

Liberty, Equality, or Fraternity between the Generations?

Social Thought and Family Ties

Cécile VAN DE VELDE

Liberty, equality, or fraternity between the generations — how should we think about “fair” transfers from one generation to the next? In a meticulous and bold essay, André Masson demonstrates that the French republican motto can be used as a key to the different theories that attempt to explain the ties between generations. He views his position as “upstream” of current debates about the emergence of and need for a reformulation of our public policies concerning intergenerational ties.

Reviewed: André Masson, *Des Liens et des transferts entre générations*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2009, 464 pp.

Instead of describing practices of reciprocal service, André Masson explores the modes of contemporary thinking about intergenerational ties and invites the reader to examine the way governments in contemporary societies perceive solidarity in the private sphere. Whether this sort of solidarity is denied, encouraged, or denounced, its place and legitimacy in everyone's lives is the source of deep structural rifts in European public policy. The trilogy Masson proposes sheds light on liberal, social-democratic and conservative theories and on the way each of these considers the place of the individual within the parent-child bond and more generally in the succession of both existing and future generations. His book should therefore be read as both an examination of current thinking about family ties, in the more general context of society as a whole, and of the interaction of state and family in the regulation of relations between the generations. Because he analyses both phenomena, Masson's book is not only a major scientific landmark in the attempt to conceptualize solidarity between the generations, but it also helps us understand the predominant social theories in Europe today from a socio-economic point of view.

The Foundations of Intergenerational Ties

How should reciprocal support — parents who provide financial aid for their children or, on the contrary, children who help dependent parents — be understood? André Masson's interdisciplinary approach to the question is one of the innovative aspects of his book. The author bases his analysis on sociological, anthropological and philosophical research in an attempt to conceptualize intergenerational exchanges in economic terms. Initially, he attempts to test the main economic models that account for intergenerational ties in a precise theoretical demonstration open to other disciplines.

Thus, by using the work of anthropologists on direct and indirect reciprocity at work in gift-giving, the author sheds light on the practical limits of “standard” economic models that consider family transfers in terms either of exchanges in which strict equivalence is the norm, or of spontaneous altruism. He draws our attention, in particular, to the paradoxes of the Becker model (invented by a free market economist who was nevertheless in favour of altruistic and mutually advantageous cooperation between the generations), which he then builds on to analyse the different generations in a family from an economic point of view, in terms of interconnected solidarity. He constructs a “multi-faceted” model that takes indirect reciprocity into account.

The different generations in a family create a triangle of potential exchanges between generations that are regulated first and foremost by indirect mechanisms of reciprocity — the repetition of the same type of transfer all along the generational chain. Indirect reciprocity may be either downward-moving, in that each generation gives to the next what it has received from the former, or upward-moving, in that each generation gives its parents what it receives from its children. Unlike standard economic theories of exchange between generations, this model holds that the family does *not* observe the principle of exclusive and direct equivalence usually at work in gift-giving (I give my parents exactly what I receive from them and they give me exactly what I give them). In an attempt to create a unified model for the patterns of intergenerational transfers in French families, André Masson states that there is a tendency towards downward-moving reciprocity — giving to one's children what one has received from one's parents. This enables him to explain the prevalence of downward-moving transfers in favour of new generations.

The “Three Worlds” of Intergenerational Ties

André Masson’s book does not merely formulate an economic theory of exchange and transfer between the generations. It attempts, on the contrary, to place the different forms of reciprocity that exist in the intergenerational family within a more general framework presenting the reader with the various theories that concern the place of the individual in relation to both family and society. For a sociologist, one of the most original contributions of Masson’s work stems from the manner in which he analyses the social and economic theories of the relations between generations. He makes use of Gøsta Esping-Anderson’s well-known typology, which he does not fundamentally change but expands instead in order to analyse the family, which the original model neglects. André Masson bases his work on the initial three “worlds” of capitalism, each defined by a pillar that is considered essential for the regulation of social dependence (either the state, the market, or the family) and then goes on to analyse social democratic, liberal and conservative theories of the ties and fair transfers between the generations.

The new typology shows how crucial is the perception of the legitimacy of “family returns” — the supposedly beneficial effects of downward-moving transfers from grandparents or parents to their children — as an element of differentiation that has until recently been underestimated when social policies are compared. This wider conceptual scope contributes to our keener understanding of these theories in that relations between state and family at various periods in the life cycle — higher education and retirement in particular — are examined, as well as their possible effects on the destinies both of individuals and of generations.

