

Thinking Through the Gift Paradigm

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Cet article définit la théorie du paradigme du don qui est basée sur le travail maternel non rémunéré. L'autrice considère que la distribution réalisée à travers le don est supérieure à la distribution des échanges sur le marché parce qu'elle est capable de créer un élément de vie. De plus, elle dénonce la façon dont le système dominant du patriarcat capitaliste a rendu invisible le travail maternel et s'approprié de tout ce qui est gratuit pour en faire du profit. Encore, elle voit un lien profond entre la logique de la sphère domestique et celle des sociétés «d'avant-marché». En définitive, elle veut une re-conceptualisation de l'économie maternelle en tant qu'alternative à l'économie et à la logique patriarcale.

Like feminist economists, I call unmonetized care work or motherwork “economic,” but I see this unmonetized work as belonging to an alternative economy that has been colonized by the market although it continues to coexist alongside it. Europeans have been engaged in monetized exchange for at least 2500 years and in patriarchy for probably 6000. Before this and in many other parts of the world, non-market provisioning economies were the norm and remnants of them exist today in Indigenous and matriarchal societies (Goettner-Abendroth). In Europe, the market and patriarchy have merged to create the system of Patriarchal Capitalism (or, with a different emphasis, Capitalist Patriarchy), where the values of competition and domination typical of Patriarchy supply the motivation for an economic system in which a few rise to the top to control the fate of all and to “make” stratospheric amounts of money. This system and the worldview accompanying it encourage us to blame or praise individuals, making them responsible for the disastrous consequences it incurs. Instead, the

system itself must become the focus of everyone’s radical therapeutic and critical attention.

As part of the Patriarchal Capitalist system, a “sphere” of unpaid “reproductive” labour contributes to the workforce free of cost to the market. My contention is that this sphere of unpaid labour is actually a different kind of economy, a different mode of distribution, which is prior and indeed superior to distribution by market exchange for the continuance of life on the planet.

The reason that it has been so difficult to count care work is that its logic belongs to this original non-market gift mode. Including free work—gifting—in the concept of “economy” has the advantage that it enlarges the category making it encompass at least two types of economies. It displaces the market from its hegemonic place in economics.

The gift economy can be found not only in phylogenesis—that is, historically, in “pre” market, provisioning economies but also in ontogenesis—mothercare. The centrality of maternal care work in the unpaid domestic sphere is the strange attractor around which that sphere is constituted and, as Duncan Ironmonger says, the domestic economy is the binary star of the market economy.

Although crude misogyny certainly takes its toll, there are a number of other reasons why the domestic sphere is not recognized as an economy, and why maternal work and care work are usually undervalued and invisible. First, there is a logical contradiction in evaluating free work in monetary terms (in terms of the very standard of what is *not* free). Secondly, free provisioning or gifting has a logic of its own, which is invisible to the logic of monetized exchange. This logic is often explained away by considering giving as instinctual, the product of duty or of hormonal disposition or of women’s nature, which like Nature

provides gifts for free. In contrast, the logic of exchange seems to be the hallmark of the human. However, gifting provides the basic human logic, and I will come back to this point in my second article in this volume.

Another reason the free work of the domestic sphere is not recognized is that the market economy is actually locked in a parasitic embrace with the gift economy. Profit itself is a portion of the price that is free to the exchanger who “makes” it. It is important to the system that this parasitism remain invisible so that those who are unwittingly giving

it also alters the views of economists and of researchers in many other fields, including scientists studying early childhood, philosophers, neurobiologists, psychologists, linguists, etc.¹ By leaving out what I believe is an economy based on the model of the mother, these investigators also do not recognize or understand the trauma of the transition from the logic of the gift to the logic of the market. In fact, one could say that children undergo a “great transformation” (Polanyi) between four and ten years of age when they transition out of the free maternal gift

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to it will not rebel. It is also important to realize that the context in which gifting occurs is deeply altered by this circumstance and that personal or domestic gifting has been made difficult and even self-sacrificial by the scarcity created by the systemic seizure of gifts of the many. This danger of self-sacrifice serves to denigrate gifting even to those who would otherwise *want* to do it.

