Introduction

William Hogarth's morality series 'Industry and Idleness' (1747; plate 6) depicts a scene at an urban wedding and is entitled 'The industrious 'prentice out of his time and married to his master's daughter'. At the centre, a band of musicians is playing drums, bass and rough instruments outside the house. On the right-hand side, the apprentice ('Goodchild') is leaning out of the window and offering one of the musicians a coin, while a servant at the doorstep is dispensing food from a plate onto the apron of a woman who is kneeling before him. On the left-hand side, amidst the crowd of musicians, a crippled beggar is handing out a broadside ballad ('A new song'). Behind the musicians there are images of street houses and the monument that commemorates the Great Fire of London.[1]

Hogarth's engraving aptly invokes some of the themes and preoccupations of this study. It teems with the kind of gestures of giving that are unlikely to surface in written records – the apprentice who offers a coin, the servant handing out food at the door and the beggar who presents a song. These gestures of offering and largesse also involve an exchange: the apprentice is rewarding the drummers for their merrymaking, while his own new status as the head of a household is affirmed by the charitable act. The beggar does not simply stretch out an empty palm but rather offers a song in anticipation of alms in return. There is also a form of rapport and exchange between the servant and the woman – the servant offers food and the woman, on her knees, responds in a gesture of submission and gratitude. The entire scene takes place neither in the countryside nor at the gates of a large aristocratic house, but rather outside the more modest artisanal households of the metropolis. It is a thoroughly urban setting bursting with merrymaking and clamour,

[1] David Bindman, *Hogarth* (London, 1981), 167–78. For rough music as a feature of eighteenth-century weddings, see E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1991), 469–70; Tim Hitchcock, 'Begging on the streets of eighteenth-century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 487–8.

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where face-to-face gestures of giving unmediated by a local magistrate, church official or other civic institution were presumed to have been long gone.

An enduring aspect of historical studies of the shift from medieval to modern society has been the presumption of a decline over time in informal support systems and a rise in more calculating, selfish norms. Varied processes were associated with this decline – the Renaissance and the formation of a modern 'individualist' self; the Reformation and novel notions of salvation and sin; the expansion of markets, towns and the growing powers of the state. With regard to England, a unique role was attributed to the poor laws, the distinctive and pioneering Elizabethan legislation (1601) that established a public relief system based on the compulsory rates. This system, so it has been conjectured, gradually replaced the range of support and voluntary giving on the part of individuals, communities and the church, resulting in the gradual shift from private and religious giving to a public relief system based on the compulsory taxes under the supervision and control of an expanding and increasingly centralized state.[2]

Historical scholarship during the past decades has already indicated that varied elements of this large narrative have been misconceived.[3] Even studies of the emerging public relief system, which has remained central to our understanding of poverty and attitudes to the poor, now recognize the continued value of various forms of charitable giving and informal support.[4] Nevertheless, a thorough study and appreciation of

[2] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920; New York, 1958); Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (London, 1971), 259–97, 483–7; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971), 660–79; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1977), 651–6. For an examination of this literature in the context of a long-established paradigm of societal change going back to the nineteenth century, see Richard M. Smith, ' "Modernization" and the corporate medieval village community in England: some sceptical reflections', in A.R.H. Baker and Derek Gregory (eds.), *Explorations in Historical Geography* (Cambridge, 1984), 140–79.

[3] Major studies include John Walter, 'The social economy of dearth in early modern England', in John Walter and Roger Schofield (eds.), *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1989), 75–128; Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991), 149–98; Martin Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past* (London, 1996). See also Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'The diversity of social capital in English communities 1300–1640 (with a glance at modern Nigeria)', in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2001), 121–52; Keith Wrightson, 'Mutualities and obligations: changing social relationships in early modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 139 (Oxford, 2006), 157–94.

