

Book review: Reciprocity in human societies

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Antti Kujala & Mirkka Danielsbacka

Reciprocity in Human Societies. From Ancient Times to the Modern Welfare State. Palgrave Macmillan 2019

“To requite a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere, at least under certain circumstances, regarded as a duty.” (Westermarck 1917, pp. 155)

Humans are a cooperative species, and reciprocity has been a cornerstone of human communities throughout history. Due to the development of larger and more complex societies, reciprocal relations between the members of society have become less transparent. However, while reciprocal relations may be less tangible, the principles of reciprocity – such as the duty to requite a benefit – continue to define the mutual relations between people in modern societies. The book *Reciprocity in Human Societies* by Antti Kujala and Mirkka Danielsbacka focuses on the relations between different social strata and explores manifestations of reciprocity in premodern societies and present welfare states.

The book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 provides a short introduction to the theoretical approaches to reciprocity utilized in the book, such as the theory of reciprocal altruism by evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers (1971) and the concept of gift institution by cultural anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1954). The next four chapters concentrate on premodern societies and their traditional customs relating to reciprocity: Inca and Maya cultures (Chapter 2), India (Chapter 3), Japan in its early modern time (Chapter 4) and premodern Nordic countries (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 concludes the book’s historical section, and explores reciprocity during a time of war within the French and Finnish armies. The following two chapters move the focus towards the present day in Western countries.

Chapter 7 could be perceived as the main part of the work, as it combines many central elements of the book: it provides a brief history of welfare state systems, introduces the well-known welfare state typology of Esping-Andersen (1990), briefly discusses the reciprocal elements of different welfare state models and then explores more closely the Nordic welfare state model, using Finland as an example. Chapter 8 addresses inequality in the United States and other industrialized countries. While Chapter 9 provides a quick closure, in which the authors briefly discuss the manifestations of reciprocity in the past and present.

A notable merit of the book is that it brings together viewpoints from different disciplines by combining evolutionary science, sociology and social anthropology with historical research. The utilization of different approaches forms a fascinating frame to investigate reciprocity in human societies and enables finding new angles on this much-discussed topic. The ultimate point of the book is drawn from evolutionary psychology, according to which humans’ tendency for collaboration and reciprocity is an innate trait that has been developed and shaped through the process of evolution. The commitment to reciprocity is compelled by retributive emotions, as first conceptualised by evolutionary anthropologist Edvard Westermarck (1917), that is, both rewarding and punitive moral feelings. While the ultimate reason

for individuals' tendency to reciprocate is considered from an evolutionary viewpoint, sociological and anthropological approaches are applied to explore the manifestation of reciprocity in different communities and societies. One key notion is that, although the precepts regarding mutual obligations and responsibilities vary over time, across cultures and between countries, perceptions of reciprocity and related retributive moral feelings shape and define the relations of people – in past and present societies.

The structure of the book is well designed, and it is mostly written in a clear manner, avoiding language that is too obscure. However, here and there, the book seems to slightly lose its focus from its main target (i.e., reciprocity) and gives a great amount of attention to related topics without clearly binding them into the current investigation of reciprocity. These side paths – such as questions of inequality – are interesting parts of the book and are undoubtedly related to manifestations of reciprocity, but they could have been discussed more precisely with respect to reciprocity. In addition, although the book is multidisciplinary by nature, the different approaches are mainly discussed separately, and the book would have benefited from combining the different approaches together more explicitly. The authors do provide short conclusions in the last chapter of the book, although a more exhaustive summary of the key findings with references to different theoretical approaches would have been a magnificent addition to the work.

Unquestionably, the book has many merits, and it can be warmly recommended to all researchers, teachers and students in wide fields of related research. Kujala and Danielsbacka clearly provide new insights into reciprocity by, for instance, shedding light on the questions of why and how reciprocity has played an important role in premodern and contemporary societies and will continue to do so in the future. In keeping with the work of the authors, it can be concluded that “reciprocity is the glue that holds society together, but breaches of its obligations can lead to social instability” (Kujala & Danielsbacka 2019, pp. 210).

References

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