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## Favours

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In his splendid book *The Wherewithal of Life*, which focusses on the moral experiences of contemporary migration, Michael Jackson tells the story of Deo, a young refugee from Burundi. Deo was fortunate to escape the 1993 genocide carried out by the Hutu militias against Tutsis in the country. While being on the run, and hoping to get over the border into Rwanda, Deo found himself in a banana grove where he was discovered by a group of women and children, totally exhausted and unable to move. Jackson writes:

‘Are you alive?’ one woman asked him. ‘Yes’, he said. ‘But please don’t kill me’. The woman, aged about forty-five or fifty, assured him that she wanted to help. She was a Hutu but declared, ‘But I’m a woman and I’m a mother’. That, she said, was her *ubwoko*, her ethnicity. The woman led Deo to the nearby Rwanda border. She told him that she knew what he was going through; many of her friends had been murdered, Tutsis for being the enemy within, Hutus – including her own son – for refusing to join the killing or because the militias wanted their land. She had once been married to a Tutsi, who had been accused of being a traitor and killed. As they came close to the militias guarding the border, the woman told Deo to pretend to be her son. She protected him, protesting when the militias suspected him of being a cockroach and threatened to take him away.

(Jackson 2013: 97–8)

This is a multi-layered and extraordinary story. Yet it is characteristic of countless human situations – extraordinary as well as ordinary – in which sheer serendipity or an act of goodwill can make the difference between life and death (Jackson 2013: 97). It can also make the difference between one’s existential immobility and movement, between action and inaction, or between getting things done and empty-handedness. More importantly, the story shows how not even the most distressing human situations are devoid of ethical sensibility, and allow for exercising freedom to act (Laidlaw 2014). What unfolds in the singularity of human situations, such as Deo’s, is a momentous act of kindness and gratuitousness without

any expectation of immediate payback. In Jackson's words, these are instances of 'an ethics beyond the pale of any specific legal or moral code' (2013: 98; also Keane 2016: 12–14). Indeed, for the woman, the decision to help Deo was the right thing to do in the given situation, and she might well have responded otherwise in different circumstances. Her decision to help was an act of doing a favour to which exhausted Deo could only reciprocate by saying 'thank you'.

The existing literature on favours has attended to the subject primarily as a matter of corruption, clientelism, and informal economic exchange, rather than as a matter of ethics. In this chapter, we take Deo's story as a point of departure to consider the role that acts of favours and gratuitousness – as an ethics of the here and now – play in social life. Indeed, the story raises the important question of how to attend anthropologically to manifestations of spontaneity, free will, and sympathy; that is, manifestations of favour. Furthermore, it raises several important questions: what motivates gratuitous behaviour? What characterizes its expression? For whom should one do a favour? Who should be excluded from one's act of gratuity? And finally, how is the interplay between these qualities and the moral frames of conduct *mediated*?

Acts of favour constitute a significant ethical dimension of social life (Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015a). Favours perform the intermediary and balancing work between incommensurable values, interests, and obligations. As we show in what follows, this argument was put forward by Julian Pitt-Rivers, an intellectual maverick of sociocultural anthropology and a largely forgotten anthropological theorist of favours. Pitt-Rivers offered an important corrective to the social theories of unfreedom on the one hand, and the theories of exchange and reciprocity on the other (see also Laidlaw 2000). One of the central themes of Julian Pitt-Rivers's ground-breaking work relates to the question of how to attend to manifestations of grace in social life, and to the human propensity to gratuity in particular. Pitt-Rivers's interest lay in examining the workings of mediating ideas, such as grace and favours, exactly because he saw in them the ways in which humans articulate 'primary social values and deal with the structural contradictions these values resolve, create, and reflect' (Shryock and Da Col 2017: xviii). Yet only a very little attention has been paid to such ubiquitous acts, and the role they play in establishing what kind of persons we become, and how we act in the flow of social life.

## Favours: A Very Anthropological Problem

Search for the terms 'anthropology' and 'barter', 'exchange' or 'gift' in any major research index, and you will find a rich back-catalogue of disciplinary debate stretching back over a century. Perform the same operation using the words 'anthropology' and 'favour', however, and you will be

disappointed. This is not because the ethnographic record and our own everyday experiences are devoid of examples of gratuitous behaviour. Ethnographers interested in religious and ethical life have long documented the social importance of acts of charity and humanitarianism, as well as instances of personal and religious sacrifice (Bornstein 2012; Fassin 2012; Henig 2019; Mittermaier 2019). Few classic studies of rural communities and tribal societies come without an analysis of customary practices of ‘lending a hand’ (Pitt-Rivers 2017b), such as sharing labour, produce, and resources, and a lengthy reflection on the moral economies of mutual help which underpin local livelihoods (Hart 2007; Layton 2000). Indeed, some of the foundational texts of the discipline, most notably Marcel Mauss’s essay *The Gift* (1954), grappled precisely with the question of how to understand the function and meaning of apparently gratuitous action. Yet, despite this evident disciplinary interest in studying moments of social cooperation and sympathy, favours have until recently remained firmly outside the conceptual purview of anthropology.