[4] Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Early Modern England* (London, 1988), 169–73; Marjorie K. McIntosh, 'Networks of care in Elizabethan English towns: the example of Hudleigh, Suffolk', in Peregrin Horden and Richard Smith (eds.), *The Locus of Care: Families,*

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informal support in its varied manifestations are still encumbered by a set of conceptual and methodological approaches that have shaped the literature on these themes over the years. Much of the literature is still based upon persisting assumptions inherited from powerful traditions of thinking, both whiggish-neo-liberal and Marxist, which underpinned our understanding of the shift to modern society and indeed our perception of modernity itself. While encapsulating opposing views of historical processes, these traditions nevertheless shared some basic notions about social action and interaction in modern life. Modern society in these accounts witnessed the emergence of 'atomized' individuals acting in pursuit of material gain and self-interest, purportedly driven or conditioned by capitalist markets, class configurations and an emerging state system. According to both accounts, informal and face-to-face interactions retreated into the private domain (the nuclear family), so that interpersonal relations became peripheral to major processes of change, be they political, social or economic.[5] A persistent tendency towards the marginalization of personal interactions has pervaded the literature on social and economic change; hence the sense of diminishing value of voluntary and personal forms of giving under the impact – admittedly sometimes belated – of the Reformation, the poor laws and expanding markets. This is the case even in accounts that recognize the enduring force of some of these private and communal forms of giving and aid, as these modes of giving are then perceived as remnants of the past rather than as integral to the shift to modern society itself.[6]

There are also methodological obstacles to the study of informal forms of aid, first and foremost due to the nature of the evidence itself. These systems of offering remain intangible and their record is fragmented or sparse, so that systematic assessment remains problematic

Communities, Institutions, and the Provision of Welfare since Antiquity (London, 1998), 71–89; Joanna Innes, 'The "mixed economy of welfare" in early modern England: assessments of the options from Hale to Malthus (c.1683–1803)', in Daunton (ed.), *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare*, 139–80; Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-politics of Poor Relief in Rural England c. 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), chs. 1–2.

[5] Craig Muldrew, 'Interpreting the market: the ethics of credit and community relations in early modern England', *Social History*, 18 (1993), 163–83, esp. 163–9; Mark Granovetter, 'Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91 (1985), 481–510, esp. 483–7. Thanks to Tamar Parush for referring me to Granovetter's article.

[6] David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), 53; Walter, 'The social economy', 75–128; Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990); Judith M. Bennett, 'Conviviality and charity in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), 18–41; Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1994), 139–42.

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and fraught with difficulties. While some practices, notably charitable bequests, are amenable to measurement, many others that were based on unspoken assumptions and transactions, or on hidden networks and casual favours were far less likely to be documented. Where evidence is available and employed, statistically or otherwise, the scholarship leans towards compartmentalization and research is dominated by segregation between charity and philanthropy on the one hand, and other types of support systems on the other. The latter are also often divided into subfields of family and household, kinship, neighbourhoods or associations, each offering different perspectives and findings. While this division of labour is justifiable given the difficulties entailed in investigating the diverse systems and considering their distinctive figurations, it nonetheless remains the case that the historical understanding is fragmented and does not allow full appreciation of the dimensions of informal support, of transformations across domains and modes of operation, as well as of the role of informal support in society and culture at large, or of more precise processes of change over time.

This book addresses these issues and offers an assessment of the dimensions, chronology and dynamics that sustained informal support over the course of the period. It examines a wide spectrum of support systems within families and households, in neighbourhoods and amidst broader networks, in associations or practices of charitable giving to the poor. It explores forms of support that were based not only on personal contacts in durable, face-to-face interactions, but also in more indirect, looser and fleeting encounters, or those managed via intermediaries and the community or the public at large. The book examines practices that have remained unexplored in the literature or have been assigned only a marginal role in welfare provision (e.g., filial support to parents in old age, voluntary church collections, forms of giving amongst the poor, especially in urban neighbourhoods, or household charities). It explores forms of support that determined the quality of life and well-being – as opposed to sheer survival – of the recipients, and probes various forms of services, favours and social interactions that were sustained over time. The book closely studies cultural practices – gestures, rituals, discourses and forms of communication as well as the settings and arenas within which they took shape – and explores their impact upon the sustenance and cultivation of informal help. Focusing on the whole period from c. 1580 to c. 1740, the book provides a new perspective on the contours of change over time. Rather than indicating the demise of informal support systems, the book demonstrates that myriad forms of informal support were revitalized and expanded throughout.