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A definition of “economy” in Wikipedia (itself a free gift economy project) unsurprisingly leaves out any particular reference to the economic agency of women or mothers in spite of the derivation of the word:

An economy (Greek οἶκος—household and νέμωμαι—manage) or *economic* system consists of the production, distribution or trade, and consumption of limited goods and services by different agents in a given geographical location. The *economic* agents can be individuals, businesses, organizations, or governments.

This commonplace omission of the free domestic economy from the concept of “economics” has an effect not only on mothers’ and everyone’s economic situation, but

economy and begin to understand and practice exchange in a world where almost nothing is free.²

As I mentioned above, one way the gift economy is disqualified is by considering it the province of emotion without a logic of its own. If we contrast exchange and giving, however, we can see the different interpersonal logics more clearly. The logic of the gift is transitive and unidirectional towards the needs of the receiver. The logic of exchange is bidirectional and focuses on the needs of the exchange agent, using the needs of the other as means. Thus, gifting is other-oriented while exchange is ego-oriented. Exchange is focused on quantification while gifting is mainly qualitative. The two modes create different kinds of value: gift value and exchange value. Gifting gives value to the other by implication. Satisfying the need implies that the other is valuable to the person who takes the initiative (if the other had not been valuable to the giver, s:he³ would not have satisfied the other’s need). This implication of value can be assimilated by the receiver and forms the basis for bonds of mutuality and emotions of positive self-evaluation and self-esteem. Exchange implies exchange value for the item exchanged, relating it by its price to all other products on the market. However, exchange is indifferent to the value of the *buyer* except as expressed in the value of the product (or money) s:he also exchanges. Both gift value and exchange value are relational and interpersonal while use value only concerns the utility of the object itself without saying anything about who will use it. It is therefore not directly relational. Identifying the gift economy and gift value provides an example of fundamental material interactions and relations that are not “materialistic.” These are established before

the transfers of exchange, which are “materialistic” and often motivated by and motivate greed, displacing them in the child’s consciousness as s:he learns to adapt to the ways of the market.

Exchange logic is self-reflecting, while gift logic is other-tending. Exchange denies the gift while maneuvering for (the gift of) profit and it ends with the conclusion of each transaction, while the gift can be passed on in the same or another form, sooner or later creating a circuit of inclusion. There is a syllogism of the gift: If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C. Gifting extends human relations of mutual inclusion and trust among many, while exchange presumes and creates separation, mutual exclusion, competition, and exacerbated individualism.

The gift is widespread, because it is necessary for survival. It begins with free mothering, because infants cannot exchange quantitative equivalents with their motherers. It is a primordial necessity for everyone in all cultures that someone satisfy infants’ needs unilaterally. The recognition of this basic free material economy provides a deep alternative but it has been obscured and victimized by the proponents of the market. Nevertheless it continues underground in all areas of life, unseen and unnamed. The recognition of this basic human economy has been made difficult by the proponents of the market and Patriarchy. Indeed, the dismissal of mothering is probably also the dismissal of the gift economy.

My focus is on society, the aggregate of individuals with their common relational patterns, in this case the patterns that come from mothering as contrasted with those that come from the market. The mothering patterns have been particularized, blocked and distorted *by* the market. I want to generalize them again. I say “again” recognizing their continuity with “pre” market societies where gift giving—unilateral provisioning—was and still is widespread.⁴ Indigenous spiritualities generalize gifting to all of Nature, and Indigenous peoples participate in rituals of giving and receiving (and communicating) with nature, spirits, and with each other. The respect for mothering and the presence of honoured gifting practices are systematically sustained in society at large.

