

# Gifts of food:

sociability and friendship among English middle class people

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When I studied friendship among a group of young English middle class people in London in the early 1990s, I found it interesting that they rarely gave each other presents, even on occasions such as birthdays. On the other hand, they cooked often for each other, thus exchanging food and drinks profusely. In this article, I want to examine the significance of these gifts of food within the context of a particular set of meanings and practices of friendship. I argue that the exchange of food and drinks, rather than of birthday or Christmas gifts, stresses certain notions and values of friendship for these English people.

Gift giving as a specific type of material exchange is one of the classic themes studied by social anthropologists. Various authors have focused on gift giving both in Western and non-Western societies, seeking, in a great deal, to analyse the distinctions between gift and commodity exchanges. Through it, they explored not only indigenous understandings of material exchanges but also the limits of applying economic concepts in cross-cultural studies (Gregory 1980, Strathern 1988). Rather than reviewing this literature, my aim here is to single out certain issues from the analysis of gift exchange, which will guide my analysis of the gifts of food among the English people I studied.

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The first point is the obligatory nature of gift giving, in spite of its appearance as a spontaneous act. Since Malinowski's (1976) analysis of the Kula ring and Mauss' (1974) essay on the gift, it has been shown that this exchange follows strict rules, even if they seem to remain in most places implicit, which contributes to its experience as voluntary. The basic norms of gift giving are the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. Each of these acts are in turn marked by their own set of regulations – to whom, how, when, and what to give, which are culturally specific. Thus, despite the fact that people often experience gift giving as deriving from their own wish to give, the regulated nature of this exchange gives it an obligatory status.

The second issue comes from Mauss' much debated focus on the *hau* – the spirit of things, which lead him to argue that the gift always carries something of the donor. Through gift giving, things and souls get mixed, and individuals and groups treat themselves as things (1974: 71). Gift exchanges thus create, reinforce or disrupt social relations. By expressing social relations through things, it dramatizes the nature of these relations, highlighting their strengths and tensions (Coelho 2006).

The last point I would like to stress refers to the emotional content of the exchange, which Mauss also touched on and recent authors such as Miller (1993) and Coelho (2006) have further developed. Because gift giving mixes things and souls, it involves as well sentiments (Mauss 1974: 70): it expresses the donor's feelings, produces feelings in the receiver and thus generates new emotions in the donor. Miller (1993) shows how insult, offence and humiliation can result from any breach in the rules of gift giving. Inspired by recent anthropological studies of emotion (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, Lutz 1988, Lutz and White 1986), which treat them as culturally formed, Coelho (2006) examines, in her study in Rio de Janeiro, how the expression of affection or gratitude through gift giving reflects the nature of the social relations involved – between family members, friends or employers and maids, whether structured on egalitarian or hierarchical basis.

With these issues in mind, I analyse the practice of gift giving between friends as a form of exchange that reveals notions and values of friendship, particularly the idea that, for the young English middle class people I studied, it is a relation which stems from individual affinities and wishes. As I suggest in this article, giving presents in occasions such as birthdays and

Christmas was seen as problematic because it was felt as obligatory. Instead, they chose to exchange food because it seemed more spontaneous, less guided by a concern with reciprocity, and it involved shared consumption, thus reasserting fundamental values of friendship for them.

This article is based on my fieldwork carried out in London between 1991 and 1992, which focused on the discourse and practice of people connected as friends. For over one year, I studied a group of seventeen people, white English men and women between 25 and 30 years old, connected to each other in various ways: as friends, as work or university colleagues. At the time, they were choosing and establishing their work careers. Some acquired experience in a particular line of work, others tried different jobs, and yet others studied for a post-graduate degree, as a final stage before starting their career. More than half of them held full time jobs, all in the service sector: as managers of voluntary sector organizations or small public sector agencies, as administrative secretaries, and as social workers. There were also artists and musicians who took on various part-time jobs (e.g. teaching English for foreign students, looking after children in nurseries) in order to complement their irregular income. The post-graduate students, all studying for degrees in the social sciences and humanities fields, supported themselves with grants and periodic jobs. I emphasize that they were in a particular period of their professional career – an early phase in which they sought to affirm themselves, either in their jobs or by attempting different lines of work as a form of seeking the right career. Consequently, they were especially concerned with work ethics and its separation from other domains of life, particularly friendship (Rezende 1999).