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Gift giving and reciprocity

The varied systems of support examined here are evoked and considered as forms of gifts, that is, modes of giving that possessed the kind of properties generally associated with gift relations and exchange. Current theoretical analyses and the literature on gifts owe a great debt to Marcel Mauss's groundbreaking and still viable 'Essai sur le don' (1923–24), despite the many years that have passed since it was published.[7] In the 'Essai', Mauss offered a broad and richly textured analysis of customs of gift giving in a range of archaic societies – Polynesia, Melanesia and northwest America – to which he also appended a discussion of gifts in some major legal systems (Roman, Indian and German). Despite the fact that the book discussed diverse customs and practices of gift offering, its analysis nevertheless generated some basic insights into the power and role of gifts in the creation and sustenance of binding commitments and social ties. Mauss tended to view the latter as inherent to many societies and human interactions: 'In this we have found one of the human foundations on which our societies are built.'[8]

In Mauss's account, gift giving entails an exchange rather than a unilateral offering. This exchange is distinctive and sharply contrasts with market exchange that is mediated by money and price. Unlike market transactions that are instantaneous and anonymous, the gift mode of exchange implies durable interactions and binding obligations. Gift giving is characterized by three fundamental components:

1 Gift giving creates reciprocities and obligations to give and reciprocate in return.
2 The giving and reciprocation are separated by the passing of time, which implies prolongation and durability of the exchange, as well as a measure of uncertainty (even volatility) regarding the timing and nature of reciprocation.
3 Gifts are exchanged within social relations that become enmeshed in the cycle of offering and reciprocation, thus acting as powerful inducements, rewards and motives for repeated and ongoing exchange. Gift giving is tied up in these relations and drives – power and status, social compacts and alliances – no less than it relates to the gift itself.

[7] Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les société archaïques', *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris, 1950), 145–279; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, intro. Mary Douglas (New York, 1990; London, 2002).

[8] Mauss, *The Gift*, 5. For a concise and perceptive recent discussion of the 'Essai', see Ilana F. Silber, 'Prologue: sortilèges et paradoxes du don', *Revue du M.A.U.S.S.* 27 (2006), 35–56.

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Over the years since it was published, the 'Essai' has been subjected to criticisms and objections that pointed to various omissions, but also to excesses that were implied in its claims. Some critics pointed out Mauss's failure to consider gift giving in the domains of kinship, relations between the genders or family economies. Others highlighted functions of gift offering – in peace making, for example – which he had overlooked or only alluded to vaguely.[9] Mauss's relative neglect of religious offering and the discourses that informed these types of gifts have also been denoted and discussed.[10] Still other critics regarded Mauss's model as overly broad and opaque; they cited his notion of the 'spirit' of the gift (which implied that when offering a gift a person gave himself away – 'by giving one is giving oneself') or his even more ambiguous conception of the gift as a 'total' fact. The latter implied that gift giving embraced almost all spheres of human activity, from economic, political and family institutions to moral forces or aesthetic objects.[11] Doubts were cast upon Mauss's claim to have discovered the 'most basic foundations' of social behaviour, that is, his intuition that the gift was a generic, universal phenomenon that traversed societies and cultures. Critics delineated the instability and wide spectrum of gifts ranging from rigorously enforced obligations to customary favours and more altruistic acts, as well as evil, negotiated and subversive gestures.[12] Some discussions of Mauss indeed concluded that this great variety of relations and human transactions eluded any single categorization, whether in a given cultural context or across time.[13]

[9] Claud Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949, trans. 1969); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1978), 185–230; Annett Weiner, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange* (Austin, 1976).

[10] Jonathan Parry, 'The gift, the Indian gift, and the "Indian Gift" ', *Man*, 21 (1986), 453–73; I. F. Silber. 'Beyond purity and danger: gift-giving in the monotheistic religions', in Antoon Vadevelde (ed.), *Gifts and Interests* (Leuven, 2000), 115–32.

[11] Mauss, *The Gift*, 59, 100–2; Claud Lévi-Strauss, 'Selections from *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*', in Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York and London, 1997), 45–69.

[12] Jonathan Parry, 'On the moral perils of exchange', in Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds.), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge, 1989), 64–93; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The work of time', in Aafke E. Komter (ed.), *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam, 1996), 135–47; Ilana F. Silber, 'Prologue', and her 'Modern philanthropy: reassessing the viability of a Maussian perspective', in Wendy James and Nick Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute* (New York, 1998), 134–50; Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange* (Gottingen, 2003), esp. the introduction, 10–18; E. P. Thompson, 'Folklore, anthropology, and social history', *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 255–8.