Although I think we should respect and learn from these societies, I do not want to directly imitate any of these models, but consciously move towards alternative economies based on free maternal gift giving, liberated from the economy of exchange. This can begin by recognizing and naming the many places where unilateral gifting is already happening, by shifting our thinking towards the gift paradigm and then by creating and validating gift projects that can serve as models. This necessary generalization of the gift economy cannot and should not happen without

the recognition of its roots in unilateral giving/receiving – mothering/being mothered (and the free work of the domestic sphere).

Thus mothering/being mothered must be generally validated as well not only as abstract giving. This validation should begin by rethinking and reevaluating several different moments of mothering, beginning with the understanding of pregnancy not as an illness, but as a condition of life-giving power (preceded by a reevaluation of menstruation as the harbinger of that power). Many non-Western societies have practices in which women care for women in these circumstances, affirming the importance of the mother’s gift of life by their gifts and services. In Western societies, we have midwives who perform a similar function often under the shadow of the commercial business of medicine. Birthing in hospitals is often demeaning to women and a standardized practice often includes the imposition of Cesareans, unnecessary cuttings, the separation of the newborn from the mother, commercial formula over breast milk, etc. All this contributes to the marginalization of the model of the mother and its replacement by the medical market and patriarchy. Similarly, the authority of money and of the Patriarchal male devalue and deny the importance of what is free, beginning with the free carework of nurturing the child and encompassing the whole household economy (see E. Skoko this volume).

The project of evaluating free giving with the tools of exchange and the market in order to make the domestic economy visible to the powers that be is misconceived. Instead, the evaluation should take place in the other direction. The market should be evaluated by the values of the gift economy, by the consideration of the needs the market satisfies. Some of this work is being done now by critics of capitalism who show that it is the needs of capitalists and corporations for money in ever more stratospheric amounts that the market is satisfying, and not the needs of whole populations, which indeed are becoming ever more dire (due also to market- and money-driven ecological destruction and wars). Since the model of the mother is qualitative and mostly denigrated or invisible in this society, critics of the market do not know they are unconsciously harking back to it. They and the mainstream fall back on quantitative evaluation by means of money, or on an appeal to the law, which has also been constructed in the absence of the model of the mother.

Instead, the mother must be the model of the human for both sexes, both as first social partner in the development of the self, and as the model and vanguard of the replacement of the market by the domestic provisioning economy, which would be an adult gift economy in continuity with Mother Earth.

I believe that it is possible to liberate ourselves from the parasitic system and find again the hidden human core of our species: we are *homo donans*, a species of givers and receivers who also pass the gift on. We are not just knowers, *homo sapiens sapiens*. In fact, as knowers we are in denial. We deny, and do not know, that we are basically givers/receivers. And we do not know that we do not know.

In order to reveal this most important hidden aspect of our species, I have tried to show how the maternal gift is incarnated in language, creating a second functioning

pattern away from gifting and towards dominance due to the placement of the boy child in a gender category opposite to that of the gift-giving mother. This categorization is aggravated by patriarchy, by the market and by the imposition of the model of exchange as superior to that of gift giving. Giving-receiving form the original pan human process while patriarchal masculinity and the market are its distortions, as is the concomitant relegation of the motherer to an inferior status. It is important to de gender and de sentimentalize gifting in this way so

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but unacknowledged gift-giving model that accompanies us throughout our lives and structures a large part of our thinking (*For-Giving; The Gift in the Heart of Language*). I have discussed this at length, but I do not have much space here for this or for the many other issues that have different formulations when the unilateral gift is seen not only as possible, but also as commonplace. There are many different strands of research that are relevant to the understanding of gift giving and its importance. For example, beyond economics there are cognitive psychology, linguistics, anthropology, semiotics, philosophy and now neurobiology. In each of these universes of discourse, we who embrace the different paradigm need to try to bring mothering/gifting forward. This is both a huge challenge and a great opportunity. It is also a fascinating intellectual adventure.