In the next section, I briefly discuss how friendship was treated in the social sciences, stressing in particular how native Western views about the individualized, socially unstructured character of the relationship affected its analysis. The following three parts are ethnographic: the first summarizes these English people's discourse on friendship and their relation to work, the second discusses their sociability practices at home and the third examines why gift giving was not seen as important. Finally, I argue that through gifts of food certain values associated with an ethics of work became resignified to fit into a friendship ethics.

## Friendship in the social sciences

In Western societies, friendship features in prose and verse, in philosophical treatises and television programs, from the time of Aristotle until the present day. In varied ways, the subject elicits sentimental discourses about the love and loyalty between friends. It has a touch of the ineffable that seems to make it an elusive subject. Particularly typical of Western modernity, it bears strongly on individualities, for friends are only friends if they want to. Given this particular description, friendship has been much treasured in the humanities and in psychology. It has, until very recently, escaped the social sciences.

Indeed, it seems that friendship has stayed out of sociology and anthropology precisely because of a difficulty in separating native Western views from theoretical discourses. The notion that friendship is ultimately about individual choices has hampered its treatment as a social relationship, profoundly constituted by social and cultural factors. Unlike kinship, which as Levi-Strauss (1969) argued was about the domain of rules against the chaos of nature, hence about the prevalence of the group over the individual, friendship was generally seen as too unstructured to merit greater attention.

This representation of friendship was so pervasive that early studies in the 60s and 70s had first and foremost to contend with the issue of structural significance. Theoretical works like those of DuBois and Paine, published in Leyton's (1974) seminal collection on friendship, as well as Wolf's (1966) comparative study analyzed the function of different types of friends or else contrasted their instrumental worth with that of kinship and patron-client relations. Likewise, ethnographic accounts of friendship (cf. Gilmore 1975 on Spain, Reina 1959 on Guatemala and Foster 1976 on Thailand) tended to describe cases of more or less formalized friendship relations, generally between men, emphasizing their value in the provision of aid and support. In all these studies, primacy was given to the study of friendship as a social relationship which contrasted in terms of form and function with other social ties, as well as to the analysis of the social conditions under which friendship arises (Paine 1974). Even DuBois' (1974) focus on the expressive dimensions of friendship avoided its culturally varied aspects so as to produce a universally valid definition of friendship. Indeed, the injunction to study the social structure of friendship came together with attempts to reveal its general features, much in the line of the structuralist approach as proposed by

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) in his study of joking relationships. Thus, DuBois and Paine (1974) treat friendship in general as a voluntaristic, intensely personal, intimate and reciprocal tie, based on affection and social equality.

The need to stress structural worth has subsided and, recently, there has been a gradual shift to the analysis of meanings and dynamics of friendship in various cultural contexts (Allan 1989, Bell and Coleman 1999, Bidart 1997, Cucó 1995 and my own works 1993, 2002). Rather than discussing the relative (un)structuredness of friendship as compared to kinship, it is now approached as a particular form of connecting people, underscored by social concepts and values. Recent studies emphasize that the ways in which different people elaborate on and experience friendship are linked to how they live all social relations, be they of the domestic, public or any other type of domain. Friendship, as kinship and other relations, builds on culturally constructed notions of the person, gender, class, work, private versus public, etc. Furthermore, the idea that friendship is a voluntary relationship has been examined with greater complexity, showing how the freedom to enter and exit relationships acquires different senses and effects in distinct social settings (Papataxiarchis 1991, Rezende 2002).

When studying friendship in Western societies, great care is needed to separate native discourses from theoretical analyzes. In the sociological literature, friendship is allocated as part of the private sphere and often opposed to relations of the public domain. As such, personal relations are considered to be characteristically distinct from the larger set of relationships associated to the public sphere (Silver 1989) in that they stress the very opposite of market and work relations: self revelation, trust and equality, against impersonality, formality and material interest. The distinction also becomes an evaluative one in that personal relations have come to be by far the most cherished set, always to be protected from the negative infiltration of market values (Sennett 1976, Taylor 1975).

Such a characterization of personal relations in modernity also entails a particular view of the self. The modern notion of self has developed out of a sense of inwardness, which includes mental states such as thoughts and feelings, whose outer manifestation become the source of individuation (Taylor 1989). Personal relations, in particular love relationships and friendships, become the venue for the expression of the self, ever more marked by reflexivity. Personal relations, such as friendships, would result above all from re-

flexive projects of the self (Giddens 1991), seemingly unaffected by social considerations or ascribed factors. As Silver argues succinctly, they provide “an ideal, indeed idealized, arena for that highly individualized conception of personal agency central to modern notions of individual freedom” (1989: 275), even if in practice there are clear limits to such autonomy.

