers and some privileged prisoners in the upper ranks of the existing hierarchy. However, other circulation networks existed for food, clothing and other objects or positions among prisoners of inferior rank. When we analyze organization four different modes of action can be clearly distinguished.

First, generalized taking from other prisoners in a random, opportunistic way. Petty

theft of goods for self-consumption was widespread. Perpetrators tried to act in such a way as to remain anonymous and thus reduce their chances of getting caught, for stealing was severely punished in the camp. Food was the most commonly stolen item, and chances of detection were usually slim for it was generally swallowed on the spot, leaving no evidence. Although perpetrators tried to remain unknown to their victims, they, in turn, might have acted with or without discrimination in choosing a particular victim. Most of the evidence, however, seems to point to mere opportunistic behavior. Petty theft seems to have had a merely instrumental objective and social relations supporting these transfers among prisoners were unnecessary because action arose randomly from opportunity.

Once I was groping for my shoes in the dark of the night because I had to go out . . . I found one boot, but I couldn't find the other . . . I was sure it had been organized . . . If I didn't have my other shoe by the next morning at roll call when I had to be ready for work, the wrath of heaven would fall upon me. [She stealthily walked down the rows of bunk beds until] I stopped in front of one where everybody seemed to be snoring and where there was an especially attractive display of shoes; I quickly picked out a boot for my right foot which didn't look bad, more or less my size. Everyone was snoring, no one moved and I thought no one had seen me. Perfect! (Hefltler, 1992: 91-2)

No one ever mentioned the organization of the two shoes. Also, anonymity inhibited the creation of social relations through these transfers. We must take into account, however, that this random and opportunistic mode of securing resources articulated with other, more intentional, modes. It was often the basic, initial way to accumulate some meager resources that would enable entering more complex and socially structured circulation networks.

A second mode of taking was intentional and structured according to social differences of rank. It was based on the hierarchical structure of the camp and contributed heavily to the reproduction of those hierarchies. Here, those with some degree of power used their position to take resources destined for those with less power. In the process of trying to secure privileged access to common resources, individuals used, maintained and created particularistic social relations with other inmates whose situation in the web of social relations in the camp held some power in some instrumentally useful manner. Taking food en route from kitchen to barracks is a good example of this. Everyone here knows who is doing the stealing, but perpetrators are shielded by authority and by the unequal division of power. In contrast to the previous mode, this type of organizing encourages small-scale alliances between perpetrators and associates. This mode of taking is akin to corruption, in that it uses privileged positions to secure common resources for personal benefit.

A third mode could be described as taking from the central warehouses. These situations generated alliances among the direct organizers in the warehouses and distributors in higher positions, such as kapos, large scale organizers, and minor SS officials. This type of organizing provided the main material input to the exchange system of barter defined by many as the 'domestic market'. It also created and sustained the web of mutual and collective obligations that structured an essential part of the circulation of

resources. Although taking from the central warehouses in the camp in order to feed the inmates' (but not exclusively) distribution networks was perceived as different from the situation mentioned earlier (and we will shortly expand on their relative valuation), it should not be understood as redistribution in Polanyi's (1971 [1944]) sense, a process institutionally involving and affecting the whole of society. In fact, these networks of circulating goods were very partial. They involved a minority of inmates who occupied particular positions in the camp's structure that enabled them to organize in a recurrent manner. However, it should be stressed that for those involved in this mode of organizing, a central outcome of the transfers was the consolidation of a web of reciprocal obligations. But the risk for these organizers was great. If a prisoner was caught with gold, the outcome was often fatal. Moreover, every now and then the members of Canada were exterminated and replaced by other workers, especially up until 1944. Thus, many tried to organize transfers to other work parties when rumors of an impending change arrived. Being a central warehouse organizer was a mixed blessing. It is no surprise, nevertheless, that alliances with Canada organizers were highly regarded. Even the Canada kapos, who for obvious reasons belonged to the organization aristocracy, had to find allies both among the workers in the warehouse and the SS. '[The kapo] herself was officially allowed no access to the material we sorted. So we filched a bit here, a bit there, and bribed her; she in turn bribed the minor SS, who were also not allowed near all that loot' (Hart, 1981: 119).

