

The Gift Economy

by Genevieve Vaughan

The gift economy is a way of looking at the world that gives us an alternative to patriarchal capitalism. If we start from the gift economy, from unilateral gift giving, we can reason through our ways of supplying each others' needs in a different way from that of the market and create an alternative society.

We need to do that now in order to create a culture of peace, but we also need to have that in our pockets waiting for the time, if it ever comes, when the economy that we have now crashes, so that we don't recreate the same negative market economy that does not work for the good of all.

The gift economy is a new perspective, a shift from the paradigm according to which we now interpret the world towards a paradigm which will make social change easier. Institutions and social structures common in society today are based on domination, competition and egotism, not on nurturing.

The gift economy perspective offers a way to review everything in terms of nurturing, in terms of gift giving. The thread of gift giving and receiving begins in every life with mothers who provide unilateral satisfaction of needs. All of us are mothered children. Someone must satisfy our needs unilaterally in order for us to grow up. As we grow up, we become givers of ever more complex gifts, and we must creatively receive and use what we are given.

But as time goes on in the lives of individuals and the existence of institutions and social structures, this thread is altered, turned back upon itself, moved to different levels, used for domination, used metaphorically.

The gift paradigm has the advantage of restoring mothering to its rightful place in the constitution of the human being. Because we are mothered children, we can find gifts everywhere. We can receive aspects of our environment as gifts even when there is no specific intention of mothering behind it. Our response to it may be as creative as it would be if it actually were a gift.

Daily life includes many examples of gift giving and receiving. In housework for example, we satisfy the "needs" of our

households to be cleaned and maintained, which in turn satisfies the needs of the people living there for a clean, healthy, uncluttered environment. Cooking satisfies the “need” of the food to be made safe and enjoyable so that the family can receive it creatively — their physiological and psychological needs be satisfied.

Farmers need seeds to plant and the knowledge of how to tend the plants and harvest them. Their work involves many subsidiary needs, such as the need for water, fertile soil, etc. Globalisation has recently allowed corporations from the North to privatise and make the free gifts of traditional knowledge, seeds, fertiliser and water into commodities that must be bought and sold, a situation which has particularly depleted the people of the South. This is one example of how free gifts are not respected but are made into the objects of plunder.

Needs for maintenance and repair accompany almost any human or non-human-made useful thing in our environment. At the level of advanced capitalism, there are many interdependent needs, for automobile and road maintenance and repair, for example. These needs are usually satisfied through the exchange economy but may also be satisfied freely by individuals who repair their own cars, for example.

At the level of fully established capitalism, there are many financial needs—the need for capital itself is one. In this case a low interest loan might be considered a gift. Where jobs are scarce, giving someone a job might be considered a gift.

The profit made by the capitalist on the labour of the worker, if it is considered in terms of surplus value (the value of the products over and above the amount necessary for the worker’s livelihood as expressed in his/her salary), can also be considered as a (forced) gift the worker is giving to the capitalist. The low price of labour in the so called “Third World” and the difference between

national economies create a flow of gifts from the South to the North also called “profit” by the corporations in the North.

By bringing needs and their satisfaction to the fore, we acquire a new perspective. We can follow the thread of the gift from its simple unilateral beginnings to the tangle created by exchange. We can re-propose the gift at a variety of levels and in a variety of measures. We can see the fertile and “generative” capacity of gift giving as we establish bonds with one another through giving gifts.

Bonds of communication and community are created through recognition and gratitude towards the source of the satisfaction of our needs, and through the recognition and care towards the other whose needs we satisfy. These bonds are instead broken by the adversarial logic and process of exchange. Living in a market-based society makes us think of all bonds in terms of exchange, of debt and repayment. But the bonds established through gift giving are positive and life-enhancing in contrast to onerous debt and responsibility. Indeed the words co-muni-ty and co-muni-cation, derive from the Latin “muni” which means “gifts.”

Many people especially in the so-called “First World” live in denial or ignorance of the devastating effects our countries’ and corporations’ policies have on the so-called “Third World.” Even when we are conscious of these effects we feel that we have no power to change them or to change similar situations within our own countries. We usually feel we do not know why these things are happening, or we attribute them to “human nature,” greed, and “man’s inhumanity to man.” There is a way to understand what is happening which allows us to address it both on the individual and group level and on the level of national and corporate policy.

In the last decades, feminists have

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challenged the “construction of gender,” questioning male and female roles and sexual identities. Psychologist Nancy Chodorow talks about little boys’ having to construct their gender in opposition to their mothers’. This is where the paradigms divide.

Mothers do nurturing work, unilaterally giving their children’s needs. In order to construct a male (non-mothering) identity, boys seem to have to give up nurturing and do something else. This “something else,” the alternative way of being, involves acculturation into male dominance. Mothers and others then nurture that dominant male identity.

Languages contain binary oppositions between male and female, as they do between other qualities and characteristics such as high and low, young and old. It is this binary aspect of language and its cultural validation that leads male children to self-monitor towards a non-nurturing, non-female identity.