The single disciplinary figure to buck this trend was the Oxford-trained anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers. In his postscript to his edited volume *Honour and Grace in Anthropology* (1992), Pitt-Rivers noted that the anthropological canon had established reciprocity as ‘the basis of all sociation, in the form of systems of exchange, of women and of food, of labour and services, of hospitality and of violence’ (2017a: 71). And yet, he argued, social life was full of relations based not on notions of contract or material reciprocation but rather on the expressions of social favour between individuals (on other forms of non-reciprocal relations, see Mattingly and McKearney, Chapter 22 of this volume). From simple gestures of kindness, such as leaving a tip for a waitress, to exceptional acts of goodwill such as the rescue of a stranger in peril, such expressions were driven by the ‘values of the heart’ rather than social laws or the desire for material return (2017a: 76–7). They were best understood not as exchanges but rather as *favours* – that is, as acts of generosity and benefaction arising from positive sentiments. As such, they operated not according to the parameters of calculative transaction or the moral obligations of social contract, but rather according to the ‘principle of grace’: the irrational, incalculable, and unpredictable impulse to bestow favour ‘over and above what is due, economically, legally, or morally’ while asking nothing but an expression of gratitude in return (2017a: 88).<sup>1</sup>

Pitt-Rivers’s essay might well have remained a footnote in our disciplinary history were it not for its reissue in the journal *Hau* in 2011 and again in a collection of his writings – *From Hospitality to Grace: The Pitt-Rivers Omnibus* – in

<sup>1</sup> As Joel Robbins (2013) has pointed out, anthropologists have been preoccupied with recognizing, analysing, and deconstructing negative expressions of gratuitous actions, such as collective violence and the forms of suffering these expressions engender (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). While these are extremely important issues, Robbins aptly argues, this focus on only one side of gratuitous action has skewed anthropological engagement with its other, more positive forms in social life.

2017 (Da Col and Shryock 2017). Running counter to the prevailing wisdom that social relations were (ultimately) conditional on material reciprocity, the essay challenged two fundamental axioms of anthropological theorizing: the Maussian notion that the principle of reciprocity is the basis for all sociality and the assumption that economic equivalence is the condition for all exchange, and thus social equity is therefore established through exchange itself (for other complementary critiques of the Maussian tradition, see Strathern 1992; Weiner 1992). In it, Pitt-Rivers shone a light on anthropology's long-standing discomfort with the very notion of gratuity. Ever since Marcel Mauss's characterization of the gift as 'in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous' but 'in fact obligatory and interested' (1954: 1), most anthropologists had considered gratuity as nothing more than a sociological delusion (see Douglas 1990). For those drawing on the Durkheimian tradition, social action was grounded in and regulated by rights, rules, and moral obligations, rendering spontaneous and gratuitous action largely illusory. Wedded to an interest-driven model of social action, later proponents of practice theory were equally dismissive. Like Marcel Mauss before him, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) regarded gratuity and disinterested action as a fantasy, preferring to apply the economic logic of competition to human action (Laidlaw 2014: 4–10).

In short, Pitt-Rivers found himself addressing an audience not (yet) equipped to deal with or ready to accept the sociological possibility of gratuitous action. Publishing widely on themes of circulation and exchange, gifts and commodities, and money and morality (Carrier 1994; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992; Miller 1995; Parry and Bloch 1989; Weiner 1992), his contemporaries continued to retreat to the comfort zone of classical exchange theory, re-describing gratuitous behaviour as the fulfilment of social obligations, or as carrying a hidden element of calculated self-interest. Grasping for a satisfactory way to understand and represent human action, they tended to present different forms of economic activity as productive of different genres of sociability. Eager to demonstrate that 'each form of transfer' was 'governed by its own morality and its own set of values' (Widlok 2013: 13), they resorted to matching 'types' of economic activity with categories of relatedness, or 'degrees' of reciprocity with different 'qualities' of relations (Gregory 1982; Sahlins 1972). Indeed, relying on tropes of marketization and reciprocity, scholars tended to project the rationale of commodity exchange onto other forms of transfer or else to take refuge in notions of reciprocity and gift-giving (Sahlins 1972; Graeber 2011). As a result, they commonly redefined gratuitous acts as a 'covert form of market behaviour or as ultimately governed by extended forms of reciprocity' (Widlok 2013: 11).