This complex network of individual and self-interested organizers, however, articulated with small units that pooled meager resources in a generalized reciprocal way, creating what was called in camp jargon 'families'. Many of the survivors who had been in these privileged positions describe the creation of small mutual support groups which were unstable on account of the constant changes at Auschwitz. While she was a member of Canada, Kitty Hart recalls:

As a counter to such self-seeking treachery little 'families' formed within a block: three or four friends would stick together and organize things together. One acquired some bread, another found a handkerchief or a pencil and some scraps of paper, another a mug of water. Members of a group helped each other and defied the rest. Outside the family there had to be bribery; within there was love and mutual help. (Hart, 1981: 69–70)

A fourth mode of organizing both required and contributed to the reproduction of stable positions of power in the camp structure. This concerned large-scale organizers, who were able to circulate considerable and valuable resources (that were described as 'foreign trade'), basically among high ranking prisoners, SS officials and out-camp civilians. They dealt mainly in the traffic of positions, special favors and luxury items. Large-scale organizers had to maintain both a stable network based on alliances and bribery with the powerful, and a complex client network of subordinates who supplied them with more contacts and goods. Understanding the relations between these camp aristocrats and SS members is necessary in order to understand the extent of the circulation of goods in Auschwitz and the links between the different levels where it took place. The degree of risk incurred by these large organizers was limited given the wide range of connections they had throughout the camp. But SS officers who were not in the

organization or who wanted to destroy them could always turn up and make trouble. Since the large-scale organizers were also forbidden to have any possessions, they could reduce danger by asking someone they were 'protecting' to hide the goods. If they were caught everything would be confiscated, but the 'protected' person would be the one to get arrested.

Simon Laks, the musician, describes the renovation of the camp's music room:

Camp authorities gave us permission to renovate, but they showed no interest concerning the means necessary to do the works. They told us as usual: 'Organize it yourselves'. How? With whose help? Nobody was interested. After some negotiation we reach a deal with Kurt Reinhold [a large-scale organizer]: the carpenters' Kommando will furnish us with the material and labor in exchange for the accordion lessons that Jozef Papuga, Reinhold's foreman and subordinate, has been dreaming of and on condition that he will also be allowed to practice in our music room. In camp jargon this transaction is defined by a brief formula: the orchestra 'organized' itself a music room and Jozef Papuga accordion lessons. Both parties made a good deal. (Laks, 1991: 103–4)

But inmates were not the only ones in need of organizers: even Höss' wife asked a prisoner serving at the commandant's home as a butler and gardener to organize food for her whenever she had a reception (Panstowe Muzeum, 1978).

In sum, while we can make an analytical distinction in terms of the social relations that sustained and were produced by the different modes of organizing in the camps, we should remain aware that they coexisted and were interdependent. Not only were they all involved in the material and social reproduction of the camps, but also of the 'outside' civilian realities of the war economy. To organize was a complex process describing circulation of resources embedded in multiple and often multiplex forms of social relations. We find that social distance, mutual obligation and differential access to power and material resources are all useful concepts to attempt an approach to the phenomenon. But we often find people simultaneously involved in different modes of organizing and trying to make sense of these messy experiences, trying to refer them to some order of morality.

### **Organization, social system and morality**

The vast majority of the unwilling victims were ordinary, respectable, law-abiding citizens, who had had no previous experience of penal systems. They could never have imagined 'taking' things from others or having their things 'taken' by those close to them. However, after total expropriation on their arrival to the camp, the system forced them to organize. In the normal world that most of the victims had lived in before Auschwitz (and some were to live in afterwards), taking instead of giving would be generally categorized as immoral as well as illegal. In the camp reality moral ambiguity was pervasive, and most memoirs give faith to it. It was a product of the constant tension between the realities of material survival in the camp and past experiences informing the grounding of agency in systems of meaning that expressed very different realities and social positions in the pre-Nazi world. Moral ambiguity disappears in the memoirs only for those who presented organization as a form of redistribution, mostly backed by political socialist

ideologies. For the rest, a moral dilemma underlay the tension between the mechanisms which allowed them to survive and their adjustment to the moral inversion at Auschwitz.