Indeed, it is this idea of autonomy – with reference to notions of self, friendship and work – which appears in a pronounced way in the discourse of the English people studied. As I show next, the limits to such individual freedom produced ambivalences in their ideas about friendship, work and affected their material exchanges. Because giving presents in predefined dates seemed obligatory, people preferred to exchange food, which appeared to them as stemming only from their wish to be together.

### **The discourse on friendship**

When I asked these English people what friendship meant to them, I was given basically the same answer: a friend was someone with whom they could be themselves. ‘Being oneself’ with friends signified feeling free to be spontaneous. It implied revealing the emotions they experienced – from excitement to depression – as well as information they considered personal. It also referred to bodily intimacy – touching, talking about bodies and doing bodily functions in the presence of friends. If initially similarity of taste, interests and sense of humor was important, as friendship developed, trust and the possibility of ‘being oneself’ became more valued. ‘Being oneself’ with friends demanded time in order to establish trust in the mutual acceptance of personal disclosure, and was thus a process which had to be synchronized.

Nevertheless, this definition of friendship often became an ideal which was hard to live up to. This unreserved exposure was seen as revealing the ‘true’, autonomous, side of the self, in contrast to the self-contained, less ‘true’ and more ‘polite’ sides. Such spontaneous presentation of the self could collide with other people’s much valued personal space – in terms of the time and emotional involvement they chose to keep to themselves or give to others. Although friends should support each other whenever needed, they were concerned that, in being ‘themselves’, they could ask too much from friends by ‘imposing’ unwanted feelings and information on to them (and vice-versa). Thus, being ‘oneself’ and being polite were held with some ambi-

valence. Being 'oneself' was both desired and feared because its uncontrolled behavior could be seen as lacking in consideration for other people. By the same token, being polite was valued because its controlled behavior respected other people's personal space, although it meant being less 'true' to oneself.

This ambivalence towards personal exposure and politeness came from two sources. Firstly, it related to ambiguous feelings people had towards what they saw as class values. Since the Second World War, the British working class conditions of life improved and the material distinctions which separated them from the middle class became less important. Differentiation became a much subtler issue based on taste, 'socializing skills', and ideas about personal space, for instance. Most of the people studied, who came from middle class families, openly criticized what they considered the overwhelming influence of class background on people's behavior.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in their daily lives, they continuously expressed concern about the preservation of their personal space, and with how various people seemed to disregard it or not have the proper consideration for it. Here politeness became associated with a particular world view, acquiring the tone of a particular class value and a way of distinguishing those with other social origins such as working class people. These were seen positively as being more honest and spontaneous than middle class people, and negatively regarded as less able to manage face-work and the skills of politeness in social events.

Although the individual freedom of choice was an important value, these people were at odds to admit that class background had strong impact in their lives. The concern with personal space, instilled through upbringing,<sup>3</sup> was a fundamental value and notion underlying all behavior, including that between close friends. Friends had to share a similar notion of personal space so that they could establish a synchronized process of mutual personal disclosure. As a consequence, in spite of the variety of people in London, close friends had similar upbringing and class background, often coming from the same home town and dating back to school and university years. Other not so

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2 The often used expression 'class background' refers to a perception of class which stresses one's background - understood both as parent's economic situation and the education they gave their children - instead of one's present situation.

3 As Finch (1989) and my own study (1993, 2002) show, the concern with personal space is also present in family relations, particularly between parents and their grown children. Even when parents are old and need more support from their children, they take care not to 'impose' on the latter.

close friends, whose relationship lived mostly on sociable activities, had more diverse origins, including their ethnic and class background.

Politeness was ambiguously valued for yet another reason. It was seen as a form of self-control also associated with the public sphere in general and with work, in particular, which, at that particular period in people's professional career, produced ambivalent feelings. Thus, work became strongly, and negatively, associated with the formality and hierarchy of workplaces. Everyone had experience, whether previous or actual, of working in such formalized settings. At the workplace, the need to be efficient was seen as requiring self-control in order to perform their specific functions. Furthermore, work environments were generally differentiated, not only in terms of its hierarchical structure but also in terms of employees' social origins, thus calling forth politeness as way of preserving personal space. This expected behavior conflicted with the value placed on 'being oneself' – being spontaneous and thus free to behave as one wished.

