

# “The Aim is always Joy!”

## The Hybrid Gift as an Anchor for Morality

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*Abstract: This article aims to analyze a specific form of the gift and its role in human lives, and to explore the moral and ethical values in which the gift is entangled. In 2012, Czech millionaire and Buddhist Libor Malý founded the “generous social network” Hearth.net as the basis of a new social and economic system. Hearth is a space where users offer and receive gifts without any expectation of a counter-gift. The network raises a debate concerning the nature of the gift and promotes heterogeneous approaches to the gift. Based on long-term ethnographic research on Hearth.net investigating gift giving, receiving, soliciting, and reciprocity, I argue that the gift reflects insecurities in human lives and relations. I perceive the gift as a hybrid that comprises the ideology of the pure gift, positive moral values, desire for an alternative system, pragmatic choices of everyday life, and tools of the market economy. Thanks to this multiplicity, the gift provides an ambiguous yet safe category through which individual development and improvement of society can be carried out. It represents an anchor for morality in the contemporary elusive world.*

**Key words:** gift; exchange; morality; assemblage; generosity

## Introduction

In May 2016, I went by bus to Litoměřice, a town in the northwest part of the Czech Republic, to attend the Alchymistic festival.<sup>1</sup> I had never heard about this event before. I had applied as a volunteer to help promote “the generous social network” Hearth.net. I was a user of this network, and the festival was my first opportunity to meet the people behind the idea of Hearth. When I arrived there, a young woman wearing a long colorful cardigan welcomed me and introduced herself as Pavla.<sup>2</sup> She worked for Adato Paradigma, the organization that manages Hearth, cares for its users, and promotes the network. She led me to the hall where our booth was to be set up. Together, we prepared badges, stickers, and flyers with information about Hearth, and placed them on small tables. Next to us was a whiteboard with the title, “I am generous when...” A few minutes later, a second volunteer came, an older, lanky man, and we started to address the people passing by. The idea of a generous social network where everyone can offer or ask for anything without the obligation to give something back appealed to many of the festival visitors. At this festival, it was possible to buy a Shungite pyramid with healing properties, ask a clairvoyant about relationship issues, and participate in musical meditation and harmonization. The unifying theme of the festival was spiritual development.

During the day I spent there, I met Libor Malý, entrepreneur, millionaire, and the founder of Hearth. When I saw him, I was surprised by his enthusiasm. I could feel the energy coming from his body language, his cheerful voice, and his boyish kind of behavior. He gave the impression of being self-confident and convincing. This combination, plus the fact that he was a millionaire, allowed him to work at organizing the world and shaping the future according to his image. I already knew that, in 2008, he received a vision during meditation in the practice of Dzogchen, a teaching passed on by Tibetan masters. The vision brought him to the idea that the world should change and work differently. After many discussions with his colleagues, he realized that it was essential for the new world to get rid of money and build relationships on something different than the

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<sup>2</sup> I left the original names of the members of Adato Paradigma because the profiles of these persons are publicly available on the Hearth and Adato Paradigma websites. However, I pseudonymized the names of all ambassadors and Hearth users.

logic of market exchange. He thought a gift economy could fulfill these requirements. Based on this idea, he launched the web platform Hearth.net in 2012. On this network, registered users can offer, accept, and ask for things, services, information, or time within the so-called market (*tržiště*), and these transactions, which are called gifts, are not to be settled.<sup>3</sup> Why is the gift accentuated, and what kind of gift is it? In what kind of moralities is it entangled, and how does morality influence the gift?

Theories of the gift mostly draw upon Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don*, published in 1925. Using data from Melanesian, Polynesian, and northwest American societies, he presented the idea that gift exchange followed “the phase of ‘total prestations’” and preceded the individual contract system (Mauss 2016: 144). Gift exchange involved three obligations: to give the gift, to receive it, and also to reciprocate (ibid.: 120). According to Mauss, “material and moral life, and exchange, function there [the system of the gift] in a form that is both disinterested and obligatory at the same time” (ibid.: 108). The obligation is what creates and strengthens relationships and mutual ties. Contrarily, as Mauss claimed, “our own civilizations [...] distinguish between obligation and nonvoluntary prestation, on the one hand, and gift (*don*), on the other” (ibid.: 146). Under the influence of Christianity, the idea of pure gift evolved out of this opposition to self-interest (Graeber 2001: 160). Mauss pointed out that self-interest was also present in the societies he explored, but it had a different meaning. It was not the opposite of disinterestedness in an endeavor to enrich oneself. Instead, it was “our economies” (of Western European society of the early twentieth century) that cast self-interest in opposition to generosity (Mauss 2016: 189–190).