This recourse to tropes of exchange and reciprocity is evident in the single area of academic enquiry where the favour has enjoyed some limited intellectual traction: studies of corruption, clientelism, and informal economic exchange. Most often figuring merely as a euphemistic

reference to practices of brokerage, nepotism, and patronage (Pardo and Prato 2017), the favour has at times been used to describe practices which appear to mix instrumental and affective relations, goal-orientated and gift exchanges, and ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutional ties. Thus, Alena Ledeneva (1998) coined the term ‘economies of favour’ to describe Soviet citizens’ use of personal relations to get hold of scarce goods and services in circumstances of shortage in a socialist economy. And, more recently, Čarna Brković (2017) has documented how favours operate as a modality of political power in Bosnia and Herzegovina, shedding light on the manner in which neoliberal governance may foster clientelism. These scholars employ the term not to describe gratuitous behaviour but rather to describe the manner in which people act in situations when contradictory – and perhaps incompatible – social, moral, and economic demands are made of them. Favours, they argue, flourish in situations where personal and institutional roles and responsibilities are ambiguous (Brković 2017). Indeed, they are themselves ambiguous or ambivalent by nature, sharing ‘features of free gift and self-serving exchange, of network-driven endowment and self-generated investment’ (Ledeneva 2016: 26).<sup>2</sup>

These works deliver powerful readings of the configuration of local moral and political economies. They illustrate the fact that while differentiating between informal practices and ‘true’ acts of gratuity may function on a theoretical level, economic and social gestures appear less than unequivocal in everyday life: not only do corruption and goodwill, duty and pleasure often go hand in hand, but the performance of informal (or obligatory) exchange may itself also constitute a show of favour on the part of the donor (Makovicky 2016; Reeves 2016). Yet, their theoretical mobilization of the term also brings about its partial re-definition. While these anthropologists’ interlocutors may present favours as exceptional benefactions freely given, the subsequent analysis of these favours reveals them to be part of routine exchange, governed by notions of reciprocity and driven as much by need and desire as by sentiment. Applied to the world of informal economics and governance, favours are seen as part of a social ‘misrecognition game’ (Ledeneva 1998) designed to make the self-interested nature of exchange palatable to the participants. Thus, while illustrating how favours implicate both material exchange and social recognition, these scholars ultimately bestow greater explanatory importance on the former. In the following, in contrast, we argue that a more

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, scholars of the related Chinese practice of *guanxi* have not adopted the language of favours (for an exception, see Yang 1994). Like students of post-communist Europe, they have shown the common habit of using social contacts to exchange goods, labour, money, or mutual help involves both affect and instrumentalism, sentiments and material debt (Kipnis 2002; Yan 1996). *Guanxi*, they note, occupies the same social space as friendship, creating not only tensions between self-interest and other feeling but also a situation where looking out for the welfare of others is a constituent part of the relationship (Smart 1999; Strickland 2010). Focussing on matters of sociality over matters of economy, such readings of *guanxi* share a certain theoretical kinship to our own understanding of favours. However, in contrast to this scholarship – and that examining European, post-communist ‘economies of favour’ – we do not regard favours as necessarily confined to a particular type or realm of exchange.

productive way of understanding favours lies in paying more attention to the latter. Drawing on Pitt-Rivers's extensive writings on the topic, we suggest that favours are better understood as a matter of ethics rather than a question of economics. Our point is not simply to recognize that many activities commonly regarded as 'economic' intersect with other fields of social life – such as kinship relations and religious practices. Rather, we seek to show how favours perform a particular kind of ethical labour in everyday life.

## Towards an Anthropology of Gratuitous Action

In the opening paragraph of his essay 'The Place of Grace in Anthropology', Julian Pitt-Rivers puzzled the anthropological uninterest in grace, declaring it his aim to 'endow it with the recognition it deserves' (2017a: 69). How was it, he asked, that the discipline had so long sought to explain systems of reciprocity without ever attending to the possibility of non-reciprocity; that is, gratuity (2017a: 71)? Like his disciplinary contemporaries, Pitt-Rivers concurred with the idea that exchange and reciprocity made up the essential building blocks of human sociality. And yet, he concluded that existing analytical models often lapsed into functionalist and mechanistic explanations based on the logic of obligation and interest, leaving little room for expressions of individual will and human freedom, including the impulse to gratuitousness (2017b: 78). Exchange and reciprocity were not, Pitt-Rivers argued, performed merely 'from a sense of obligation' but also from the will that 'comes from the heart' (2017b: 27). Probing the limits of contemporary exchange theory, he asked how anthropologists could attend to those situations and social transactions in which unaccountable and un-exchangeable value was transferred, granted, or given (Shryock and da Col 2017: xxv). Furthermore, Pitt-Rivers observed that any discussion about value must also include the question how values are felt. This analytical move led him to address a second problem, namely how to attend to those forms and moments of reciprocity which were reducible neither to rules, interests, and obligations nor to an exchange of economic equivalence.