The fact that people had to work in order to support themselves was another problematic aspect. However, they considered the financial dimension of work as its less significant aspect. Some people chose to go through short periods of unemployment and rely on the government welfare system, rather than to stay in jobs which they disliked. Furthermore, most people earned relatively low salaries (around 500 pounds per month in 1991). Moreover, despite their dependency on wages (or unemployment benefits), they eagerly stressed that money was not important, so that financial differences between friends were seen as not problematic.

However, work was positively related to the idea of personal fulfillment. Work careers were considered an important aspect of personal growth and people put time into choosing or establishing a satisfactory career. They saw university education as a significant step towards finding out what they wanted to work in and most of them had obtained a graduate degree. At the time, they chose occupations which followed either a vocation, usually in the arts, or personal beliefs, such as contributing to the welfare of people in general and to the underprivileged in special.

The ambivalence about work affected people's relations to colleagues at work. Most of them tried to establish friendship with those they worked with, but very few actually had made friends. Going to the pub after work hours was much cherished because drinking alcohol made people relax their

self-control, and allowed them to show more of themselves outside of their specific roles at work. 'Having a laugh' at the pub also contrasted with the relatively serious and controlled ethos of the workplace. Furthermore, the common practice of buying rounds of drinks for others in the pub meant that individual expenditures might not be evened out in one night, thus creating temporary imbalances which people did not seem to care about<sup>4</sup>. This delayed form of reciprocity was typical of friendship relations and differed markedly from the balanced exchanges associated with work and commercial ethos. Inviting people from work to have dinner at home was also frequent and became another attempt to establish friendship relations at work.

However, despite the sociability practices among co-workers, people often said that they required 'a lot of effort'. The fact that people worked together, performing different roles which could involve either competing or hierarchical relations, made them feel 'wary' and try to 'keep their pose' even outside work, which meant that it was difficult to relax self-control. Furthermore, the social diversity within the workplace could create problems for the personal disclosure that friendship entailed, as I have already discussed.

In this context, close friends became even more significant because their relationship was based in values which contrasted to those associated to work. Maintaining these friendships was thus something which people 'invested' on, making time to see each other in various sociable situations. In particular, the meals they often cooked for each other clearly revealed how such maintenance was seen and cared for.

### **Time and 'effort' in meals**

The home was one of the most preferred sites for the sociability among friends. People cooked meals for friends nearly once a week and at times more. Whether they invited only one friend or prepared a dinner party for three or more people, these occasions of commensality were much valued as an opportunity to be with friends and to reaffirm friendship.

Some people thought that asking friends over for a meal was a sign of their growing intimacy. But the meaning of inviting friends for dinner laid

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4 Pubs are physically structured on a main counter with few tables and stools around it, with no waiters to serve the tables, which influences but does not determine this particular form of buying drinks. As I explore elsewhere (1993), a lack of reciprocity in buying drinks did create problems among friends.

not so much in the idea of opening the house to outsiders. Because most people shared their residences with flatmates, some of whom related to each other as mere acquaintances, the home was not necessarily equated with privacy and intimacy, these often being restricted to the bedroom only. The significance of having friends for dinner revolved more around people's desire to put some of their time and 'effort' into preparing a meal for them. This was especially important since friends were often asked to come for dinner on week nights, when there was not much time to cook since people worked until five or six in the afternoon.

Not everyone was inclined to spend time and 'effort' in cooking a meal for friends. Kevin found that he did not 'invest' in asking friends over for a meal because of his greater commitment to work. His job as the manager of a small organization often demanded that he stayed at work until late at night. Anne had met some people who she would like to know better and thought that inviting them for dinner would be an opportunity for developing their friendship. But she felt that she would need to put some 'effort' into it and that she often lacked the time for it. With close friends, however, time was not an issue and she often invited them for a meal. Thus, when friends were entertained at home, it was one way of showing how much time and 'effort' people devoted to friendship.

Dinner events were often set at least one week or so before hand. Although time was needed to buy the necessary foodstuff and prepare them, the pre-arranged character of these meals was not particular to them but was a feature common to most sociability occasions (e.g. going to the cinema or to the pub) among friends. Some people thought that pre-arranging meetings was linked to what would be a more general middle class tendency: underplaying spontaneity in favour of controlled behaviour. I also heard that living in London required settling meetings in advance, for they thought distances were great and preferred not to risk dropping in on their friends without knowing if they were at home.

