

This Week's Citation Classic

Gouldner A W. The norm of reciprocity: a preliminary statement. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 25:161-78, 1960. [Washington University, St. Louis, MO]

The manner in which the concept of reciprocity is implicated in functional theory is explored, enabling a reanalysis of the concepts of 'survival' and 'exploitation.' The need to distinguish between the concepts of complementarity and reciprocity is stressed. Distinctions are also drawn between 1) reciprocity as a pattern of mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, 2) the existential or folk belief in reciprocity, and 3) the generalized moral norm of reciprocity. Reciprocity as a moral norm is analyzed; it is hypothesized that it is one of the universal 'principal components' of moral codes. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*™ (SSCI™) indicate that this paper has been cited over 290 times since 1960.]

Alvin W. Gouldner
Department of Sociology
Washington University
St. Louis, MO 63130

October 10, 1979

"Appearing historically near the end of the 'silent generation' of college and university students, 'The norm of reciprocity' was an early articulation of growing disenchantment in the sociological ranks with the dominance of functionalist theory. The paper was completed shortly after my arrival at Washington University from the University of Illinois in the Fall of 1959. Its rapid completion and the timing of its submission for publication were, as I recall, motivated by my desire to inform colleagues of my new academic residence and interests. At that time I had recently finished up work in the area of industrial and organizational sociology and had begun to concern myself more and more with general sociological

theory. Increasingly central in my thinking were what I perceived to be a number of outstanding functionalist omissions. 'The norm of reciprocity', in particular, was directed toward the failure of functionalism to effectively deal with problems of power and unequal exchange or exploitation

"The article can best be understood—both historically and intellectually—alongside its sister pieces, 'Reciprocity and autonomy in functional theory'¹ and 'The importance of something for nothing' (completed in final form and only published much later in my *For Sociology*)² Initially these papers arose out of, and served as the theoretical warrant for, a number of empirical studies undertaken at the University of Illinois in the middle and late 1950s. That work, which by and large remains dormant, included theses by Richard A. Peterson and Kenneth Downey, who were, among others at that time, engaged in factor analyses of the basic components of moral systems. The exposure to that rich empirical context and the enormous body of data was integral to my growing critique of the work of Talcott Parsons³ and of the functionalist paradigm articulated by my former teacher Robert K. Merton.⁴

"In effect 'The norm of reciprocity' and its companion work presage the neo-Marxist critique of functionalism which I later developed more fully in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*.⁵ In retrospect it seems clear that this earlier work arose both from a specific empirical environment and my own thinking through of problems beginning to fester in the sociological milieu. Given that it was published during a period marking the initial stage of considerable intellectual transition, frequent citation of this paper is in part a measure of its anticipation of a changing mood and of its role as an analytical document in that change."

1. Gouldner A W. Reciprocity and autonomy in functional theory. (Gross L Z. ed.) *Symposium on sociological theory*. Evanston. IL: Row. Peterson. 1959. p. 241-70.
2., The importance of something for nothing. *For sociology*. London: Allen Lane. 1973. p. 260-99.
3. Parsons T. *The social system*. Glencoe. IL: Free Press. 1951. 575 p.
4. Merton R K. *Social theory and social structure: toward the codification of theory and research*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949. 423 p.
5. Gouldner A W. *The coming crisis of western sociology*. New York: Basic Books. 1970. 528 p.