While exploring the essence of favours – grace and gratuitousness – Pitt-Rivers turned to semiotician Émile Benveniste's (1969) etymological archaeology of grace. Noting that '[e]verything that refers to economic notions is tied to much vaster representations which bring into play the totality of human relations with divinities', Benveniste suggested that grace operated outside the calculative obligations of interested exchange (1969 in Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 79). He distinguished between two circles or cycles of reciprocity, a 'normal circuit of exchange' in which one gave in order to receive and a second circuit of 'bounty and acknowledgement' in which one participates 'without any consideration of a return of that

which is offered, as act of thanks' (1969 in Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 79). As 'service for nothing', acts of grace and goodwill belong firmly to the latter category. In Benveniste's 'second circuit of exchange', Pitt-Rivers found a space for theorizing grace and favours as a form gratuitous action. Like any other gesture, favours require a 'return of grace ... whether in the form of a material manifestation (regardless of the material value of that which is returned) or merely a verbal expression' (2017a: 72). Yet, when it comes to favours, Pitt-Rivers wrote, 'there is no need, as in contractual exchange, to determine in advance what the value of the return shall be, nor when it shall be made, since none is envisaged, even though it may be hopefully expected' (2017a: 79). In other words, while both favours and contracts involved reciprocity, favours do not require contractual reciprocity but rather a 'reciprocity of the heart' (2017a: 99).

For all its eloquence, Pitt-Rivers's extensive body of work failed to establish grace as a category of anthropological interest. Rather, it was left to Caroline Humphrey to take the first step towards an anthropology of gratuitous action. In her seminal piece examining the illicit payments in higher education in Mongolia and Russia (2012; see also 2016), Humphrey proposed that favours are not ill-disguised transactions but rather a *sui generis* way of acting that deserves anthropological theorization on its own terms. Far from simply an exchange of goods and services governed by material needs or social obligation, favours are an 'independent mode of acting that is initiatory, 'extra', ethical, and gratuitous' (2016: 51). As such, they differ from other actions by their *ethics*, rather than their morphology: while an action may take the form of barter, a gift, or even a commercial transaction, performing this gesture as a favour 'adds a "gratuitous" extra to any practical function it may have, and turns the act into something incalculable' (2016: 51). Favours are therefore not primarily driven by need but arise in situations and moments in social life where individuals elicit the sympathy and lenience of others. Gaining social efficacy and moral value precisely by virtue of *not* being conceptualized as an exchange, Humphrey argues, favours are grounded in compassionate action and affective sentiment. Indeed, as we saw in Deo's case, such an act can be motivated by a sentiment of care, of 'being a woman and a mother'. This makes favours central to the production of social esteem, personal reputations, and ultimately moral personhood. In Humphrey's words, a favour is a distinct 'moral aesthetic of action that endows the actors with standing and a sense of self-worth' (2016: 51).

Humphrey's argument serves to highlight the fact that the giving and receiving of favours is above all an ongoing, reflexive exercise in moral reasoning and action. This was the major insight elaborated in our book *Economies of Favour after Socialism* (Henig and Makovicky 2016). Seeking critically to re-interrogate the conceptual relations between the categories of 'favour' and 'economics', we argued that favours constitute neither

a form of ‘masked’ exchange nor an expression of goodwill, but rather a distinct mode of action which has economic consequences, without unfolding in a regime of direct equivalence or being fully explicable in terms of transactional cost–benefit analysis (Henig and Makovicky 2016: 4). This makes them ethnographically and theoretically slippery; they resist both fixed interpretation in real life and our theoretical attempts to square them with transactional frameworks of exchange because their meanings and moral import remaining open-ended and ambiguous. With their unapologetic open-endedness, they are not simply altruistic, instrumental, or reciprocal by nature, but rather carry the potential to be one or all of these. Yet, rather than conceiving this ambivalence or ambiguity as a conceptual problem to be resolved through our analytical labour, we suggested that it is a normal, even productive outcome of everyday social interaction (e.g. Berliner et al. 2016). Building on these initial observations, we would like to push the argument further, suggesting that favours do not simply embody a particular moral aesthetic of action (see Humphrey 2016), but *perform a particular kind of ethical labour*: favours appear ‘ambiguous’ or ‘ambivalent’ not simply because they do not fit neatly into pre-conceived categories of human action and intention but rather because they help *mediate* between the value, expectations, and moral frames which underpin them. To understand how favours perform this labour, we turn to recent developments in the anthropology of ethics.