Following Mauss, Jonathan Parry assumes that the pure gift is created in opposition to the predominant economic structure based on self-interest. He thinks of the pure gift as an ideology that evolves in “highly differentiated societies with an advanced division of labour” (Parry 1986: 466–67). According to Graeber and Laidlaw, the conception of pure gift plays a vital role in the market economy. Graeber (2001: 161) argues that an act of pure generosity in the form of a modern ideal of gifting not limited by any idea of personal gain becomes an impossible mirror of market behavior. Similarly, Laidlaw (2017: 569) writes: “We like the idea of making our economy more gift-like precisely because for us gifts now symbolize the positive moral qualities excluded from ‘the economy,’ where cold calculation has to reign.”

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of my fieldwork (2016–2017), the number of Hearth users was about 15,000. At the beginning of 2018, that number had fallen significantly, as Adato Paradigma decided to delete accounts that were rarely used.

A gift without a counter-gift seems to be the only way Malý could think about it. His definition of the gift – one that requires no remuneration, compensation, or exchange – would be consistent with a pure gift. However, although one can read about disinterested gifts on Hearth, at the same time the Terms and Conditions state: “The ultimate goal is always joy. Joy that you can pass on to the rest of the world.”<sup>4</sup> It means that the gift is neither pure nor disinterested, because the donor should expect positive moral value in return. How, then, to approach this gift?

In the conclusion of *Essai*, Mauss states that gift exchange is ubiquitous also in “our societies” and inherent in the economy. He related gift exchange to positive moral values such as mutuality and solidarity, and he postulated the recommendation: “Let us adopt as a principle of our lives that which has always been – and will always be – a principle of action: emerging from ourselves, and giving freely and obligatorily; we will not be disappointed” (Mauss 2016: 184). Mauss’s understanding of gift associated with positive moral values is challenged by Retsikas (2016: 2-5). He asks why Mauss puts gift giving in the context of morality and goodness when his ethnographic examples indicate that the gift is linked with humiliation and enslavement (ibid.: 5).

Retsikas (2016: 3) finds the aim of Mauss’s writing, which was to find an alternative to “commodity production,” problematic. Mauss describes gift exchange as the opposite of the market system and as the inspiration for the future. Retsikas suggests reconsidering the gift. In contrast to Mauss, who highlights the donor of the gift and gift giving as the principal act, he emphasizes the role of receiver and focuses on soliciting the gift. Based on ethnographic research of *zakat* practice in Java, he depicts “soliciting as irreducible, and as prior to giving” (Retsikas 2016: 14). Soliciting and the violence associated with it are preconditions for the gift and its positive aspects.<sup>5</sup>

I recognize the importance of Retsikas’s argument in deconstructing Mauss’s tripartite obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate, with an understanding of reciprocity and positive moral values as inherent parts of the gift. In this article, I want to offer a perspective on a kind of gift that proceeds in an organized way in contemporary society and presents a more subtle and ambiguous case. Based on Retsikas’s arguments, I want to focus not only on the morality

<sup>4</sup> Hearth Terms and Conditions, <https://www.hearth.net/app/terms> (accessed 1 April 2021)

<sup>5</sup> Similar to soliciting, Widlok (2016: 75) describes demand as the constitutive aspect of sharing that is often unsaid but not violent. He claims that sharing is done on demand. What matters is that demand is shared among others. In opposition to the gift, “sharing is enabling access to what is valued through a bundle of social practices of responding to demands” (ibid.).

of gift giving; I am also interested in a gift that embraces giving, receiving, and soliciting or requesting, and finally, reciprocity, even if verbally absent in the context of Hearth.

In analyzing the moral values associated with the gift, I follow Jarett Zigon’s methodological theory of moral and ethical assemblages. These assemblages cover three aspects of morality and a set of ethical practices that emerge from the assemblage. The three aspects are institutional discourse, public discourse, and embodied individual capacities. Within assemblage theory, Zigon (2014: 21) approaches the individual as an affective and relational being and follows the relations that determine the character of being. Zigon’s approach allows one to address moral and ethical effects on the broader scale and, at the same time, to pursue the specific actors and their moral and ethical actions and convictions.

This article aims to reveal the moral and ethical values that are highlighted in the context of the gift and how they shape the gift. Other questions follow: What kind of gift is produced in the context of Hearth? Why does this gift get a significant role? Many economic anthropologists engaged with gift exchange have formulated their theories based on fieldwork in various non-capitalist or small-scale communities (Gregory 1982; Mauss 2016), and religious groups (Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986; Retsikas 2016). There are exceptions, such as Carrier (1990, 2005), who applied the Maussian model of gift exchange to social life in Western (American and British) capitalist societies. This article observes a specific form of gift giving present in Europe, namely in the Czech Republic. However, I will not explore gifts that appear inconspicuously in the daily routine of human lives. Instead, the gift under scrutiny here is thought through and reflected in many ways – as an alternative to the market economy or a stimulus for spiritual development, among others – by the founder and users of the social network Hearth.net.

