

Giving and Receiving

The Maternal Basis of Life and Language

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Malheureusement, l'économie du don dans le système capitaliste-patriarcal est discréditée et retenue invisible. Un changement vers un paradigme féministe est nécessaire. Selon l'auteur, la première étape consiste à dévoiler la pratique de l'économie du don et à se demander pourquoi elle n'a jamais été considérée comme valable. L'auteur identifie l'économie du don, non seulement, dans la pratique maternelle mais aussi dans la langue elle-même et note que le don a été annulé en tant que clé d'interprétation par la linguistique et la sémiotique comme par de nombreuses autres disciplines académiques. Ensuite, elle reconnaît un lien entre les modèles de donner et de recevoir des humains et ceux des niches environnementales de la nature, insistant sur le fait que si nous acceptons l'économie du don, lui-même vu, comme donation qui a besoin d'un receveur, nous pourrions tout interpréter selon ce paradigme, comme le font certaines cultures des peuples autochtones qui souvent pratiquent le don. L'article se termine sur la question de l'importance du modèle maternel pour réaliser un changement social radical.

In a way, it is easier to write about the gift economy than to do patriarchal

philosophy, because describing the gift economy reveals something that already exists, while the latter has had to invent a motherless philosophical system *ex novo*. However, revealing giving/receiving, mothering/being mothered, has required stretching some widely held concepts.

First, giving and receiving in mothering has to be recognized.¹ Then, the concept of “economy” has to be enlarged to include maternal giving and receiving and thus also the maternal gift economy. This makes it clear that the free labour of the domestic sphere is the “host” of a parasitic market economy based on exchange, that is, both remnant of an economy of the past and harbinger of a liberated alternative economy which is to come. At the same time, with my background in semiotics, I saw that it is possible to base a philosophy of language on mother-child giving and receiving. And I came to see the world we share as a gift made of gifts.

If the patterns of giving and receiving structure our reality and are projected onto the plane of sound in language, then they can also be projected onto the world at large and vice versa. Cultures that practice gift

giving and maintain customs of gratitude often recognize gifts everywhere. Even in our exchange-based society, many of us recognize and are grateful for the gifts of divinities, of Nature, of synchronicity, or fate. The framework that we receive in childhood is maintained in our adult propensity toward the gift, even when we no longer recognize the model of the mother because the superstructure of the patriarchal exchange economy has occupied our field of vision.

By making mothering and being mothered fundamental, we are given a framework for understanding the experiences of the adult human being. Furthermore, I believe the notion of ecological niche can help to show how the giving and receiving framework informs perception itself.

Humans are vulnerable creatures. Our engagement with our ecological niches is mediated by interaction with cultural niches that provide many ways of receiving the positive and avoiding the negative aspects of Nature and of Culture itself. In her² construction of a child-relevant environment, the motherer's right brain to right brain pre-elaboration of the world together with the child

(Schoore *Affect Regulation*) is a service that makes the world accessible, showing its positive and negative affordances to the child and promoting the child's self-regulation of emotions. Moreover, emphasis is also given in the form of the emotional "valences" the motherer ascribes to their shared experiences and the social value accents or words that the motherer has herself learned interpersonally and has received, used, given, and elaborated upon throughout her lifetime.

Under the right conditions, the mothering of infants and young children creates a kind of more intense ecological niche, an external interpersonal "social placenta" that can make the child's early experience intensely nurturing. The gifts of the mother, first in the womb and then in the extra-uterine gifting practice she creates, mediate the life of the child, and ready her for interaction with the gifts and services of the wider niches of society and Nature.

There is a gift "fit" between the adult human creature and the ecological niche, achieved without exchange, even if some exertion is necessary on the part of the receiver. The idea that receiving is purely passive is part of the patriarchal prejudice against receiving (and against women and children considered as passive while men are seen to be active). Receiving is active in that a creature has to exert itself to receive. The rabbit searches for tender grass, the wolf hunts the rabbit. The baby has to suck at the breast to receive the milk, the adult has to plant the corn and care for it until she can harvest, grind, cook, and eat it. There are innumerable ways of actively and creatively receiving the gifts of our surroundings and previous receivers and givers have handed (given) many of these down to us. In fact, many aspects of nature and culture are not revealed to be gifts until ways of receiving them are created.

It is through the gift fit of human creature and ecological and cultural niches that we understand Nature and even Reality itself as Mother.

The maternal character of the world is invisible or seen as negative in a patriarchal, even matricidal, culture like our own, where gifts are systemically seized as private property, commodified, and denied to the needs of the many, while creating pockets of abundance for the few. Nevertheless, our bodies, brains, cultures, and languages are products of tens and hundreds of thousands of years of evolution during which we have adapted to our ecological and social niches as mothered children receiving abundant perceptual³ and conceptual gifts, even in situations where few material gifts were available for our direct consumption. We remain perceptually, conceptually, and linguistically maternal and mothered even when we are materially deprived. Even when we disrespect mothering, we turn toward the world to be nurtured by it. Our perceptual, conceptual, and communicative needs are satisfied by the world around us and by other people who nurture us without knowing it, using language and other signs.