In tackling the ambivalence of favours, we find Michael Lambek’s work on ethics and value in particular productive to engage with. In developing his argument about the ethical condition of human existence, Lambek (2015a) drew on Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to distinguish between choice and judgement as two modes of action. Choice, he writes, is ‘a matter of calculation between commensurable goods’ (2015a: 15; see also 2015b [2008]). Judgement, on the other hand, is an act of ‘deliberation in the face of incommensurable values’ (2015a: 15). Of course, we all have to make choices in our lives and these choices might be determined by existing larger structures of power, as the proponents of practice theory would argue (e.g. Ortner 2006, 2016). Yet, social life and human existence cannot be reduced to clear-cut, ‘either/or’ choices only. As Lambek further writes, ‘there are always diverse calls upon our attention, competing criteria, obligations, values, desires, interests, relationships’ (2015a: 15). Similarly, Michael Jackson suggests that ‘all human action is conditioned by a plethora of often competing influences, interests, and persuasions’ (2008: 23). Exercising judgement is thus an act of balancing, mediating, and interweaving ‘both/and’ into one’s life (Jackson 2013: 208). Favours – that is, instances of gratuitous action – are thus deeply ethical, for they are the ways in which humans articulate and mediate between ‘primary social values and deal with the structural contradictions these values resolve, create, and reflect’ (Shryock and da



Col 2017: xviii). It is to this kind of everyday ethical labour of mediation that we now turn.

## Acts of Gratuitousness: Performing Good Deeds

In order to understand how favours perform the ethical labour of mediation, we return to Pitt-Rivers's argument that social life should be seen as grounded not only in enduring relationships of exchange and obligation but also partially in expressions of grace and gratuitousness. Grace, that second circuit of exchange, has had an enormous importance in Christian, Judaic, and Islamic traditions (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1992). And, as Pitt-Rivers's cross-cultural excursions to the Zande, Nuer, or the Ashanti ethnographies suggest, also beyond (2017a, 2017b). The theological concept of grace in the Abrahamic traditions is connected to the notions of abundance, beneficence, fortune, and a free gift of God that is bestowed on the beneficiary in return for acknowledgement and sentiment (Benveniste 1969). But grace, as Pitt-Rivers observed, can be generated and dispensed by humans as well, through expressions and acts of favour. Grace, in other words, is 'a product of the arbitrary will, human or divine' (2017b: 80). In turn, grace can be sought for salvation as much as for material benefits and prosperity. Although it would be easy to attend to such instances of gratuitous acts as completely separate, acts of gratuitousness and their *ethics*, as Pitt-Rivers observed, often operate simultaneously 'on the social and theological plane' (Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 80). This observation brings us to the point we make in this chapter, namely that favours perform the ethical labour of mediation between contradictory values, interests, and ethical sensibilities.

Let us therefore first focus on how acts of gratuitousness operate simultaneously on the social and theological plane, and ethnographically elucidate what labour of mediation they perform. In explicating this point, we turn to Henig's work on Muslim moral cosmologies and ethical sensibilities in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina (2016a, 2019, 2020). Henig carried out extensive fieldwork in impoverished rural areas that have been deeply affected by the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia, ensuing war, and subsequent post-socialist, post-war restructuring of economic opportunities and shrinking social redistribution (2016b). These developments left the great majority of villagers struggling with accessing jobs, education, and social security. The practices of accessing scarce resources have been widely described by scholars working in the region as constituting a grey zone of illicit economic practices and moralities where mediation or leverage of access to resources is negotiated (Brković 2017; Koutkova 2016). This is recognized by international policymakers operating in the country who designate it as an area of 'soft corruption' (UNDP Report 2009). Indeed, villagers, as Henig argued elsewhere (2016a), participate in

an ambiguous sphere of various forms of informal brokerage, leverage and cultivating connections in accessing jobs, healthcare, permits, or education, as they are often the only ways to get by in the situation of protracted economic precarity. But it would be misleading to reduce villagers' actions solely to the notions of corruption or illicit economic practices. These discourses lock people's actions into the cost–benefit or transactional framework as a way of securing advantage and access for oneself or one's own (Haller and Shore 2005: 2). Villagers' understanding of the term 'corruption' is very much the same as that of policymakers or anthropologists, and villagers regard corruption as legally problematic and morally wrong. Indeed, what became soon apparent during Henig's fieldwork was that partaking in such activities and exchanges creates for numerous villagers a moral conundrum. It is an ongoing process of walking a moral tightrope, stretched between the pressures to get by and to be a good Muslim. What is right and what is wrong in such situations? This is the moment at which the social and the theological planes intersect, and the acts of 'ethical reflection, reasoning, dilemma, doubt, conflict, judgement, and decision' are exercised (Laidlaw 2014: 23).