I argue that the character of the gift, which Hearth’s users find difficult to understand and define, reflects the fragmentation of moral and ethical values, the uncertainty of daily life, and the elusiveness of interpersonal relationships. I call the contemporary form of the gift a *hybrid gift* because of its capacity to offer social, spiritual, and economic outcomes in addition to being embedded in “economic orthodoxies of neoliberalism and the market” (Henig 2018: 3). In other words, it is a hybrid of pure gift, obligation, spiritual enlightenment, and market-economy logic. Despite the hybridity emanating from contradictions and paradoxes, the gift is a fixed reference point and becomes a representation of morality in the contemporary ambiguous world.

## Gift without Counter-gift

When I visited the Hearth website for the first time in November 2015, I did not find it very convincing. The phrases “A joy to give! A delight to accept!” and “A space for open hearts”<sup>6</sup> gave me the impression of a group of naive spiritual people whose goal was spreading joy, love, and happiness. Gradually, I found out that it was not so straightforward, nor were the users so gullible. I registered on this website so that I could participate in the so-called market (*tržiště*). The market was full of gift offers and requests for gifts, consisting of things, services, information, and time. Every user could offer or ask for a gift under one important condition – those who offered must demand nothing in return.<sup>7</sup> This was implied further on the website: “Let’s share gifts and wishes.” “We share what fulfills us. We accept what we ask for. Without money. Without ‘what’s in it for me’ [*Bez principu ‘co za to’*]. Just like that, for the pleasure it brings.”<sup>8</sup> The gifts in the market were controlled by the team from Adato Paradigma or by the ambassadors;<sup>9</sup> when an offer did not fit the regulations, the person was asked to delete or edit that offer. However, this raises the question of whether a gift without a counter-gift is possible. I have already explained that Hearth’s gift, the way it is presented, is not pure or disinterested, since it seeks to generate positive moral value. What does it mean to give a gift without a counter-gift, and how it is framed?

In December 2016, in a small old-fashioned café, Hearth user and future ambassador Antonín told me how he always gave a lucky button to a donor in return. However, after some time, he realized that it was not a good idea, “because I gave a counter-gift when no one wanted it.” The twist in his understanding of the gift came when someone “forced” something on him when he was not interested. The gift that he previously considered a nice counter-gift started to strike him as violent and unwanted: “Basically, Hearth is teaching us how to give gifts and how to accept them, to get used to it. Not to feel bad when receiving a gift. Why wouldn’t you receive it if I want to give it to you without

<sup>6</sup> These phrases appeared on the homepage of [Hearth.net](http://Hearth.net) in the years 2015–2019.

<sup>7</sup> The terms of use stated: “Our site is a platform for communication between users for providing gifts – giving is the main content of activities at [Hearth.net](http://Hearth.net). In no way can you ask for any sort of fee, barter or exchange for anything you offer to others.” (<https://www.hearth.net/app/terms>)

<sup>8</sup> Phrases from the homepage of [Hearth.net](http://Hearth.net) from the years 2015–2019.

<sup>9</sup> Ambassadors are the most active users selected by Adato Paradigma, the organization that runs [Hearth](http://Hearth) and assists Malý, the founder, in considering and implementing his ideas. The ambassadors help Adato Paradigma spread [Hearth](http://Hearth)-related ideas and values.

any counter-gift, just for the sake of it, from the pure joy?" (Antonín, interview 4 December 2016). Antonín embraced the values presented on Hearth and consciously internalized them.

Nevertheless, this does not apply to all users. In many cases, they give at least a chocolate bar or a little something as a counter-gift. It signifies the obligation described by Mauss. The obligation emerges by virtue of the "spirit of the thing" and is based on honor (Mauss 2016: 69-70, 144). Mauss drew the conclusion from, among other things, the study of potlatch among the North American Kwakiutl. Sergei Kan (1986: 206), who gave a very detailed account of the funeral ritual linked with the potlatch of a similar group of North American Indians called Tlingit, showed that the mourners gave guests gifts that were not to be rejected, "since its spiritual essence belonged to the dead." Hearth presents a different context, yet we will see a similar application in the way a thing given is associated with the person giving it, and thus places demands on the gift's receiver. The counter-gift is articulated, or rather its absence is emphasized, and it results in alternative forms of covering the obligation without necessarily giving something back or admitting one is making a counter-gift. These include more or less personal conversation when handing the gift over, endeavoring to offer something on Hearth rather than only taking, or giving a rating.

After giving or receiving gifts, the users are encouraged to write a review about the giver or recipient. Reviews can also be given without being prompted by a link. A user who is rated can react to that rating. The rating is only an option, not an obligation, but some users explicitly demand it from recipients of their gifts. The rating does not merely serve potentially to cancel the obligation; it also plays an important role when the donor is deciding to whom he will give his gift. The ratings are divided into categories: "Thanks," or "Everything has clicked into place," or "It did not work out well." On Hearth, most of the ratings state that everything worked out. When users react to something that has gone wrong, they often stress that they are loath to give such a rating.