Because we have been mothered we cannot be solipsistic. Our connections with other minds and with the external world have been established at the beginning of life. The philosophical stances that doubt this have simply eliminated mothering and childhood from the picture, leaving patriarchal philosophers puzzled about how we are able to perceive and understand the world. I suggest a naïve realism, which is naïve because we learn it as children. But that does not invalidate it. Indeed, every child that grows up is an experiment that succeeds, proof that the maternal interactive framework is functional for the human ecological niche. We continue to provide this proof

not only as motherers, but also as adult communicators, weaving our perceptual and conceptual commons through nurturing-gifting-and-receiving in consonance with nature and society.

I want a materialism that arises from maternal giving and receiving, and that includes the possibility of passing the gifts on, creating a valid and viable worldview beyond the hungry and impoverishing mechanism of bilateral exchange. In fact, on the surface, exchange seems serenely equal and symmetrical, but this is an illusion because exchange is motivated by the possibility of appropriating hidden gifts (of profit) at all levels.⁴

Infancy Research

A certain amount of attention has been given to mothers and mothering by the newly developing discipline of infant psychology in recent decades. Researchers have studied infants from birth using video and more recently neuroimaging techniques like MRI and fMRI. This has allowed an elucidation of the specifics of babies' neurological development. Many of these studies have been focused on the mind and brain of the individual child—from the skin inward so to speak. With the exception of some of Daniel Stern's work, this focus has been mostly on the child, with the mother (the "motherer") in the picture mainly as background (a "given"). Despite the limitations of its focus, the new understanding of the infant has brought about some change in the understanding of mothering. Studies by Colwyn Trevarthen (see Smidt), Andrew Meltzoff (Meltzoff and Brooks), Stein Braten and many others have shown that differently from what Freud and Piaget supposed, the infant is an active social being right from the start and requires an active adult social being as

partner. Others, like Alison Gopnik and Patricia Kuhl (Kuhl, Meltzoff and Brooks), have developed detailed computational theories about how babies learn language, by monitoring the activity of their brains with advanced magnetoencephalography.

An interesting move towards a somewhat more central focus on the motherer is a shift toward the

emerge, our social experiences can directly shape our neural architecture. Put simply, our relational connections shape our neural connections. This interactive process occurs throughout the lifespan. (15)

Interpersonal neurobiological research thus shows how nurture

Moreover, recent studies have shown that the child's and the motherer's mirror neurons simulate the activity of the other person in the dyad, so that each person subconsciously knows what the other is doing and feeling. This would be particularly important for the material nurturing interaction, but giving and receiving have hardly been

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integration of John Bowlby's attachment theory (*Attachment and Loss*) and neurobiology in what is being called "interpersonal neurobiology," as developed by Allan Schore (*Affect Regulation*), Daniel Siegel (*The Developing Mind*) and others. Here, the right hemisphere of the motherer's brain is seen to interact with the infant's brain. The motherer regulates the preverbal child's emotions and the child's right brain registers and learns from her how to self regulate (Schore *Affect Regulation*). Moreover, "The rate of synaptogenesis in the developing infant's brain is a remarkable forty thousand new synapses every second, and that brain volume increases from four hundred grams at birth to one thousand grams at one year" (Schore "Understanding" 3). During this tremendous growth spurt, the social experiences the infant has with her motherer are incorporated into the neural connections while the potential connections that are not used disappear. Dan Siegel elaborates:

Given that interpersonal relationships guide how we focus our attention and therefore how our neural firing patterns

becomes nature. The care given by the motherer is incorporated into the physiology of the child's brain. Although I consider this a very important shift in perspective, I have to insist that the most important early interpersonal experiences for infants are those of the maternal gift economy: receiving and giving goods and services. These are crucial for their survival. Most neurobiological researchers come from the disciplines of psychotherapy, so they tend to concentrate on psychological rather than material interactions. However, the material interactions of giving and receiving are the most fundamental; they are the substrata for the psychological ones.⁵

I believe these gifting experiences are what create the communication and attention patterns that, "form our first relationships and directly shape our neural architecture" (Siegel). These first free nurture-based relationships are permeated with emotions. Satisfying the child's needs tends to establish mutuality and trust, the positive affect that Schore (*Affect Regulation*) underlines as a most important aspect of the mother-child interaction.

studied as such by mirror neuron and infancy researchers. The only comment I have seen is by Stein Braten: "...We should expect, for example, that in humans give-mirror neurons should be activated during their own giving and while watching the other give and that grasp-mirror neurons be activated during own grasping and while watching the other grasp" (291, n.3).