[13] Algazi et al., 'Introduction: doing things with gifts', in *Negotiating the Gift*, 15.

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These criticisms notwithstanding, the book has continued to have great impact and to inspire numerous ways of thinking about acts of giving and exchange, which in themselves attest to the viability and inventiveness of Mauss's insights. The book proved compelling in its ability to capture a crucial dimension of human interaction that might configure in varied social, political, religious, economic or even intellectual contexts. It was elaborated upon and discussed not only by anthropologists and sociologists, but also by economists, psychologists, literary critics and philosophers.[14] There have been closer examinations of the notion of the 'total' gift and of the symbolic interaction that it entailed as well as the role of gifts in interpersonal interaction – friendship and affection, caring and love – especially in modern contexts.[15] Historians, too, have become alert to the importance of gifts in different contexts, and the past decade has witnessed several important contributions that offered more contextualized analyses of gifts. Given the traditional engagement of the literature on gifts with 'small-scale' societies, it is perhaps not surprising that initial contributions were produced by medievalists, who shed light upon the role of gift relations in charitable donations to monasteries and religious institutions, but also their figurations in kinship, politics and social relations.[16] For the early modern period, Natalie Davis's incisive account demonstrated the role that gifts continued to play in an era of expanding markets, print culture and religious change in particular. In the sixteenth century as well elite patronage was pervaded with gift giving.[17] There have also been a

[14] For some of these contributions, see Komter (ed.), *The Gift*, esp. part II; Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift*; Helmuth Berking, *Sociology of Giving* (London, 1999); L.-A. Gérard-Varet, S.-C. Kolm and J. Mercier Ythier (eds.), *The Economics of Reciprocity, Giving and Altruism* (London, 2000).

[15] David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London, 1988); Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief and Other Currencies* (Princeton, 1994), 71–118; James and Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*.

[16] For an overview of this literature, see Arnoud-Jan A. Bijsterveld, 'The medieval gift as agent of social bonding and political power: a comparative approach', in Esther Cohen and Mayke B. De Jong (eds.), *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden, 2001), 123–56. See also Martha Howell, 'Fixing movables: gifts by testament in late medieval Douai', *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), 3–45; Jane Fair Bestor, 'Marriage transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), 7–46; Valentine Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2000); Algazi et al. (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift*.

[17] Natalie Z. Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-century France* (Madison, 2000); Linda L. Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London, 1990); Felicity Heal, 'Reciprocity and exchange in the late medieval household', in Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds.), *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-century England* (Minneapolis, 1996), 179–98; Heal, 'Food gifts, the household and the politics of exchange in early modern England', *Past and Present*, (forthcoming).

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number of significant studies of gift giving in modern contexts, yet overall, historical studies that fully address issues of gift giving in the early modern and modern era, and, crucially, their mutations over time remain few and far between.[18]

In our examination of varied modes of support, the abundance of the extensive literature on gifts is not just granted and acknowledged, but also applied selectively and elaborated to fit the distinctive configurations and historical issues that pertain to this study. All types of support are studied as forms of gifts that were structured by social interactions, reciprocities and obligations. Yet, in investigating the dynamics and contents of these interactions no single mode of exchange is taken for granted. Rather, varied forms of reciprocal exchange – in families, communities, associations and so on – are explored and delineated as the investigation proceeds. The analysis incorporates diverse modes of offering and exchange and underlines their intense personalized form, elaborating upon a wide range of giving, favours, services and donations, as well as the social relations that were at play. It not only delineates the broad contours of informal support systems, but also closely examines case studies that illumine dynamics of exchange, including 'bad' gifts and gift relations subverted or gone astray. The book further pursues a set of distinctive practices that encouraged and emboldened patterns of support and exchange during this period, including more specific forms of gift giving (New Year's gifts, for example), feasting and commensality, practices of appeal as well as commemoration of giving and support. The special role of Protestantism in elaborating and communicating the value of gifts is considered and explored.

The book also addresses more directly transformation across time and the impact of markets as well as state policies and institutions on informal forms of support. For Mauss, gift exchange contrasted with a market mode of transaction, and as such it was incompatible with market institutions and mechanisms. This implied that as markets expanded, so these systems of gift giving diminished in importance, if they survived at all.[19] This contention echoes the kind of analyses referred to above when addressing the transition to modern society; it was also replicated

I am grateful to Felicity Heal for allowing me to consult and refer to this article before publication.