Words expressing gratitude represent a crucial reaction in the process of handing over a gift. Kan (1986: 203) argues that words, in addition to gifts and food, are a significant object of exchange between hosts and guests during a Tlingit potlatch. In their conception, words have the power to heal or to wound. Words in the form of speeches are dedicated to the mourners. The speeches are clearly structured, as is the speech of gratitude delivered by the host. A certain structure is also apparent in the ratings of "Thanks" on Hearth. The rating always includes a thank-you for the gift and an appreciation for a good agreement on handing over the gift. In many cases, the receiver makes an effort to state how the gift made him or his relatives happy and how it was used. For example, one

user wrote: “Thank you again for the beautiful books, I am immersed in the one about coaching, and it is excellent. It fits well into my practice of psychotherapy. I probably wouldn’t get to it normally, so it was just supposed to come to me through you :). May you prosper and still have the courage to love :).” These words do not merely express gratitude; they primarily demonstrate the endeavor to disrupt the link between the giver and the gift by highlighting the new link between the receiver and the gift. Thus, the comments are used to alienate the gift from the receiver and decrease the feeling of obligation.

I perceive the rating as a way to build up and strengthen prestige and social status within the network of gift giving. To gain positive ratings, the user must behave virtuously, give generously, and receive gifts with joy. The gift acts as an object for building up a certain social position within the Hearth community, while simultaneously representing individual morality based on “one’s already cultivated everyday way of being in the world” (Zigon 2010: 8) – in other words, embodied morality. The rating may be approached as the pivot of how to understand the gift on Hearth. This gift is proclaimed to be without a counter-gift, and yet at the same time it is linked with emotions of happiness and joy that are possible to gain. These emotions and the rating alike are not perceived as a counter-gift, yet they present an integral part of the gift and are partly the reason for gift giving. It shows that the “gift without a counter-gift” is an ideal that individuals yearn to achieve. The reality of the gift demonstrates an effort, on the one hand, to show gratitude through giving a rating or something in return, and on the other, to make disinterested gifts and find ways to avoid making a counter-gift.

The rating is also a way to orientate in the anonymous network, and people are used to this form from other web platforms, mostly based on collaborative production. In this context, Adam Arvidsson and Nicolai Peitersen refer to “reputation” as representing “the way value is measured and circulates in an economy of commons” (2013: 92). The online reputation system emerges as part of “productive publics”<sup>10</sup> (ibid.: x). Arvidsson and Peitersen think of it as ethical capital whose accumulation “must be understood to be premised on ethics” because it may be obtained only “by acting in coherence with the established values and norms of a particular institution” (ibid.: 107). This assumption is opposed by Alison Hearn, who argues that the digital reputation system based on “ranking and feeding back” represents “voluntary activity whose affective qualities are colonized for value by capitalist interests” (Hearn 2010: 434). Hearn addresses primarily social

<sup>10</sup> “Productive publics are collaborative networks of strangers who interact in highly mediated ways and who coordinate their interaction through adherence to a common set of values” (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013: x).



media and states that rating is “a free source of large profits” (ibid.: 436). This does not apply to Hearth in the same way, because Adato Paradigma does not make a profit from the website.

The rating or the online reputation system appears to be a market economy tool to profit from “affective expressions” (ibid.: 434). As such, it contributes to posing a crucial paradox inherent in the understanding of gifts made through Hearth. On the one hand, there is an effort to break free from the market system, evident in the conceptualization of the gift without any kind of compensation. On the other hand, the gift involves the adoption of the market system’s features, such as the reputation economy. I will address this paradox later.

## Gift as Generosity and Kindness

In August 2016, I participated in a weekend meeting “with Hearth.”<sup>11</sup> I met there with members of Adato Paradigma, the managers of Hearth, and with Hearth users. I did not know what the meeting would be about. The only thing I knew was that we would discuss the future of the Hearth network. The first evening, the members of Adato Paradigma presented the idea behind Hearth, which they eventually called the “paradigm of generosity and kindness”<sup>12</sup> (*paradigma štědrosti a laskavosti*). For all participants, including me, it was the first time we had heard about it. During the weekend, it became clear that this paradigm was far more important than Hearth itself. After the meeting, I started to hear about the paradigm of generosity and kindness more often.

It emerged that Libor Malý, the founder of Hearth, perceived the gift within a broader context, and envisaged the development of a new paradigm of generosity and kindness. In this paradigm, people can live, work, and develop their relationships through gift giving. The money that will no longer be needed will lose its role. According to Malý, people will be able to unify the separated parts of work and personal life. In that case, they could devote time to what they enjoy to the benefit of those who need it. Malý calls this behavior “generosity.” In his view, generosity contributes to building interpersonal relationships that are currently negatively influenced by money. The new paradigm of generosity and kindness should gradually replace the old one characterized by the “dopey

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<sup>11</sup> Hearth is a social network, but the term is also used to denote the community of people who participate in the gift giving.