To me the research on mirror neurons communicates the extremely important idea that each individual at least subconsciously knows what the other is feeling when giving or when receiving (and vice versa) and perhaps also knows *that* the other knows. Emotionally, at least to some extent, receiving is giving and giving is receiving.

The neurobiological research leaves out the fact of motherwork and nurturework, so it is not acknowledged or emphasized that at the level of practical daily life, all of the developments of the brain in early childhood are taking place in what is for the baby a free gift economy.⁵ The growth of the brain, neural network activations, and positive emotional responses all arise with free unilat-

eral gifts and gifting. From an adult market perspective, free goods are positive mainly because they are *not* exchange. However, “free” actually has an important positive character of its own, in that the needs of the receiver elicit the gifting initiative of the giver, thereby maintaining the infant’s life.⁶ No exchange of a return gift is expected or required. By this

the skin inward. Even the *interpersonal* neurobiological study of the mother-child relation does not recognize the importance of the gift economy for the development of the child and of the infant brain. This is in part due to the therapeutic intention of these studies and their final destination in psychology and psychoanalysis, which disregard the larger scale ques-

understands its genesis in the context of maternal gifting and receiving, and includes the possibility of passing the gift on, beyond the *cul de sac* of bilateral exchange.

In everyday life, gifting also provides an accessible model for non-exclusive categorization (which includes spirituality), because it includes the needs of the other. With gifting, no

The maternal gift economy sets up patterns of relations that derive from the satisfaction of needs and not from the competition and domination of patriarchal capitalism, or from following rules that curb such domination. These gift patterns and those deriving from gifting in language are the basis of a fundamentally functional, humane way of behaving.

I don’t mean to say that children do not respond or that their motherers do not respond to their response; rather, this is not a *quid pro quo* transaction but turn-taking mutual attunement.

Although much is made of the psychological and verbal “give and take” between motherers and children, the material interaction is hardly mentioned by the neuroscientists, nor is motherwork seen to be relevant. Neurobiology—even interpersonal neurobiology—constitutes a narrative about individuals from which motherwork, the work of care, has been eliminated. There is therefore little or no visible connection between neurobiology and alternative economics.⁵

Child Development

Although the fields of child development, infancy research, and neurobiology have recently opened many new perspectives regarding mothers and children, removing material nurturing economics from the context of these fields conceals the importance of the interaction of mothering so that the investigation of “development” concerns the individual child from

tions of poverty⁶ and wealth. These latter issues are themselves relegated to other academic “silos.”

Thus, while the neurobiological study of the brain—even of brains interacting—seems to have to do with the material world, it eliminates from the discourse the transfer of goods and services on which physical being depends. Although it studies the body, neurobiology is not “materialist” just because it does not deal with the provisioning aspects of life. Mothering on the other hand *is* a materialist practice, because it gets goods and services to the needs.

On another front, the free maternal gift economy is not “utilitarian” even though it satisfies material needs. Rather, it brings with it all of the positive psychological and spiritual developmental effects that form the social human. Thus, even anti-utilitarian gift economy sociological thinkers (*Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales*),⁷ like economists, linguists, anthropologists, neurobiologists, and many others, leave out the important unilateral material gifting that takes place in maternal practice. I want an anti-utilitarian (anti-market) materialism that

separate realm of religion or morality needs to be constructed beyond life. Rather, life itself is already “spirit” (deriving from Latin *spiritus*, breath.) Indeed, the air we inhale is a free gift and the breath we exhale freely satisfies the needs of the plants for carbon dioxide. When we no longer engage in this gift process, we die.

The values of care and compassion follow from the conscious or unconscious practice of the gift economy. The imposition upon society of the market and its values, together with the dismissal of the importance of mothering, displaces into a special realm of “morality” the kinds of positive actions and ideas arising from the practice of the maternal economy. This has sometimes allowed us to think that mothers are “instinctually” more moral than others or that they have a natural tendency for self-sacrifice. Instead, I believe motherers, and even most men and women who do not have anything to do with children, are already necessarily though unwittingly, if only partially, practising the alternative economy that harks back to the gift economy they knew as children. Using Marx’s idea, we can identify what we call moral

or caring values not as something independent and *sui generis* but as the *superstructure* of this alternative gift economy *structure*.