Some survivors had established norms regulating whom it was acceptable to organize. Kitty Hart and her mother, who worked in the hospital, had established a moral code: they never took anything from anyone who was alive:

Life in Auschwitz was a matter of organizing, of grabbing the bare necessities wherever you could find them. But we would never let ourselves be demoralized into cheating the living. If we took anything, it must be from the dead. People today may flinch from such an idea. But what use had the dead for their clothes or their pitiful rations? Mother, in hospital, had plenty of opportunities for taking bread and the occasional slice of cheese or salami from a corpse; the body suffered no extra misery. To rob the living, or the half living, was to speed them on their way to death. To organize the relics of the dead was to acquire material which helped keep the living alive, and keep the half-living breathing, with just enough strength maybe to survive until the gates opened on to a freer, sweeter world outside. (Hart, 1981: 71–2, 66–7)

Yet other prisoners resolved the moral dilemma of taking in terms of the segmentary antagonism within the camp hierarchy. They would draw a line between political prisoners who were exercising moral rectitude by distributing goods from German warehouses and common criminals who robbed other prisoners in a generalized manner. For the Polish political prisoner Szmaglewska, organizing seems to have two meanings, one for the common criminals, and the other for the political prisoners:

[The common criminals] distorted the meaning of the word 'organization' in Oswiecim. In the language of a political prisoner the word 'organize' means to acquire a thing you need without wronging another prisoner. For instance: to take a shirt from a warehouse full of underwear . . . is to organize. But to take someone else's shirt which she washed and put on the grass to dry is not to organize – that is stealing . . . The criminal mentality is not able or does not want to distinguish the difference between theft and organization. (Szmaglewska, 1947: 66–67; Lewinska, 1945: 147)

The Polish political prisoner Lewinska described organization as a form of heroic resistance: 'It is thanks to you, brave organizers, that the Germans have been unable to exterminate us all' (Lewinska, 1945: 77).

In this manner, when seen as part of the struggle, in an epic mode, and excluding taking from other prisoners, there was no moral ambiguity in organizing. Here, organizing was taking what had first been stolen and criminally appropriated by the Germans; therefore, 'taking' was interpreted as a form of resistance:

the term 'organize' contained a nuance that I did not grasp for some time. It meant not only to steal, but to steal at the expense of the Germans. In this way, theft became ennobled, and even beneficial to the internees. When the employers of 'Canada' . . . stole warm clothing for their badly clothed comrades, that was not common theft; it was an act of social solidarity . . . Thus the words 'steal' and 'organize' were not at all synonymous. (Lengyel, 1983 [1947]: 95)

Olga Lengyel tries to present a morally acceptable and ideologically irreproachable model of what organizing should have been, but her model clashes with her experience: 'Unfortunately, it was not always easy to draw the line . . . And the term "organization" was often used to excuse low theft . . . under that pretext, some inmates pressed by hunger stole the miserable rations of their neighbors' (Lengyel, 1983 [1947]: 96). This made her realize that the moral differences in organization were not just a matter of distinction between political prisoners and common criminals, but were somehow also related to previous class positions:

in the melting-pot of Auschwitz-Birkenau, social barriers fell away and class prejudice vanished. Simple, uncultured peasant women accomplished wonders in the way of 'organization', and gave proof of magnificent selflessness, while sophisticated women whose morality had never been doubted pretended to engage in 'organization' to the detriment of their comrades. (Lengyel, 1983 [1947]: 96)