<sup>12</sup> The first name was “paradigm of happiness” or “paradigm” in general. Quite early after that meeting, the name changed to “paradigm of generosity and kindness.” Later the term “paradigm” was cancelled because for many users it was hard to understand.

financial system” (Libor Malý, interview 31 October 2017). According to Malý and Adato Paradigma, the paradigm should provide for the welfare of all people globally. Hearth, together with the gift, is only a means to achieve this paradigm.

The essential inspirational source for Malý is the teaching of Dzogchen that was passed on within Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddhism, generosity and kindness are both significant virtues. Generosity or giving is one of six perfections (*pāramitā*) and is called *dana*. It presents the act that must be made with noble and selfless intention. Kindness or *metta* is one of four immeasurables (*Brahma-vihara*). *Metta* means unconditioned and selfless loving-kindness. In its meaning of gift giving in Buddhism and Hinduism, *dana* was studied by anthropologists (Heim 2004; Laidlaw 2000; Mauss 2016; Parry 1986; Raheja 1988; Simpson 2004). *Dana* represents a gift that must be given to a worthy receiver, and it carries on “the inauspiciousness from the donor to the receiver” (Parry 1986: 460). It assumes that “the gift contains the person” (ibid.). “The gift threatens to cement the two [donor and receiver] together in a dangerous interdependence; but every attempt is made to sever their bond by insisting on the complete alienation of the thing” (ibid.: 461). The counter-gift is seen in karma, in “the flow of merit” (ibid.: 462). Parry argues that such a return is deferred and impersonal. Although Malý works with *dana* virtue, Hearth’s gift is not like the gift *dana*. First, the gift on Hearth is not recognized as a religious gift. Second, there is no belief in the inauspiciousness handed over with a gift. Instead, Hearth’s gift arises, in Parry’s words, in the different “ideology of reciprocity and non-reciprocity” (ibid.: 453).

Generosity is the virtue also emphasized in practices of other world religions, such as *zakat* (Retsikas 2016) and *halal* (Henig 2018) in Islam or alms giving and charity in Christianity (Svoboda 2010). The paradigm of generosity and kindness does not correspond to religion. However, given the ideals it represents, it is not far from it. Instead, considering the totality of the paradigm covering gift giving, general reflections on the world, and one’s behavior in it, I approach it as a cosmology. That means it constitutes a shared belief in the essence of how the world works, the human behavior within it, and the forces that govern it.

To be precise, the paradigm rather represents an ideal cosmology. It defines how the world *should* work, and it suggests the way to achieve that. The decisive forces that should determine human action are generosity and kindness together with joy and the desire for happiness. Within this cosmology, the individual is seen as the central point of change. Through his inner development, humanity can lead to positive change. The paradigm of generosity and kindness is to be spread by the most active users, joined in the group of so-called ambassadors. Hearth defines ambassadors as “a community of people who believe that

kindness, generosity, openness, and respect belong to a happy and good life.”<sup>13</sup> Malý and Adato Paradigma stress generosity and kindness in opposition to the world, defined according to them by the economic relations of market exchange, where these values disappear.

A year after the first meeting of ambassadors, Adato Paradigma organized a second meeting. In both events, I observed an enactment of the virtues of generosity and kindness. The atmosphere was always friendly. Everybody was encouraged to express himself and his opinions. At the same time, nobody was forced into anything. Moreover, at the second-weekend meeting, Milan, one of the ambassadors, gave a morning lesson of *qigong*<sup>14</sup> to all who were interested. Ambassador Erik donated several of his books, and he also played his songs on a guitar for the enjoyment of all listeners. The other two ambassadors, Alena and Monika, brought homemade cookies. At the first meeting, participants could taste sheep cheese from Luboš and Jana. For both meetings, the accommodation, catering, and transport were paid for by Malý, who thereby displayed his generosity. However, his generosity was different from the generousities displayed by ambassadors. It had a specific purpose: to support the users’ activity in the promotion of Hearth and the paradigm of generosity and kindness. Thus, the relation between Malý and ambassadors is asymmetrical and involves a gift that requires a counter-gift. Nevertheless, this counter-gift is not solicited and is returned only voluntarily.