If flatmates were preparing a meal together, they shared all the tasks, from cooking to washing up the dishes after guests were gone. When dinner was offered by a couple, women tended to cook while men helped to clear the table and do the washing up, although at times they reversed the roles or even cooked together. On the whole, there was the feeling that all the work should be done by the hosts and that guests should not do anything, becau-

se they were there to enjoy themselves. Guests generally took something to drink (e.g. a bottle of wine), whether they were asked to or not, but more than anything else they were told to 'bring themselves'. However, helping the hosts with the work varied with the greater or lesser closeness between guests and hosts, as well as with the formality or informality of the occasion. When guests were close friends, they could help with any cooking that still needed to be done, with setting the table and clearing it afterwards, as well as with washing up. On more formal occasions, guests tended not to involve themselves with any of these tasks.

The meals themselves varied in terms of their elaborateness. There were times when dinners opened with starters as a first course, followed by a main dish with accompaniments and being closed with dessert and coffee or tea. At other occasions, just the main course was served, with coffee or tea in the end. People liked to prepare stir-fries -- a variation of the popular Chinese dish, which retained the technique but not necessarily its basic ingredients (soy sauce, sherry and ginger), pasta with sauce (which was frequently ready-made) and salads, which, together with cold smoked fish, was often a starter as well. When served, dessert was usually ready made, such as ice cream or frozen pies, or consisted of fruit or chocolate.

This choice of dishes reflected a taste for international cuisine akin to their preference for foreign decoration objects, clothes and adornments. This pattern of consumption retained some aspects of the foreign culinary tradition while recreating the dish in terms of people's own individual taste. Meat dishes, on the other hand, were not very popular. People did not normally buy it for moral reasons, although they sometimes ate it in other people's homes.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, these dishes seemed to be particularly favoured because they were seen as easy and requiring little preparation time. Since people frequently invited friends for dinner on week nights, they came home from work not more than two hours before guests were due to arrive. But there were some who, despite their busy routine, liked to take greater trouble in preparing meals. Those who had a flexible work schedule could at times go home earlier in order to cook more intricate and time-consuming dishes. Or the

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5 Writing about England, Mennel (1985) associates meat restrictions with middle and upper classes tastes, while the liking for foreign cuisine has become more of a widespread preference since after the Second World War, thus diminishing the contrasts between the tastes of different social classes. Douglas and Nicod (1974), though, describe working class eating habits as displaying less variety.

investment could go into trying new recipes, which required more attention and care because of their novelty.

Making such elaborate meals could be a way of displaying culinary skills to friends, Allan (1989) argues. When friends are invited home, he says, not only is the home presented in its most public fashion -- i.e. clean and tidy - - but meals can also be intended to impress guests with the host's or hostess' culinary gifts (1989: 141). But among the people I studied, the home tended not to be ordered for public presentation nor did they express the intention to make a statement of how well they cooked through the meals they offered. Which is not to say that they did not appreciate receiving compliments from their guests. It is only that the emphasis was not placed on such a display.

Sally recounted a particular dinner party in which she felt excessively praised for her food. Her mother was a professional cook and, through her teaching, Sally acquired the skills and taste for cooking. Friends of hers had remarked to me how creative and demanding she was as a cook. Thus, regarding one of the dinners she was preparing for a group of friends, she discussed with her mother what she planned to make and spent most of a Sunday cooking the meal. When her friends went over on Monday night, they issued endless compliments as she brought from the kitchen the dishes she had prepared. She was very flattered, she told me, but wished that they would stop praising the food. She could not explain why she felt like this. It was not that she doubted how genuine these comments were but only that they were in excess.

Sally's purpose had not been to give her friends a favourable image of herself as a cook but to please them with the food she had prepared for them. There is a fine line between these two views but the stress fell on the latter, not just for Sally but for others as well. Others were even more emphatic by saying that they were not concerned with what people thought about their cooking. Rather, what mattered was the quality of the whole encounter, of the sociability among friends.

The time and 'effort' which went into cooking for friends showed, therefore, the investment made on an occasion in which sociability was paramount. Time and 'effort' figured in these people's lives as resources which were especially valued in the world of work. At home, they could be manipulated according to people's wishes as elements of their personal space, of their privacy. To dedicate their time and 'effort' in preparing a meal for friends symbolized the importance of friendship for themselves. These in-

redients seemed to become as significant as the food itself, so that inviting friends over for a meal turned into an opportunity for expressing how much people devoted to sociability and friendship.