Difference in discourses about taking have to be related to the particular position of the speaker in the extremely differentiated social structure of the camp, but it must also be understood in relation to personal life histories and the positions the speaker occupied before and after the war in normal society (i.e. political militants vs. non-politicized civilians, different class positions and so on). There is tension between the various processes and experiences of differentiation that generate particular moral orders and the apparent suspension of morality in an extremely differentiated context. There is tension between the very heterogeneous past realities of the inmates and their apparent homogeneous lot in the camps. Therefore the absence or production of mutual responsibility, the possibility or impossibility of predatory action among prisoners at Auschwitz, was the result of permanent tension between different and confounding moral orders emerging at the intersection of individual and collective histories of differentiation.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of reciprocity is tied to the problem of social reproduction, an issue which concerns individuals and the continuity of groups and societies. Social reproduction hinges on various considerations: material ones (how to reproduce the things needed to live), political ones (how to reproduce the social relations of power), cultural ones (how to reproduce an identity) and a moral one (how to reproduce a system of justice and authentication). In a world in constant transformation the idea of continuity seems to offer security and support for action. But a particular model for continuity can be questioned by certain groups (whether dominant or dominated). Then, the actions of such groups will appear as guided by an idea of rupture, of change for the future, underpinned by an alternative moral order. Under such circumstances, positive reciprocity quickly reveals its negative side. Auschwitz provides an extreme case in point since there were no opportunities for social reproduction of any kind for a particular group. Here, morality is simply 'suspended' in a context where this circumstance, paradoxically, might offer the only possibility of material survival.

The moral reference is fundamental to make the concept of reciprocity useful and to differentiate it from that of exchange. The ability to deal with the often ambivalent meanings of their actions for subjects in real life is the other central element of this

concept. The positive side of reciprocity is based on shared morality. Its negative side is rooted in a break, transformation or suspension of the moral order. Whatever the case may be, the concept of reciprocity is directly tied to the idea of social reproduction or transformation of a specific social order. However, it is essential that both the positive and negative facets of reciprocity be dealt with simultaneously. Let us consider the three basic processes at work in producing social organization: (1) to TAKE in order to GIVE; (2) to ASK in order to RECEIVE, and (3) to KEEP in order to BE. In situations in which a shared morality sustains and conveys the claims of some and subsumes those of others, only the positive aspects of reciprocity of these three pairs emerge: (to take in order to) GIVE, (to ask in order to) RECEIVE, (to keep in order to) BE. The negative aspects of each pair remain hidden or are strongly de-emphasized. In situations of a break or suspension of the moral hegemony, the groups struggling against moral hegemony will stress the negative aspect of reciprocity in the old system while downplaying any positive side: to TAKE (in order to give), to ASK (in order to receive), to KEEP (in order to be).

If we consider the articulation of social systems, we will see that both situations described here usually form part of connected processes (typical situations of colonization, international division of labor, environmental predation, economic exploitation and so on). These imply at once social contexts typified by either a break with the hegemonic morality (i.e. involving different or conflicting moralities), or bounded spaces where particular hegemonic moralities prevail, and other bounded spaces with a suspension of morality (i.e. Auschwitz, technical spaces). All of it is evident in the ethnographic description of Auschwitz.

Reality is complex and involves different but connected social systems undergoing constant transformation, with different groups and subjects being mutually produced as subjects and as groups. These social groups will produce moral codes or systems of mutual obligation and responsibility that will exert pressure to modify or save particular social configurations and systems of inequality. One can easily appreciate how both aspects of reciprocity are constantly and simultaneously present as the tension between beneficial or predatory outcomes of social relations. But one should also be aware of both these aspects as discourses necessary for the interpretation of this reality by historical subjects, for the objectification of experience and the empowerment to transform reality.

We believe that the concept of reciprocity still has a useful role to play in analyzing social processes providing it incorporates negative reciprocity. The emphasis on equality and balanced exchange as the starting point for a reciprocal relation has only served to hide the imbalance and ambiguity inherent in reciprocal relations and their capacity to generate, reproduce and transform systems of inequality in reference to a field of moral forces where conflict and ambivalence prevail.