The paradigm of generosity and kindness was enacted and materialized in the form of the weekend meetings. This means that the whole environment was organized to support the impression of generosity and kindness, along with mutuality, solidarity, trust, joy, and peace. It involved material objects such as chocolate being shared among all participants, a display of encouraging posters, close mutual proximity given the building’s character, and sitting on the ground, which reduced barriers between people. Thus, some of us sat close to each other. It becomes apparent that the specific moral and ethical framework defined by the paradigm of generosity and kindness is anchored in material and non-material aspects. The paradigm of generosity and kindness can be seen as a constituent of discursive public morality (Zigon 2010: 6). It signifies that the ideal gift and the practices linked with it are considered in relation to the paradigm. It provides a context and a set of rules for giving and receiving a gift correctly. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the paradigm is not clear to all users, and not

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<sup>13</sup> Dolínek, Jan. 2016. „O radosti (nejen) Na radosti.“ In Blog.HEARTH.net [online]. <http://blog.hearth.net/o-radosti-nejen-na-radosti/>

<sup>14</sup> A traditional Chinese practice to cultivate body and qi.

even to all ambassadors. Understanding of the paradigm and the gift is given by users' specific contexts as "relational-beings" (Zigon 2014: 21). It is formed in their interactions and within their discussions. Thus, Malý's original idea is further organically developed.

Ambassador Eva is one of those who unintentionally challenged the course set by Malý and Adato Paradigma. She was not satisfied with the fact that there were not many people from her town on Hearth. Therefore, she decided to hold *dařiště* at the town festival. Adato Paradigma created the term *dařiště* to designate gift-markets that should represent "offline Hearth" and be places for generosity. At *dařiště*, people can bring gifts and receive them. The gift-markets organized by Adato Paradigma took place primarily at events with a spiritual theme. Instead, Eva decided to bring the "offline Hearth" to a local civic event, because it was essential to her to connect people living in the same area and avoid throwing away things someone else could use in the neighborhood, such as apples from the garden. For her, the important aspects of gift and paradigm were locality and thrift. In this way, she and some of the other ambassadors introduced to the paradigm values that broadened the spiritual understanding of generosity and kindness and included pragmatic aspects, such as local relationships and regard for the environment manifested in thrift.

Precisely because of the paradigm's ambiguity, given by its evolving character, it seems useful to understand it in terms of the ideology of the gift (Parry 1986). The paradigm constitutes such an ideological ground for gift giving. Parry puts the modern gift in opposition to exchange in an ideological way: "*Gift-exchange* – in which persons and things, interest and disinterest are merged – has been fractured, leaving gifts *opposed* to exchange, persons *opposed* to things and interest to disinterest. The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange" (Parry 1986: 458; italics in the original). Even though disinterestedness is highlighted on Hearth, the person is not always in opposition to things. According to Malý, people should give what they enjoy, things they created or that they like. They should give some part of themselves.

In both ideologies – of the gift and market exchange – the individual plays an important role. However, the outcome varies. In the ideology of market exchange, the goal is to maximize utility. In the ideology of the gift, more precisely in the paradigm of generosity and kindness, the goal is to achieve one's own and others' wellbeing. Thus, the ideology of gift does not count only with the disinterested gift. Instead, it covers the qualities related to gift exchange in the Maussian interpretation that can build relationships. The spiritual aspects linked with more pragmatic values create an ideology opposed to market exchange and demonstrate the broad scale on which the ideology of the gift may appear. However, as I showed in the

previous section, the practice of gift giving is linked to aspects and relations of the market, thus rendering gift a *hybrid* category<sup>15</sup>.

## The Gift as Training for a Better Future

The paradigm of generosity and kindness is closely attached to Malý’s broader vision of the future world. Based on the evolution of the current world, he assumes the system is changing from linear to chaotic, with the latter system difficult for individuals to understand. Malý builds on the distinction between what he calls western and eastern styles of thinking. “Western thinking is dull, linear, structured, and leads to the materialization of outcomes in the matter. Eastern thinking is elusive, subtle, very chaotic, and leads to inner knowledge development, but it is not visible from the outside” (Libor Malý, interview 31 October 2017). Furthermore, Malý considers it crucial to become aware of the duality in which we live. He describes it thus: “I think I am me, and you think you are you, and we think there are two of us.” He means that people see themselves as clearly defined beings, independent and detached from others. In opposition to duality is non-duality, which refers to the state in which a person becomes aware that all living beings in the world are united by one consciousness.

According to Malý, the capitalist system uses duality and stresses the concept of individual freedom to the effect that “you won’t tell me what to do” (Libor Malý, interview 31 October 2017). He considers it problematic for potential social change. For this reason, it is necessary to go beyond the boundaries of time and space where the conceptions and terms of current society are no longer valid and relevant. At that point, one realizes that there is only one consciousness: “You will achieve the ultimate point of knowledge, the state of non-duality.” Buddhism defines this state as the absence of everything. Malý finds substantial the ability to take off “the glasses with those concepts” and experience something impossible to convey. For the person who can “take off” those concepts, change himself, and become aware of non-duality, “the old paradigm” and the financial system seem too formalized, and thus binding. Therefore, he introduced “the gift economy,” where “the two beings that will develop themselves may communicate or cooperate on some higher level” (Libor Malý, interview 31 October 2017). Hearth exists as a space where gift giving can be “trained” until people begin to live by it themselves. In Malý’s vision, the gift gains the potential to change the lives of individuals and society.