[18] James G. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London and New York, 1995); Avner Offer, 'Between the gift and the market: the economy of regard', *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), 450–76; Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914* (Cambridge, 2004).

[19] Mauss, *The Gift*, 91–100. For a critique of this aspect of Mauss's work, see Groebner, *Liquid Assets*, 7–10; Silber, 'Modern philanthropy', 135–9.

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in major economic accounts of the shift, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from a pre-capitalist economy which was immersed in social relationships and reciprocity, to capitalist economies governed solely by considerations of money and profit. Historical accounts of the development of modern financial systems were also based on similar assumptions regarding the incompatibility between a pre-capitalist mode of personal credit that supported non-productive activities, and modern credit institutions which from the nineteenth century onwards made large-scale investment and economic growth possible.[20]

The analysis here elaborates upon the distinctive features of gift relations that were apparent in informal support and contrasted with market exchange based solely on money and pricing. This distinctiveness notwithstanding, the book also explores the ways in which informal support and more formal institutions interacted. It investigates the impact, implications and feedback of markets and of an expanding state apparatus on varied forms of informal support. It demonstrates that gift giving, support and the personal interactions underlying them penetrated and at times became enmeshed or identified with market transactions and state policies. Rather than invoking decline, the book elucidates processes of change through the notion of *boundaries* which were inherent to informal support systems, and which were also reinforced by market expansion and the increasing powers of the state. Within these boundaries, however, varied forms of informal support and gift exchange persisted, shifted and multiplied. The latter were at times made possible, if not directly induced, through policies, arenas and forces generated by the state and an expanding market for commodities or by growing urban populations and the patterns of economy, culture and networks created in their midst.

Formal/informal, voluntary/involuntary

The set of practices examined here is deliberately broad, although no attempt is made to cover all forms of giving and support. Thus, for example, there is little on marital relations and the types of support which flowed between husbands and wives; nor does the book systematically address gendered forms of gift giving and support. Overall, the

[20] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, 1944), 46. For the literature on the history of financial transactions, see Philip T. Hoffman, Gilles Postel-Vinay and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, 'Information and economic history: how the credit market in old regime Paris forces us to rethink the transition to capitalism', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 69–94, esp. 69–70. See also Muldrew, 'Interpreting the market', 163–9; Finn, *The Character of Credit*, 17.

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selection of practices is inclusive and loosely structured by the varied contexts and social spaces that are relevant to the early modern era, and within which recurring practices of support and help can be observed.

Designating these support practices as 'informal' or 'voluntary' poses a certain difficulty, especially once it is conceded that many of them entailed binding commitments and were structured by social interactions that sometimes left little leeway for choice or autonomous action. Like all forms of gifts, practices of support were in this sense neither wholly informal nor always voluntary. Thus, in aristocratic hospitality during the Christmas season, the gifts offered by tenants were enforced as a form of return for the landlord's generosity and largesse, which traditionally had been rather precisely calculated to match the tenant's offering. This form of enforced obligation to offer a gift remained a central feature of tenant feasts that were typical of gentry hospitality throughout the period.[21] In practices of aid to the poor, as well, the boundaries between 'voluntary' giving and the relief offered through the emerging system based on the compulsory rates were also fluid. The officials appointed to administer the system were initially known as 'collectors' for the poor, a designation that had been associated with traditional, voluntary offering to the impoverished. In many parochial records, the money gathered from the rates continued to be referred to as 'collections' and was lumped together with all other recorded parochial income, including the 'voluntary' collections and benevolences for the poor. Even when the money raised through the rates began to be recorded separately, it continued to be designated 'collections' or as the money 'collected' from the parishioners. Differentiation between voluntary support and the involuntary rates remained imprecise, and both types of giving were considered 'obligatory' collections for the poor.[22]

Nevertheless, distinctions were still made, and while boundaries were sometimes blurred, the distinctiveness of these modes of operation – informal giving vs market transactions, voluntary handouts vs the compulsory taxes – was increasingly acknowledged and became part of common parlance and record keeping as the period progressed. Account books were here instrumental in affecting a more rigorous formulation of the bifurcation between voluntary giving or gifts, on the one hand,

[21] Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England*, 74–5. For the lack of distinction between rents in kind and tenants gifts, see also her 'Reciprocity and exchange', 183; and 'Food gifts' (forthcoming).