In addressing the moral conundrum of how to get things done, villagers turned to favours, and their actions in the grey zones have become informed by and performed according to the social and Islamic etiquette of good deeds and merits, recognized and articulated as doing *sevap*. *Sevap* refers to a good deed performed for others that earns merit for one's afterlife, but its benefit is realized by the community of fellow villagers here and now (see Henig 2019).<sup>3</sup> This is a vernacular idiom of what Pitt-Rivers would recognize as grace. In turn, good deeds are the acts of gratuitousness that belong to the second circuit of exchange. Performing good deeds in the villages has thus become a way of addressing the issues of access to scarce material resources while maintaining a sense of moral self-worth as a Muslim.

One of the spheres where doing good deeds takes place in situations of moral conundrum is when negotiating access to education. Accessing education in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires a degree of personal connections (*veze/štetla*), and this is vividly discussed and negotiated in rural as well as urban areas across the country. It happens in elementary schools as much as high schools and universities. The latter in particular have attracted attention in a number of local media and international reports. Over the years Henig often heard from numerous university students that to pursue a university degree has been for many students more than just a matter of having good personal connections. It also sometimes requires a considerable amount of money, depending on the subject studied, and

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have documented how similar models of understanding agency are related to other spheres of life, such as charity, trade, and accountancy (Anderson 2018; Anderson and Marsden, Chapter 30 of this volume; Mittermaier 2019).

one needs to calculate not only university fees but also additional money for 'ensuring' success in exams and the like. Everyone Henig talked to over the years had an experience of needing to mobilize their personal networks to get through the system. The lower stages of education are not an exception. Very often, however, the cases of leverage or providing access were neither classified nor understood as using personal connections but conceptualized and pursued as a good deed (*sevap*).

This is also the case for Mujo who is simultaneously a village imam, a high-school teacher in the municipal town, and a neighbour with extended kinship networks in the village. These three layers of his personhood straddle particular moral registers, duties, and obligations: that of Islamic moral authority, civil servant, and kin, respectively. In day-to-day situations, Mujo has to negotiate often contradictory expectations emerging from these different strands and yet maintain his moral accountability and self-worth in order to be a good Muslim. In his everyday conduct, he puts emphasis on the notion of good deeds as a form of everyday ethics that enable him to balance such diverse and often contradictory expectations and obligations, and yet to strive to be a good Muslim.

As a local imam and a high-school teacher, Mujo's networks of access with regard to influencing things are dense and wide. It is no surprise that he is often approached after prayers in the mosque, as a moral authority, or over coffee, as kin, to 'fix' various issues. Mujo and Henig became close friends as they exchanged books and spent long hours discussing them. As he often confessed to Henig, people approach him with unrealistic expectations not only of what he can do but also of what he is willing to do. He makes it very explicit that he does not want to do anything that would be considered as *veze/štela* as he was fed up with it, and with the fact that nothing seemed to work without it in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But this does not mean that Mujo would refuse to help his fellow villagers whom he meets in the mosque or his village fellows he meets on paths in the village. This was the case on one autumn day, when Mujo was approached by Nurfet, who is his neighbour and a distant relative. In fact, Mujo was walking home through neighbours' gardens and Nurfet dragged him in for a coffee, as he wanted to ask him for help but not in public. While sitting in Nurfet's living room, it took some time to get over the obligatory conversational themes. Only then was Mujo asked if he could help Nurfet's daughter to enrol for the prestigious subject of economic management at the municipal high school where Mujo was a teacher. During this conversation, Nurfet tacitly pointed out to Mujo that the two of them were distant relatives and close neighbours. Moreover, Nurfet also carefully reminded Mujo of his socio-economic situation: that of being the only breadwinner in the house, yet with a small and irregular salary from the village sawmill, four children, and massive debts. There was no way for Nurfet to ensure that his daughter would get enrolled without any *veze/štela* connections and assistance.

Mujo was reluctant to help Nurfet as a distant relative, as much as Nurfet was reluctant to ask Mujo. This would imply to him exactly a case of *veze/štela*. Participating in *veze/štela* matters would be for Mujo acting in a wrong and immoral (*haram*) way. At the same time, he knew about Nurfet's difficult situation, and was thus concerned about the well-being of his family which was in need. Facing 'competing criteria, obligations, values, desires, interests, relationships' (Lambek 2015a: 15), Mujo needed to balance and mediate between them – to exercise a practical judgement – by performing good deeds. Indeed, Mujo eventually decided to intervene in the selection process, and Nurfet's daughter was enrolled although her grades were slightly below the required average. Mujo later told me that he had to explain to the selection committee that her poor grades were due to her difficult family situation rather than her being just an average student. Nurfet and his relatives reciprocated with sentiment by thanking Mujo on many occasions, saying 'May God bless you'. Mujo's response was always, with reference to Islamic ethics and his sense of being a good Muslim, '*halal* to you' (free of charge), meaning in this context that his help was morally acceptable, and, more importantly, it was a gratuitous act, free from obligation, and that Nurfet's family did not owe him anything but acknowledgement (see Henig 2019). As Michael Lambek has pointed out, such utterances are performative because they establish the 'seriousness of the ensuing values and acts that are at stake' (2015b: 239). By uttering 'free of charge', Mujo made clear that his act of favour was performed out of the goodness of his heart, and belonged to the second circuit of exchange, that of 'bounty and acknowledgement' (Benveniste 1969). Although other villagers, as well as a number of teachers, knew about the enrolment process, none of them questioned what Mujo did or invoked this case as an instance of using connections for personal gain, as they did in the case of some other students. On the contrary, the overall situation was evaluated and recognized as an act of good deed, whereby the contradictory and competing demands, values, and obligations were brought together and mediated on one moral plane.