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<sup>15</sup> Mauss has already pointed out the hybrid nature of economic acts, which range from pure total services to exchanges driven by interests and utility (Mauss 2016: 186).

Malý envisages a dystopian evolution of society, with machines taking over people's jobs and people having to figure out what to do. Malý proposes to "be useful," by which he means to make others and oneself happy. Hearth could thus provide space for "training" and starting a new life, while preventing dystopian social evolution. The most significant emphasis is on the spiritual and economic aspects of society and the individual search for one's qualities. What is essential for a good life is the ability to find one's own potential in relation to an economic system that should be based on gift and generosity rather than exchange and material wealth.

Economic relations play an essential role in ambassador Karel's vision. He is one of the users of *Hearth.net*, and he reflected carefully on his position in the network and his reasons for using it. Based on life's twists, he began to think about "optimizing his consumption" (Karel, interview 2 February 2017) and how to reduce the amount of money he must earn. In seeking to release himself from competition and craving for profit within the market system, he referred to self-sufficiency, or what he described as "mutually interconnected self-sufficiency," recognizing the impossibility of complete independence. Karel's interest in *Hearth* was shaped by his goal of building a working alternative economic system where people provide services and products to each other to meet their needs within the local context. He also emphasized the world's natural resources and regard for the Earth. In maintaining a balance between consumption and resources, he stressed the importance of frugality and thrift.

Both men have a vision of a better future for the world. To make these visions intelligible and applicable, they materialize them in the gift and the practice of gift giving and gift requesting. The gift becomes the centerpiece of the ideal image of the future, a specific way of becoming attached to the world and others in the continually evolving assemblage of moral and economic relations<sup>16</sup> that seems barely comprehensible. Therefore, the gift and *Hearth* represent a stable way of organizing social relations, although the gift itself is ambiguous.

In their visions, a better future lies in strengthening the relations between people and between all animate and inanimate entities. The imaginaries of a better future are projected into the gift in the disinterested gift ideas and the counter-gift's action. The contradictions intrinsic in the gift become a creative

<sup>16</sup> I understand the term assemblage as the relational networks of animate and inanimate with a capacity to affect and be affected (Fox and Alldred 2015: 399). I build upon Deleuze, who uses the term assemblage to designate "multiplicity" and "becoming." It presents a process and a tendency to acquire an ontological status by being involved in relations to other material, social and abstract entities (Fox and Alldred 2017a: 17).

part of these imaginaries. Within the assemblage of economic relations, the gift represents the ideal that connects the most valuable moral values. In relation to the current market system and selfish acts in pursuit of wealth, the absence of such values as generosity, mutuality, and solidarity becomes evident. It supports the inclination to Hearth and the ideas of gift economy and values of happiness and joy, especially when these qualities are promoted as the natural ones.

On the one hand, the gift is perceived as something natural by the members of Adato Paradigma. For instance, they construe birth as the gift of life present in human lives from their very beginning. On the other hand, Malý talks about gift giving that must be trained. This aspect of learning and training is specific for religious practice, through which one should achieve enlightenment or self-perfection. Training is also the inherent practice of religious gift giving. Retsikas (2016: 2), on the basis of his ethnographic observation of *zakat* distribution, states: "Giving as well as receiving are activities conducted in a socially approved and politically sanctioned manner. Because of this, givers as well as recipients have to be trained in the acquisition of appropriate manners and should expect to have their performances evaluated according to standards of behavior that are historically and culturally specific." In this way, Hearth presents an artificially created environment whose rules are primarily given by its founder and further negotiated and extended in the assemblage constituted by users, ambassadors, the team of Adato Paradigma, imaginaries of the proper gift, experiences with the market economy, and relations between humans and nonhuman entities, material things for instance. Learning of these rules occurs while giving and soliciting gifts. When Malý refers to the training of gift giving, he perceives it as a practice by which the perfection of oneself, and thus of society, can be achieved.

### Gift as an Anchor for Morality

When the financial crisis hit the world in 2008, it impacted many people who lost their jobs and income. At that time Libor Malý, entrepreneur and Buddhist, had a spiritual vision that influenced how he approached the crisis. He thought of a new system that would not only offer affected people a way to cope with the consequences of the crisis; he wanted to create an alternative economic form that would provide at least some security to people in an ambiguous, fluid, and chaotic world, full of political, economic, and social uncertainties. He came up with the idea of a gift economy, which seemed the most suitable because it was conceived as the opposite of the market exchange. The economic crisis in 2008 challenged the financial system and the moral values associated with economic activities. The gift appears not only to show an alternative way of organizing economic



relations; it also emerges as the “apparent” antithesis to globally accepted moral values. I say “apparent” because although in many ways Malý conceived the gift in clear contrast to the market economy, these boundaries are blurred.