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## Notes

- 1 We will address later on in the article Weiner's (1978, 1980, 1985, 1992) and Godelier's (1996) discussions which cannot be considered 'definitions' of the concept.
- 2 We can distinguish three stages in the chronology of their appearance. The first stage goes from the liberation of the camps to the early 1960s. This stage coincides with trials such as Nuremberg (where the emphasis was not on the concentration camps but on war crimes more generally). A second stage covers the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of Eichmann's detention and trial, as well as the holding of other trials in Germany, such as the so-called Auschwitz trial (Frankfurt), brought the world of the camps back to center stage, this time emphasizing, however, the Jewish Holocaust. The interest in the testimony of some of the witnesses arising from these trials provoked the appearance of numerous memoirs, as well as the reprinting of others that had previously passed unnoticed. A third stage goes from the 1980s to the present. This stage coincides with the holding of the last trials almost half a century after the liberation of the camps (for example those of Barbie and the slave workers), and with renewed interest in the Holocaust as a mass-culture phenomenon. The majority of these memoirs, unlike those in the first two stages, are written by Jews, and the initiative to publish them comes from third parties: members of the Jewish community, historians, or leaders of projects designed to collect testimony on videotape, often linked to museums or monuments characteristic of the commemoration and reification of crucial historical events in our times (Finkelstein, 2000; Novick, 1999).
- 3 In contrast, for Bauman (1989) self-interest seems to be a product of the instrumental rationality of modernity, as opposed to a pre-societal generalized responsibility for the other defined as universal morality.
- 4 'Nous verrons la morale et l'économie qui agissent dans ces transactions.'
- 5 We want to point out here the connection with Bauman's basis for a *universal morality*: social proximity. Here, too, the argument of social distance is central, and the possibility or probability for immoral action (such as the Holocaust) depends on the *production of distance*: producing invisibility, dehumanizing victims and so on. The universal individual feeling of pristine responsibility for the other is based on the fact that social proximity is a universal human reality. Moreover, being a pure gift, this moral responsibility precedes the institution of reciprocal obligation and sets the grounds for it (Bauman, 1989).
- 6 For a slightly different scheme concerning the logical relations between positive and negative reciprocity based on the direction in which goods are transferred, see Gregory, 1994: 923.
- 7 'Donne autant que tu prends, tout sera très bien.'
- 8 Auschwitz embraced a complex network of sub-camps (over 40 at one point) which were run from three large centers (Czech, 1978, 1990; Dwork and Van Pelt, 1996): Auschwitz I, or the main camp; Auschwitz II or Birkenau (3 km away from Auschwitz I) was a concentration camp, work camp and death camp (from Spring 1942 to November 1944); lastly there was Auschwitz III (also called Monowitz or Buna), a work camp centered round a factory built by I.G. Farben to make synthetic rubber. Depending on the period, the number of prisoners in Auschwitz ranged between 80,000 and 120,000 (Czech, 1990). Between 1940 and 1945 some

- 405,000 people were taken to Auschwitz and over half died. These figures refer to the whole of the Auschwitz complex but do not include about one million people gassed at Birkenau.
- 9 Auschwitz housed prisoners from all over Europe and the camp was a Babel of mutually incomprehensible languages, although German and Polish tended to predominate. There were prisoners who were there for their religious beliefs (Jehovah's Witnesses), common criminals, prisoners of war (Russians and British), homosexuals, political prisoners and resistance fighters, gypsies and Jews.
  - 10 A red triangle indicated a political prisoner or a resistance fighter from one of the occupied countries, a green triangle was worn by common criminals, a black triangle by 'antisocial elements' or by Gypsies. Two superimposed triangles formed the Star of David and showed the prisoner was Jewish. A pink triangle was worn by homosexuals and a violet one by Jehovah's Witnesses. The letter 'P' indicated a Polish prisoner, an 'F' a French one and so on.
  - 11 Every two or three months the members of the *Sonderkommando* were gassed as were those in the Canada warehouse during the first years.

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