## **Food, not gifts**

Visser comments that “in middle-class circles few gifts are as generous or as complimentary these days as the taking, on one’s friends behalf, of time and culinary trouble” (1986: 18). Indeed, for the people I studied, cooking meals for friends became the most significant material exchange, for in other occasions, such as Birthdays and Christmas, they rarely gave each other presents. Some people explained that they did not have money to buy gifts. Others criticized the excessive profit orientation that now characterized Christmas and thought that friends should not be involved in such a commercialized gift-giving. Yet others simply said that presenting friends with gifts was not something done.

Celia, who was an actress and lived on an irregular income, did not generally buy presents for her friends. She might if she saw them on their birthdays, but not otherwise. She emphasized that if she had more money, she would get her friends presents whenever she saw things they would like to have. However, she had begun exchanging Christmas gifts with her close friends two years before I met her. Previously she used to send her friends Christmas cards only, because she never had much money to buy presents. But then her two closest female friends gave her Christmas gifts and she felt ‘a bit bad’, since she had not bought anything for them. Celia did not, however, think of giving them presents straight away, for it would seem that she was only doing this because she was obliged to reciprocate. Instead, she bought them Christmas gifts in the following year (1991). When I saw her just after Christmas, she had not yet given her friends their presents, but she felt that this time they would not give her anything, and it did not bother her if this really happened. Later in this same year, she and her flatmates decided to celebrate Christmas and prepared a Christmas meal for themselves. As part of the celebration, they gave each other gifts.

Thus, Celia stressed that not having money was the main reason why she did not give presents to her friends more often. But there was also the idea that gift-giving should be motivated by the personal and spontaneous desire

of giving a friend a present, that is, it should not be obligatory. With respect to Celia's flatmates, the gifts given were part of the Christmas celebration *they decided* to have among themselves. Buying Christmas presents for the family was not questioned, however, for it was for most people a family occasion. Nearly everybody I met spent Christmas at their parents' home and they exchanged gifts with siblings and parents as part of 'tradition'.

There are two issues which seemed to pose problems for this type of gift-giving. The first deals with reciprocity. The second relates to the element of money. I suggest that people felt confused between having a more 'generalized' and a more 'balanced' form of reciprocating gifts among friends. Sahlins (1972) explains that 'generalized reciprocity' entails an altruistic character for, while assistance is given, returns are not stipulated by time, quantity or quality; "the expectation of reciprocity is indefinite" (1972: 194). Returns are made "when necessary to the donor and/or possible for the recipient" (1972: 194), and do not follow predefined dates. Obligation to reciprocate is implicit and any reckoning of debts is not overtly done, since the material aspect of the transaction is outweighed and subjugated by its social character. By contrast, 'balanced reciprocity' refers to exchange which is direct and without delay. Equivalence of quantity and quality is important in the transaction, imparting to the exchange a 'more economic' and 'less personal' character.

'Generalized reciprocity', Sahlins argues, is usually found where there is little social distance (e.g. close kinship). This is the notion of reciprocity which prevailed in the ideas and practice of friendship I am discussing here. Support among friends was reciprocal and help was given when one or the other was in need, without any explicit account of what each had done for the other. The practice of buying drinks at the pub, mentioned earlier, also followed a 'generalized' form of reciprocity. Likewise, friends were invited to dinner without any overt reckoning of whose turn it was to ask the other to come for dinner. Furthermore, not all friends knew how to cook nor lived in a place large enough to receive guests so that they were not expected to invite others for a meal. In general, reciprocity was an implicit concern, for the friendship tie, and not calculations of what each had done for the other, should predominate.

But, when it came to giving presents, reciprocity seemed to become an overt issue. Although Celia did not reciprocate at once the first Christmas gifts she received, she felt awkward for not having bought anything for her

friends. Moreover, in the next year, she took the initiative of getting presents for her friends, not knowing and reportedly not minding whether they had done the same. Perhaps she was not concerned with receiving anything because she was reciprocating those she had got in the previous year.

Christmas appeared as an occasion in which 'balanced', rather than 'generalized', reciprocity would be expected. Such form of reciprocity was problematic because of the explicit concern with a gift exchange which, for many people, seemed very 'commercial'. Furthermore, the fact that it was expected that people gave gifts on such date seemed to remove the spontaneous element of gift-giving. It was as if its motive ceased to be based on the desire to give to become one arising out of an obligation to give. Hence Celia's decision not to reciprocate immediately the first Christmas gifts she received.<sup>6</sup> The explicit concern with reciprocity contrasted with ideas about friendship, which were based on principles of individual volition and not on any type of normative tenet. Moreover, it raised exchange to a position which could overshadow the worth of the relationship, as Sahlins has remarked. Material considerations could become more important than friendship itself.