By putting the mother-child relation founded on free motherwork back into epistemology, we can begin to recognize a picture that has been distorted by centuries of patriarchal thinking. In this way, we can give a new general positive valence, or value to mothering/gifting and to the gift economy as a whole. It is almost as if we are identifying it and naming it anew. We have to *motherize* Western thought and “rematriate” it.

Every human born has to be mothered and thus every child who survives, whether female or male, has to receive the *model* of the unilateral gift. This model and the patterns deriving from it shape us as human beings from the beginning and are visible in communication and language as well as in many other aspects of our lives. One of these aspects is the construction of the masculine gender, which I understand as the distortion of the

that we can see it as an economy with a logic and values of its own.

In order to create a profound paradigm shift, we first need to understand what we are *not* seeing and why. There are many reasons for our blindness; some are structural or logical, and some psychological. I will mention just a few. To some extent, we do not recognize gifting because exchange is “intrinsically” double. That is, it is made up of symmetrical parts that substitute for each other. Gifting is dyadic but asymmetrical (one has something to give and the other has a need) and transitive, not primarily substitutive. Exchange replicates and reflects itself in the numerical meta language of prices, while the altercentric unilateral gift, which creates mutual connection, solidarity and support, does not reflect itself in the same way.⁵ In fact, repeating the gift towards others outside the dyad, “passes it on.” There is not just a psychological or “moral” difference here, in that exchange is ego-oriented and gift is other-oriented, but a logical and structural difference between self-reflection and focusing on the other. The self-reflection is what we are used to seeing, while focus on others is not mainly self-reflecting and we tend not to see it, or we discount it by considering it exceptional.

Patriarchal capitalism is self-confirming. In the context of scarcity created by the market, giving is difficult; givers over-value exchange and exchangers, because it is only through exchange that they have access to the necessary means of giving (capitalists own the means of production, but the market and its participants own almost all of the means of giving). Moreover, because of the scarcity and lack of community in patriarchal capitalism, and especially the lack of close women’s community around issues of

pregnancy, birth, mothering and care, many mothers who are overworked and over-burdened see the maternal role itself as the source of their problems.

Patriarchy ignores or undervalues giving or overvalues and touts it as a saintly ideal. Women, who have to take the point of view of the (infant) other in order to mother, often take the point of view of patriarchy and undervalue themselves and mothering or blame themselves for failure to reach the ideal. Working in the exchange economy presents many psychological and practical challenges for mothers, but not working for pay can be life threatening.

The paradoxical invisibility of gifts means that the exchange economy has been able to take the gifts of the many—to ubiquitously extract them as profit in plain view—without being recognized as doing so. Making gifting visible is already a revolutionary act, a necessary first step in the feminist approach to social change I am proposing.

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Endnotes

¹Nevertheless a new discipline, neuroeconomics, has emerged that makes the study and determination of human choices available to economic agents, putting the public at the service of corporations in ever more sophisticated ways. If the patriarchal capitalist economy were not allowed to occupy the whole category of economics and the gift economy were admitted, we would more easily understand exploitation and the choice to engage in it.

²It is also significant that many little boys in the U.S. begin to experiment with patriarchal behaviors in kindergarten at around four years of age. Already influenced by macho stereotypes, they begin to reject the maternal values of

care and join together in “mean teams,” bullying weaker boys (Chu).

³I use this variation on s/he because I consider the slash a masculinist symbol. I have substituted it with : representing nipples, which both women and men have. I also use a terminological variation on “mother,” “motherer,” which brings forward the idea of mothering as a process that both women and men, and indeed entire villages can do.

⁴Even though it is relatively unstudied. Thus, a wide range of societies have maternal provisioning, including societies with “agonistic” gift exchange, those with peripheral or occasional markets, market societies in rural areas where neighbourliness is normal, and among poor communities everywhere with limited access to money.

⁶Grammar terms form the meta language of language. Exchange follows the linguistic path of re-presentation while giving is an act of transitivity (see Vaughan *For-Giving* and *The Gift in the Heart of Language*).

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