The example of Mujo's favour might give the impression that the mediating work of favours is done primarily at the level of performative acts (Lambek 2010), a reference to religious notions of grace transforming a gesture from a morally questionable use of connections to a gesture of goodwill. Yet, favours cannot simply be understood as verbal sleight of hand, but rather as a working out of competing and perhaps even incompatible values, interests, and ethical sensibilities 'at the level of action' (Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 72). As has been increasingly recognized by a number of anthropologists of Islam, people's conceptions of Islam and efforts to live a good life are often contradictory, fragmented, and ambiguous, and entwined with other aspirations and moral values (Marsden and Retsikas 2013; Schielke 2010). Doing a favour, in other words, requires not simply an exercise of judgement about what is deemed correct, appropriate, or

good at any given moment, but also an action which materially or socially substantiates this judgement. As such, a favour is a gesture which both exposes the individual to the judgement of others and, more importantly, implicates both those who dispense grace and those receiving it in wider relations of economic and political power. As we saw earlier in the case of Mujo, *whom* he chose to help and *the medium* of his aid were contingent not only on their relationship but also on his multiple roles as a teacher, a neighbour, and the religious head of the community. Indeed, his gesture had substantive material consequences for Nurfet and his daughter (and any student who would otherwise have been admitted in her place). Thus, because they operate simultaneously ‘on the social and theological plane’ (Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 80), favours rely not only on a verbal recognition of their gratuity but also on a certain play with social form.

A good example of this is found in the work of Makovicky, who has conducted fieldwork with Polish artisans and commercial traders in the contemporary cottage industry making ‘folky’ crochet lace. Run predominantly on the unregistered labour of kin and community members, this cottage industry can be described as ‘informal’ in the classic sense – that is, as operating beyond the spaces and rules of the regulated market (Hart 1973). Artisans and traders collude to circumvent the letter of the law in order to earn their share of the small profit margins in the craft industry, often deploying gifts and granting favours in order to direct employment and trade their way. In this way, gratuitous action becomes articulated not only with commercial transactions but also with petty economic crime in the form of tax avoidance and benefit fraud. Such informalization accommodates small-time enterprise by extending market practice into community and kin relations. However, it also creates internal competition for employment, labour, and profit. Retailers and commercial gallery owners must deal with a workforce burdened with expectations of mutual assistance traditionally extended to kin and to neighbours. Lace makers, on the other hand, must show themselves to be reliable but flexible in order to receive work. As artisans and entrepreneurs stake out their positions in the political economy of the industry, in other words, several conflicting registers of contract and affect are set into play and the social meaning of gratuitous gestures becomes a point of contention.

However, when favours and favouritism skirt not just the sphere of informality but also the realm of charity, they have the potential to produce humiliation as much as they can act as confirmation of the self-worth of the giver and the receiver. Much depends on exactly how such favours are performed: like acts of hospitality, gratuitous actions involve the construction of social intimacy and performance of social equity where there may not (yet) be any (Candea and da Col, 2012, da Col and Shryock 2017). Such performances are liable to fail (Shryock 2004, 2012). This point

is nicely illustrated by an episode witnessed by Makovicky when she visited one of the village's groceries for an afternoon cup of tea and a chat with the owner, Bogusia. Bogusia ran the shop with her husband, travelling to the local wholesale market in Bielsko-Biała five days a week for fresh fruits and vegetables. Despite the long hours and physical demands of running the business, she also did occasional piecework for a local lace trader, supplying him with a steady stream of cream-coloured doilies and colourful crocheted lace lingerie. Before she could expand on her craftwork, however, her conversation with Makovicky was interrupted when a young lady walked into the shop. She walked up to the counter with an uneven gait and laid a soiled doily on the flat surface. She had no money, she explained, would Bogusia be willing to take the doily as a payment? After a moment, Bogusia nodded, named a price, took the doily, and paid out the amount from her till. She then let the young woman fill her shopping bag with produce, and received the same cash back from her as 'payment'. Bogusia later explained that the young lady had suffered a stroke after the birth of her third child, leaving her unable to work, and she felt it was her duty to help a village family fallen on hard times.