Because this process for the most part goes on unconsciously and because it contains many paradoxes—such as the paradox of male preference where the mother nurtures the ones who are unlike herself more than the ones who are like herself—our values have been altered, and nurturing appears to be a relatively unimportant and even an inferior aspect of life, circumscribed to the area of early child care.

One particularly important loop in the thread of gift giving is the double gift: giving in order to receive a return gift — what we call “exchange.” Exchange requires quantification and measurement, an equation between what is given and what is received to the satisfaction of both parties. Our present economic system is based upon exchange.

Exchange is at odds with gift giving. The competition characteristic of capitalism pits the exchange way against the gift way. Two paradigms or worldviews are formed, one based on exchange and the other on gift giving.

One of the ways the exchange paradigm wins its competition with the gift paradigm is by defining everything in terms of competition, quantification and measurement. At the same time the exchange paradigm hides the activity of the gift paradigm. This concealment degrades gift giving and makes it inaccessible, both as a continuing activity and as a key to interpret and understand other aspects of life.

Because exchange is so much a part of our lives, we use it as a metaphor for understanding everything. For example, we may consider an interaction between two people to be a loving exchange when instead it may be two persons taking turns in giving and receiving. We are not usually conscious of the fundamental distinction between giving in order to receive and giving in order to satisfy the need of the other.

Giving in order to receive — exchange — is ego-oriented. The satisfaction of one’s own need is the real purpose of the transaction. Giving to satisfy another’s need is other-oriented. These two motivations constitute the basis of two logics, one of which is intransitive (exchange), the other of which is transitive (gift giving).

Exchange creates and requires scarcity. If everyone were giving to everyone else, there would be no need to exchange.





Mirror Image.
According to Nancy Chodorow, although children are nurtured by their mother, a boy's eventual identification with maleness entails a disassociation with his mother, including the task of nurturing and an orientation towards dominance. "Mother Wearing A Sunflower On Her Dress" by Mary Cassatt.

Taken from the Mary Cassatt Gallery
<http://www.marycassatt.org/Mother-Wearing-A-Sunflower-On-Her-Dress.html>

The market needs scarcity to maintain the level of prices. In fact, when there is an abundance of products, scarcity is often created on purpose. An example of this is the plowing under of "overabundant" crops. On a larger scale, scarcity is created by: (1) the channeling of wealth into the hands of the few who then have power over the many; (2) by spending on armaments and monuments which have no nurturing value but only serve for destruction and display of power; and (3) by privatising or depleting the environment so that the gifts of nature are unavailable to the many.

The exchange paradigm is a belief system which validates this kind of behaviour. Individuals who espouse it are functional to the economic system of which they are a part. Exchange is adversarial, each person tries to give less and get more, an attitude which creates antagonism and distance among the players. Gift giving creates and requires abundance. In fact, in scarcity gift giving is difficult and even self-sacrificial while in abundance, it is satisfying and even delightful.

Language is based on gift giving. This hypothesis breaks through the taboo against using nurturing (gift giving) as the model for other kinds of human activity and it has important consequences. If language is based on nurturing and if thinking is at least partially based on language, then thinking is at least partially based on nurturing.

If we view language as gift giving transposed onto a verbal level, and if we accept the idea that language made humans evolve, we can conclude that the gift giving aspect of language, not just the capacity for abstraction, caused the leap forward. Gift giving and receiving could be the way forward for humanity to evolve beyond its present danger and distress. Indeed we could begin to take nurturing as the creative norm and recognise exchange as the distortion which is causing devolution and danger to the human

species as well as all other species on the planet.

The construction of gender, with devastating effects such as the promotion of the values of dominance, competition and hierarchy (which are non-nurturing values), can be countered by re-introducing gift giving as a social value and interpretative key. Both male and female human beings are basically nurturers. One gender is not the binary opposite of the other. If we reintroduce the gift paradigm into our interpretation of the world, we will find our "gift giver within."

Women, as those who have been socially designated as the nurturers, will be rightfully restored to their place as the norm, and men can be reinterpreted in this light as those who have been socially dispossessed of that normal behavior but who can re-acquire it by espousing nurturing values.

Institutions are usually organised around the exchange and dominance paradigm, but they can be reorganised to satisfy needs. The rewards which accompany dominance can be eliminated and gift giving can be affirmed and promoted.

It is not because of a fatal flaw in human nature that we act so inhumanely to one another, but because of a complex tangle of gift-thread logics and strategies which become contradictory and promote adversarial behaviours. The tangle can be unraveled and understood, not within the exchange paradigm itself but by starting over, putting gift giving first as a theme for understanding the world. ■

Genevieve Vaughan is a feminist activist, theorist and writer. She has practiced the gift economy in her life for many years, as well as theorised and written about it. Her books include *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange and Homo Donans*. She has also written many articles and edited collections on the gift economy. These may be freely downloaded from the website: www.gift-economy.com