[22] For examples see the accounts of the overseers of the poor in St. Dunstan in the West, London, for the years 1633–87. GL, MS 2999/1, no fols. See also Hindle, *On the Parish?* 228, 230; McIntosh, 'Networks of care', 72.

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and payments and taxes, on the other. Thus, already in the fifteenth century, landowners received the majority of their rental income in cash, and household accounts reflected this type of monetization of rents, with regular records of rental pay as opposed to gifts that were registered only intermittently, if at all. In many household accounts, among the aristocracy as well as in the lower social strata, the distinctions between rents and gifts were evident, and gifts alongside a host of charitable donations were designated as 'given' rather than 'paid'; in many accounts they were also recorded separately as 'gifts'.[23] In the case of obligatory rates, these too gradually came to be demarcated from all other forms of giving and aid, although some blurring of the boundaries persisted. The Elizabethan legislation initiated the shift in the labelling of the poor law officials from 'collectors' to 'overseers of the poor', while ratepayers themselves were rather quick to differentiate between what was collected from them 'by assessment' and their voluntary gifts. While the proceeds from the former were increasingly referred to as 'allowances', 'pensions' and, by the mid- and late seventeenth-century, 'legal charity', the last were invariably designated 'benevolences', 'gifts' and 'collections', sometimes with the added description of 'free' or 'voluntary'.[24] As early as 1620, when the Dorchester merchant William Whiteway recorded the contributions raised following the brief for the defence of Protestants abroad in his diary, he wrote, 'In this month was there a free Collection made for the defence of the Palatinat'.[25] Preachers themselves sometimes made explicit allusions to the voluntary dimension of charitable giving, implicitly contrasting it with the public relief system based on the rates. 'For by the voluntary contribution of divers of you, with the assistance of some other charitable persons ... all the poor children in your parish are taught to read and write gratis', as Thomas Gouge expressed it in his solicitation for donations in a sermon delivered in 1664.[26]

The systems of support examined here are not necessarily considered 'informal' due to the fact that they lacked a structure or were wholly 'free', nor because they were not obligatory. Regardless of how contemporaries understood or labelled these varied systems of giving and

[23] Heal, 'Reciprocity and exchange', 183; 'Food gifts' (forthcoming); Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke and London, 1998), 100. See also Chapter 6, this volume.
[24] Hindle, *On the Parish*? 228; Innes, 'The "mixed economy"', 144.
[25] David Underdown (ed.), *William Whiteway of Dorchester: His Diary 1618 to 1635* (Dorset Record Society, Dorchester, vol. 12, 1991), 31.
[26] Thomas Gouge, *Christian Directions Shewing How to Walk with God All the Day Long; Drawn Up for the Use and Benefit of the Inhabitants of St. Sepulchres Parish* (London, 1664), 3.

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exchange – and their designations were not always consistent – for the historian there is a conceptual advantage in keeping the categories of 'formal' and 'informal'/'voluntary' and 'compulsory' intact. Informal support was not a unified system – varied distinctions and modes of support will be apparent throughout this book. But as forms of gifts embedded in social and at times enduring interactions, for the most part these systems of support contrasted with market exchange that was based solely on money and prices, and with the public relief system that was based on compulsion and taxes. The boundaries between these varied modes of giving and exchange were sometimes porous. But bearing in mind the possibilities for interactions and mutual penetration between them, the designation of the 'informal' category allows us to delineate the distinctive features of these systems as forms of gifts, as well as to consider their changing configurations under the impact of expanding markets and the relief system based on the compulsory taxes as it gradually took root over the course of the period.