Birthdays and individual celebrations did not call forth such direct gift exchange. This practice contrasts with Cheal's (1988) and Coelho's (2006) studies of gift-giving among middle class people in Winnipeg, Canada, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, respectively. In both, friends exchanged presents in various occasions. For them, these gifts expressed the love, interest and concern they felt for one another, keeping alive the memory of the donor. Because giving gifts acquired a strong personal character, money should not be presented as a gift because it is impersonal and 'cold'. What was significant in buying gifts was the 'effort' and 'thought' put into choosing a suitable present. Since money required less thought or time, Cheal argued, it could not symbolize a caring relationship (1988: 131).

Indeed, money was also problematic for the English people studied, but in a different way. Celia, for instance, explained that she rarely bought presents for friends because she did not have much money, a reason given by other people as well. There were a few for whom money was not a problem

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6 Coelho (2006) also shows how the women she interviewed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, recovered an element of spontaneity in the experiencing of gift-giving by refusing to give on expected dates such as Christmas and birthdays. Likewise, the relation between friends has become a subject that deserves specific focus, rather than its constant comparison with kinship relations as prevailed in earlier studies.

and, even for them, gift-giving was extremely unusual. Celia might not have enough money to buy the presents *she* would like to give to her friends. But she herself stressed that, although she did not generally present her friends with gifts, she did ‘exchange’ a lot of food and drink with them. She was not ‘stingy’ at all about it, she said, and she shared with friends all the food and drink she had at home. Reciprocity here was not usually a concern. She described her attitude first as one of ‘generosity’ but then corrected it as one of ‘sharing’. This is an important distinction because ‘sharing’ means the common/collective use of something by a group of people, such as in a meal shared by all those present. The notion of ‘generosity’, instead, places the emphasis on a person’s free, readily disposition to give, creating a difference between giver and recipient, and does not necessarily imply the common use of the thing given.

It seemed, therefore, that spending money on food and drink consumption with friends was easier than purchasing presents for them. Considering the frequency with which people went out for drinks or entertained friends at home, the costs involved in each case might not be so much different. Guests coming to a dinner were normally expected to take something to drink – generally a bottle of wine. For those preparing the meal, the expenses could amount to much more, depending on the number of people invited and the ingredients used. In other words, with the frequency with which people invited friends over for a meal and the average expenditure involved in these events, there was enough money for the occasional exchange of presents, such as in Christmas and Birthdays.

But the investment of money in meals was almost not recognized as such when people said they could not afford to buy gifts for friends all the while exchanging a lot of food and drink with them. The value placed on money changed so that, from being the end result of much time and ‘effort’ put into work, it became only one of the means, and the least emphasized one, to create sociability.

What seemed to be at stake was not so much the money involved but the different uses of presents and meals. In both cases, time and ‘effort’ were combined with money in order to personalize the acts of buying a present and preparing dinner for a friend. The difference between them lay in

the individual use of the gift and in the commensal aspect of the meal.<sup>7</sup> To refer again to Cheal's (1988) study, gifts showed people's concern and love for others in the form of an object that materialized the memory of a relationship. It was given to friends so that 'they remember me and my affection for them', as one of Cheal's interviewees says. Similarly, meals expressed care and affection as well, but were vested with the character of sociability. They were experienced together as friendship in action. This is why Celia preferred to characterize dinners as an act of sharing rather than as one of generosity.

If there was a strong value placed upon sharing, it was important then that guests take alcoholic drinks. Hosts often provided some alcohol themselves so that what guests brought could be seen as additional. The significance of taking alcoholic drinks went beyond the mere aspect of consumption. It became guests' contribution to commensality and a form of retribution for the food. Even if on a much smaller scale, they shared with hosts the time, 'effort' and money in preparing a meal which normally included the presence of alcoholic drinks. Thus, what served to reaffirm friendship through time was not so much the gifts of mementoes of one person or another. Rather, it was through gifts of food and drink *which were shared* by both giver and recipient in the context of sociability that the tie of friendship was continually renewed and strengthened.