Citizenship, equity and solidarity have become the principles of justice between the generations and are the hallmarks of liberal, social-democratic and conservative theories concerning the place of the individual in the parent-child relationship and the legitimacy of family solidarity. André Masson uses the French republican motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” to articulate three ways of seeing family ties.

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

According to André Masson, there are three theories of intergenerational ties. The first, liberal theory — or the theory of the “free agent” — is based, exclusively, on confidence in the market as a regulator of the many ways in which we are dependent in the course of our lives. It advocates widened individual responsibility — especially where the authority of parents over children is concerned. The state’s attitude to family solidarity is one of ambiguous neutrality: it refuses to interfere in what is supposedly the private sphere, yet attempts to limit downward “family returns”; transmission of patrimony in particular is considered a transfer of capital that ought to be lured away from the family towards the social sphere (towards foundations, investment savings, etc.). For the sake of equity, state transfers should be limited to the young, but only residually so as to avoid promoting dependence.

Social-democratic theory — or the theory of “equal citizenship” — gives preeminence to the state in the regulation of dependence in the course of the life-cycle, and advocates the defence of universal citizenship from an early age, including for unborn generations. Characteristically, social-democratic theory is generally wary of solidarity between generations, which it considers inefficient, unfair, and arbitrary. The state ought therefore to take the place of families by organizing financial transfers and services, with the objective of limiting poverty at every stage in life, but mainly among the young. The state is particularly wary of downward family returns, which it considers both perverse and unfair.

Finally, conservative theory — or the theory of “multi-faceted solidarity” — is characterized on the contrary by its confidence in family cooperation. It favours parental altruism as well as the different interdependent types of solidarity at various levels (family, but also professional, local and national solidarity). Intergenerational solidarity is considered more efficient than the state, whose task it is to protect mutual cooperation of this sort and to make sure that individuals find a place in the “chain” of generations. “Family returns” are considered optimal and virtuous; state and family are thought to have complementary — and thus efficient — roles: relatively widespread financial aid should be given to family elders and parents so that it will move downwards through the generations within the family, thus avoiding exclusion through disaffiliation.

Public Policy and Generations

The popularity of the term “solidarity” in France and in Europe, as well as the vehemence of theoretical debates about redistribution between the generations, is not easily understood in the English-speaking world. In fact, they are the result of an approach that places the individual in a “generational chain”. For Liberals, on the other hand, family solidarity is a blind spot. Solidarity is thought to belong to the private sphere exclusively. The liberal individual, and not the state, is responsible for the protection of the family. That’s how the relative implicit familialisation operating in liberal societies can be understood. Masson’s comparisons also underscore the distinctive propensity of social-democratic theory to arbitrate between different age groups — particularly during periods of economic slump — preferring direct expenditure on the young to direct expenditure on the aged, in order to avoid the downward family transfers they consider unfair and arbitrary.

Although it does shed light on the founding principles of public policy concerning the family, the object of André Masson’s book is not to analyse the policies themselves. Nevertheless, he draws constant parallels between theory and its realization in public policy and practice. This dialogue between the author and the comparative sociology of family ties might well become the basis of further study of the reception of public policy — study that would take norms, practices and cultures into account and would enable the development of public policies. Indeed, in practice, economists all too often forget the social and cultural mediation so necessary to good relations between family and state.

Masson briefly attempts to extend his analysis of parent-child ties to marital ties and to consider the way each of these is articulated by the three different branches of social theory. If he were to take this further, an analysis of the gendered dynamics at work in family exchanges and transfers could be included. This would shed light on the coherence of the principles of equity between generations and genders. The existence of “familialist” thought might, in this way, be tested: the soundness of André Masson’s division between liberal, social-democratic, and conservative theories — let us note that, as a result of feminist critiques, Esping-Anderson added a fourth familialist model — is convincing as far as intergenerational ties are concerned. This division deserves further study and needs to be tested, particularly where vertical inscription (ties between the generations) and horizontal inscription (ties within the couple) intersect, in order to understand the legal and political difficulties involved.

In the final analysis, what Masson's book does is to help us understand what is at stake today in the elaboration of public policy concerning generations. It offers an invaluable key to the various concepts — both scientific and political — of justice between the generations and of the role of the state. As a politically committed economist, Masson is inspired by the defence of the multi-faceted solidarity that has influenced the way we all think. He favours more tightly woven modes of cooperation and solidarity, and a multi-generational family supported by the state. He offers readers a deeper understanding of possible political choices when faced with the question of transfers between generations, in particular when confronted with the problems of aging and with the increasing difficulty of entering the work force in France and in Europe. The book is both erudite and engaged. It helps us understand the founding principles, the contradictory arguments, and the risks involved.

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