Although it took the form of a commercial transaction, it was clear that Bogusia's gesture was one of benevolence. With the doily largely unsalable, its exchange for a bag of produce remained symbolic, and Bogusia stood to lose out financially. And yet, she waived any debt she could legitimately have claimed. Indeed, Bogusia could have opened a tab in the woman's name, or simply handed her a box of produce in an overt act of charity. Going through the motions of a commercial transaction, however, worked to mask any social discomfort between Bogusia and the young woman by appearing to put the equitable nature of the exchange beyond question. Thus, while Humphrey determines that 'favours are a particular type of action that have moral value by virtue of not being conceptualized as exchanges' (2016: 51), in this case the 'warm glow' of good grace was facilitated precisely by maintaining a veneer of correspondence and reciprocity. Here, commercial exchange and gratuitous action remained mutually constitutive in both a conceptual and practical sense; while the open social and commercial equity of the transaction were demonstratively foregrounded through the exchange of cash and produce, the fact that it relied on Bogusia's goodwill was obscured along with the social implications of this dependency. Not only did her favour get its social efficacy by being mediated through what appeared to be quite another sort of gesture, her very choice to conduct it in the form of a transaction appeared to be directed at avoiding its possible interpretation as a condescending act of charity. Faced with contradictory values and interests, between commercial profit on the one hand, and being a good neighbour while avoiding charitable acts that would have sullied

such a relationship on the other, Bogusia turned to the ethical labour of favours manifested ‘at the level of action’ (Pitt-Rivers 2017b: 72). What we can thus observe here, to use Benveniste’s and Pitt-Rivers’s conceptual vocabulary of two circuits of exchange, is how the (first) circuit of commercial exchange becomes a medium for delivering grace for a neighbour out of the goodness of her heart.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we offered a panoramic view on the role that acts of favours and gratuitousness play in social life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a favour as ‘an act of kindness beyond what is due or usual’. A favour, according to this definition, is an exceptional act of benefaction arising from positive sentiments. It is, to use the words of Alena Ledeneva, an exception which proves the rule: a gesture which deviates from the ‘normal’ rules of obligation and reciprocity, while also sustaining these norms (2016: 25). As such, generations of anthropologists have generally shown little interest in favours, and gratuitous behaviour more generally. Reflecting the long-term dominance of the discipline by Durkheimian ideas of morality, ethnographers have concentrated instead on mapping the repeated, routine moments of cooperation and sympathy which make up communities, livelihoods, and social worlds. Commonly considering morality a matter of *collective* social and religious imperatives and obligations, and thus of unfreedom (Laidlaw 2014: 1–46), rather than *inter-personal and relational* action, and exercises of judgement, ethnographers have also given relatively little consideration to the possible ethical import of such gestures. Instead, favours have been largely approached as a problem of economy – or, more precisely, of exchange – and seen as embodying the tensions which characterize social and economic transactions: the push and pull of self-interest and fellow-feeling, instrumentality and affect, and the weighing up of material needs and moral imperatives. They have been seen as the formally and morally unorthodox acts undertaken by people when contradictory and incompatible social, moral, and economic demands are made of them (Ledeneva 2016; Brković 2017).

Favours, in short, have been considered a matter of ethics only insofar as they are implicated in larger moralities of exchange. Drawing on the work of Julian Pitt-Rivers, we have sought in this chapter to widen this remit. Building on Caroline Humphrey’s definition of the favour as a distinct ‘moral aesthetic of action that endows the actors with standing and a sense of self-worth’ (2016: 52), we have previously argued that favours constitute neither a form of ‘masked’ exchange nor an expression of goodwill, but rather a distinct mode of action which has economic consequences, without unfolding in a regime of direct equivalence or being fully

explicable in terms of transactional cost–benefit analysis (2016: 4). Pushing the argument a step further, here we suggest that favours do not simply embody a particular moral aesthetic of action but *perform a particular kind of ethical labour*: favours help *mediate* between the often contradictory and incompatible values, expectations, and moral frames which underpin our lives. Favours can mediate, for example, between the calculative values of the market and those of friendship and kin relations, between the divine grace and performing good deeds; or in the situations of radical distress, when the question of life and death is at stake, they allow for exercising freedom to act, as we saw in the story of Deo. What all these instances of doing favours have in common, Pitt-Rivers contended, is that they all articulate ‘the arbitrary will’ to act (Pitt-Rivers 2017a: 80). This brings Pitt-Rivers and the concept of favours close to the current anthropological debates on ethics and freedom. If human sociality is grounded in exchange of sentiments and gratitude mediated by the ethical labour of favours, then favours need to be considered as one of the key articulations of the ethical condition of social life.

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