## **Home and the transformation of work values**

The kinds of food and drink consumed by a group of people may be examined in terms of their value as signs of a certain status, as markers of a particular taste in Bourdieu's view (1984). Alternatively, the consumption of food and drink may be discussed as a set of meanings which are part of an information system, hence communicating messages as Douglas and Isherwood propose (1978). For instance, they argue that "a household's expenditures on other people give an idea of whether it is isolated or well involved" (1978: 11). In this article, I have analysed dinner parties in terms of the theoretical discussion on gift exchange and its significance to friendship.

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7 The negative character attributed to money appears as well in many different societies. For example, Carsten (1989) shows how in a Malay fishing village money loses its potentially divisive and individualizing effects by being spent on household food consumption, thus endowing money with the values of kinship morality.

Dinner parties became important forms of sociability which took place at the home. They contrasted with eating at restaurants and drinking at pubs because of the meaning of *home* as contrasting with *work* and with the public domain in general. Dinner parties were special because they required that people put time and ‘effort’ to make something for friends. Elements such as time and ‘effort’, which were valuable resources in the sphere of work, acquired different meanings once they were transposed into the sociable activities among friends. From being “assets” related to the goal of making money at work, even if just enough to earn one’s livelihood, at home they became ‘invested’ into welcoming and pleasing friends as well as into having a ‘good time’ with them. Through meals, friendship was shown to be important exactly because it received the ‘investment’ of people’s time and ‘effort’. For people who did not have children to take care of, time and ‘effort’ in the home tended to be spent according to their wishes. ‘Being bothered’ and ‘taking the effort’ to prepare a meal for friends was a way of expressing how much people valued friendship.

When employed in the entertainment of friends, money also seemed to lose the market features which it normally had in the domain of work. It was no longer impersonal because it was vested with personal time and ‘effort’ in order to produce a meal. It was almost not recognized as money when people said they could not afford to buy gifts for friends all the while exchanging a lot of food and drink with them. From something which was usually the end result of much time and ‘effort’ (i.e. making money as one of the aims of work), money became only one of the means, and the least important one, to create sociability.

Thus, the predominant exchange of gifts of food, rather than of presents, reasserted relationships and expressed various meanings related to these people’s notions of friendship. First, it gave new sense to elements associated to work ethics – time, effort and money – by transforming them into ingredients of meals consumed with friends.<sup>8</sup> Second, by giving each other food and drinks, friends emphasized the act of shared consumption, of commensality, rather than the individual use of a present received. Third, this was an exchange that followed rules of ‘generalized’ reciprocity, which disguised

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8 In a similar vein, Papataxiarchis’ (1991) study of male friendships in Greece shows how the commensality experienced at the coffee shops, with a particular way of dealing with reciprocity, reaffirm masculinities constructed in contrast with to the domestic domain linked to women and to work.

the element of obligation by delaying the necessary retribution, unlike the Christmas gifts they exchanged with their families. As such, it fitted well in to a view of friendship which placed great value on the spontaneity involved in 'being oneself' with friends, highlighting as well the much valued individual autonomy.

Such exchange of food followed rules, as other gift giving practices. Reciprocity was expected not so much in terms of reciprocating meals with meals, but of food with drinks. It was less important to give food in return – as I pointed out, not everyone cooked or had the condition to cook. By taking drinks when invited over for dinner, guests also actively contributed to the emphasis on commensality. Because sharing food and drink was the purpose of these sociable venues, excessive praise for the cook seemed displaced.

In this sense, when reciprocity was lacking or the food received more attention than the reunion of friends, feelings of awkwardness were expressed. Because these people did not think the food, drink or present were important in themselves, but rather stressed the significance of being with friends, when they were given, no one reported feelings of insult or offence, such as discussed by Miller (1993) and Coelho (2006), in situations when there is an imbalance between the expected and the received gift. Rather, feeling 'bad' or 'awkward' arose in situations in which people were given too much – too much praise for one's cooking or gifts that were not expected. It made them feel indebted and obliged to do something in return, feelings which contrasted with the value placed on autonomy and spontaneity.

Thus, for the English people studied, gifts of food were important for friendship not just because they stressed the significance of friends over work values by re-elaborating the elements of time and money. They also seemed to follow rules that were much more flexible and implicit than those of gift-giving, becoming more apt to express the volitional character of friendships. Gift-giving stayed mostly within the family – those relations that left less room for individual autonomy. Friends should accommodate the involvement created by the tie with the personal need to maintain one's freedom, hence the choice for a form of exchange which resolved this tension, temporarily.

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