The dichotomy between the commodity in the market economy and the gift in the social science literature was mentioned by Mauss in 1925 (Mauss 2016: 189-90). Further, economic anthropologists elaborated on this topic, and they either criticized the basic distinction between gift and commodity (Appadurai 1986: 11-12; Gudeman 2001: 461) or thought of these two categories as intertwined (Carrier 1992: 189-90). On the one hand, this dichotomy has been used as a conceptual framework to help understand the logic of exchange and specific aspects of economies (Tsing 2013: 22), and on the other to end this dualism by reversing the common understanding of both categories (Miller 2001: 113). However, they all showed that the dichotomy is alive and plays a vital role in the prevalent conceptions of daily economic life. Thus, Hearth’s gift appears both as opposed to the market economy and the capitalist way of thinking, and simultaneously as a hope for a better future in responding to dystopian economic development.

Parry (1986: 467) states, “in an economy with a sizeable market sector gift-exchange does not have the material significance” and thus does not fulfill an economic function. Therefore, it is perceived as released from the ties of the market economy. According to the visions of Libor Malý and Karel, the gift on Hearth should acquire an economic role. They perceive gift exchange as the natural outcome of shortcomings of the current system. Despite their endeavors and imaginaries, many users consider gift exchange to be a rather secondary way to organize their social and material relations. Furthermore, the effort to establish gift exchange as an alternative economic system is accompanied by a spiritual discourse searching for noneconomic qualities. These ambiguities and inconsistencies linked with the gift lead me to think of Hearth’s gift as a *hybrid gift* that embraces material and non-material forms, with diverse meanings from spiritual to social and economic.

The hybridity of the gift lies in the conjunction of different economic and moral aspects. The gift is framed by the ideology of the pure gift and a public moral discourse defined by the values of generosity and kindness, and disinterestedness. However, the same gift is embedded in the tools created in compliance with the market economy and marketing. Hearth is organized like a social network that includes communication between users, a rating system, the option to join a specific group of users, and the ability to address all users with an offer or request within the market. These functions are used intuitively because everybody is familiar with them from other social networks and web platforms, making Hearth understandable. Simultaneously, they show how the contemporary gift is



irreducible from the capitalist neoliberal society's current rules. The other hybrid feature of the gift concerns the ideal gift that should be, according to the Hearth website, "disinterested without any demands and expectations of the donor." At the same time, the aim of this gift "is always joy." Although Hearth's gift is understood without the counter-gift, it supposes something in return already in the discursive sphere. Further, the counter-gift is an inherent part of gift giving and gift requesting, and it has different forms, as I have already shown.

The hybridity of the gift reflects the uncertainties present in human lives that stem from vague values and relations to the self and to other humans and nonhumans. Despite its opacity, the hybrid gift on Hearth acts as an anchor for positive moral values and represents a fixed point of reference in the world. The fact that it is embedded in the "economic orthodoxies of neoliberalism and the market" (Henig 2018: 3) only contributes to fostering confidence in something familiar.

## Conclusion

On the "generous social network" Hearth, the gift emerges as an articulated, organized, controlled, reflected, and intentional unit. It is a type of gift defined from the top by the millionaire Libor Malý and his team and further shaped by Hearth's users. I call this a *hybrid gift* because of its ability to merge divergent layers of human life. This hybrid gift obtains diverse functions and meanings. It becomes the means to get rid of a certain thing as well as a way to make someone happy, establish a deeper relationship, make one's dreams come true, help someone, accept help, give one's opinion, persuade others, spend time effectively, understand oneself, or fulfill the idea of the moral person. In other words, the gift offers a way to extend oneself, become entangled in new relations, and to affect and be affected.

*The hybrid gift* absorbs the various moral and ethical values attributed to it by donors and recipients. This moral and ethical assemblage involves individuals' embodied moralities, the discursive morality of the paradigm of generosity and kindness, and the institutionalized morality of mainly market exchange presented by the state and major economic institutions. Although institutionalized morality is plural and stems from multiple sources, the gift is shaped primarily in opposition to the values associated with the market system. The opposition is not homogeneous and includes various reactions by Hearth's users depending on their approach to market exchange.

On the one hand, the financial system is seen as unsatisfactory, and there is a need to refuse the idea of duality behind it. It results in highlighting the values of generosity and kindness and the necessity to "train" the individual in gift giving

to start a better life in non-duality. On the other hand, competition and desire for profit leading to uncertainties in people's lives are perceived as harmful. By contrast, regard for other human and nonhuman beings and the environment is emphasized. While these two aspects of morality, institutional and discursive, are "separate and distinct from one another, they are in constant dialogue with one another" (Zigon 2010: 7). In this dialogue, the gift becomes a representation of morality and takes on the role of an actor contributing to the development of the individual and society.

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