Informal support and credit

The inclusive mode of the term 'informal' employed here implies that a wide spectrum is incorporated, ranging from the more generous and altruistic forms of giving (as in parental giving) to diverse others, including the more rigidly enforced, calculative or market-like exchanges. This concept also implies that credit relations are to be considered as a form of informal support. Credit constituted a particular case of more formalized transactions that engaged debtors and creditors in relations of exchange akin to market transactions. Unlike some of the informal support systems studied in this book, credit was governed by monetary and market considerations; it was designed to promote buying and selling and involved both oral and written contractual agreement. Payments were priced and expected on specific dates, and legal sanctions that safeguarded the interests of creditors were available if debts were neglected or delayed.[27]

Yet, credit and credit relations also constituted a particularly distinctive case in which market exchange and informal support merged, and elements of gift relations were conspicuous in credit relations and obligations. Critical in this regard was the time lag between giving and paying, as well as the personal aspect of credit. As indicated by Craig Muldrew's important study of these issues, credit was ubiquitous among

[27] Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, esp. chs. 8–9.

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all social strata, engaging the participants in enduring (even if sometimes undesired) obligations. Many contracts were unlimited by date and were deliberately prolonged or occasionally dropped. Credit was predicated on trust and tended to be pursued among people who knew each other.[28] Among the lower classes, it implied a form of support that impinged on basic subsistence and necessities, allowing the survival of the poorer sections of society. For other social classes, it implied crucial support in the advancement of careers and commercial enterprises. As we shall see, trust, binding obligations, enduring interactions and dependencies all pervaded other forms of gift giving and informal support. While credit is not a major focus of this study, under certain circumstances it did imply 'gift relations' and is considered as such in this book.

Themes and structure

The book is made up of three parts. Part I is an overview and analysis of informal support within varied social spaces – in families and domestic settings, within social networks, parishes and associations, in the immediate locality and beyond. Divergent patterns of reciprocities that sustained these varied informal support systems are delineated – unequal exchange based on parental generosity; symmetrical interactions built upon trust as well as asymmetrical interactions structured by social inequalities, status and rank. The convergence of different reciprocities within single practices of offering support is also observed. The chapters show that while some practices of informal support dwindled over time, many others increased, became more robust or mutated into novel types of private as well as collective forms of giving and help.

Part II broadens the scope of the investigation through an analysis of the economy of giving – that is, the dynamics and management of offering and reciprocating help. The chapters here investigate the diverse ways in which, in addition to the reciprocal exchanges discussed in Part I, informal support was cultivated and reinforced. Added incentives that boosted informal support are investigated, in addition to the dynamics that brought about failures and collapse. The method of analysis in these chapters shifts to a closer examination of case studies and specific practices, including languages of appeal, modes of recording gifts, the rituals that attended acts of giving and discourses of gifts and informal support. Chapters 5 and 6 study a set of practices,

[28] Ibid., esp. chs. 5–7; Finn, *The Character of Credit*, esp. 7–11.

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including gift giving and feasts, written appeals, public displays of largesse and forms of commemorating charitable gifts; they delineate the multi-faceted role of these practices in consolidating commitments and nurturing attachments, as well as in communicating the honour and enhancing the reputations of those involved in offering support. Chapter 7 examines Protestant and Humanist discourses, placing special emphasis on the means used to communicate and disseminate the message of good works. It is argued that the varied – and not wholly consistent – set of notions conveyed from pulpits and in numerous publications was effective in broadening the language of gifts and in invigorating the values attached to informal giving and support. In Chapter 8 the vulnerabilities of informal support modes are considered. The dynamics that led relations astray – in families, communities and neighbourhoods – are explored, highlighting the diverse and contingent configurations that brought about escalation and collapse. While analysing the limitations of informal giving and gift exchange (Chapter 8), Part II indicates overall that these limitations were offset by the rich reservoir of assets and cultural resources that were entailed in offering help; it hence broadens our understanding as to why, in a period that witnessed the gradual implementation of the compulsory rates, informal support nevertheless remained viable and vigorous throughout.

Part III investigates broader processes of transformation and revitalization across time. Chapter 9 examines the boundaries created by patterns of exclusion that were inherent to informal support, but which were reinforced during this period by the state and market expansion. A state policy involving mobility and control, economic and demographic crises, the increased use of wage labour and long-distance migration to towns, all constrained the scope and form of informal support. Chapter 10 considers how, all in all, these processes entailed in state and market expansion for the most part acted as powerful catalysts for many forms of informal help. It indicates how state policies and the implementation of the poor laws, the growing impact and use of the courts, as well as the expansion of markets and the growth of towns – all left their stamp on and became closely linked with the diffusion and proliferation of gift giving and a host of informal support.

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