The maternal gift economy sets up patterns of relations that derive from the satisfaction of needs and not from the competition and domination of patriarchal capitalism, or from following rules that curb such domination. These gift patterns and those deriving from gifting in language are the basis of a fundamentally functional, humane way of behaving. Exchange, the market, and the law operate according to other patterns such as categorization, equivalence, repayment, and reprisal. They are an artificial overlay on the gift patterns and they distort our original motivations and reactions. The law and the ethics of rights and justice are based mainly on categorization, exchange, and payment for crime. They are part of the superstructure of the exchange economy; the system needs them to keep the market's parasitic plunder of the gift economy within acceptable limits. Causing a balance between gift and exchange, the ethics of rights and justice, crime and punishment, appeal to the market for validation. The idea of "balance" as conceived in patriarchal capitalism harks back to the quantification necessary for trade, the balance of the scales, and the equation between a commodity and a quantity of the money standard. The gift, which is inherently unbalanced—the having of one given to the lack of the other—is once again excluded, beyond the pale.

Language and Meta Language

For centuries, the maternal gift economy in the West has appeared to lack its own valid meta-level. Maternal gifting has been unspoken and ignored, called "instinct," women's "burden," "destiny," "duty," or "moral behaviour." It has been thought of as

part of a separate economic "sphere" alongside the market afflicted by the scourge of unpaid labour.

Even though women, and especially mothers, have engaged in and experienced a pervasive alternative gift economy, we have not even recognized it as such ourselves, nor have we understood its connections with everything else. Although we are practising it, often to our disadvantage, we have not taken it seriously enough in a positive light. In fact, if feminists do not recognize the gift economy as an alternative to the market economy, we can only continue to practice it as a subordinate behaviour, and we will continue to create changes only *within* the market, making improvements inside what is after all a destructive, oppressive, and matricidal/suicidal system. To shift the paradigm, change the system, dismantle patriarchal capitalism, and replace it with a better way of loving and sustaining life, the gift economy approach is sorely needed.

Language Itself is the Meta Level of Giving and Receiving, Mothering and Being Mothered

The old paradigm, which derives from the merger of the market and patriarchy, permeates all the disciplines of academia, while academia influences daily life through its collusion with the market and through the elaboration of market ideology. Challenging the paradigm at an academic level is necessary to loosen its hold and create a multiplier effect. That is why I am proposing the theory of the maternal gift economy. The areas of academic investigation that I know most about are those that deal with language and communication and that is where I have concentrated my efforts. I try to show how nurture not only becomes nature (by shaping our neuron connections) (Siegel) but also how it becomes language (as we project our

nurture-based social relations onto another plane).

I believe that language is a reenactment of the mother-child and giving-receiving interactions on the plane of sound⁸ and that language derives its basic structure and its capacity for conveying meaning from mothering and being mothered. As I have been saying, giving and receiving is the basic human (and economic) relation-creating process. In the formation of language the same process, the giving-receiving interaction, creates relations among words; among things (and experiences and ideas); and among words and things (and experiences and ideas). Speakers give words to listeners and satisfy their cognitive and communicative needs. To construct combinations of words, speakers create giving-receiving *among* words. This is what allows one word or particle to modify or merge with others in syntax. In "red ball," "red" is given to "ball." In "walked," "ed" is given to "walk" to form the past tense.⁹ In a transitive sentence in English, the subject (giver) gives the predicate (the gift or service) to the object (the receiver). ("The girl hits the ball.") I have described giving-and-receiving in language at length in my books and articles and refer the reader to the detailed treatment there.

It is important to look at language in this light because in the old paradigm, philosophers and linguists have seen language structure as a *sui generis* innate or conventional system of grammar rules. They leave out mothering and gifting or make it secondary while language becomes abstract and mysterious. Consequently, human communication and connection seem to come from the capacity for linguistic abstraction and from following the same rules instead of from giving-receiving to satisfy others' needs (in this case communicative and cognitive needs).

To those who study it in aca-

demia, language is usually seen as our species-specific trait. It has been considered a tool for communication and thought; used in daily life by all, but serving also for the abstract elaboration of culture. It has also been criticized as an important instrument of domination. I appreciate all these dimensions. However, when the source of language is seen as a genetic inheritance (itself a gift word), the study of language bypasses mothering. This view seriously impedes the shift to an alternative gift paradigm based on mothering, because it denies the creative agency of nurture and mothercare. Instead, it attributes our linguistic capacity to our (unmothered) genes, which most of us cannot directly investigate.

Many are turning toward the gift economy now that the market economy is demonstrating its inability to satisfy the needs of the many. Attempting this without a paradigm shift toward the maternal model presents the same problem as that of academics who see language without the mother. It fails to acknowledge that our human agency and gift capacities come from being mothered and does not allow a new understanding of maternal care that would provide a context for practical gift experiments to generalize. Exchange and the market remain the defining context, and are spreading ever more widely into what were once free gift areas, making gifting more difficult. Think of the takeover and exploitation of “pre” market economies, the commodification of water and seeds, and the plunder of pristine environments. Even developments like the “sharing economy” confuse gifts with exchange and thus validate the market. If we do not have a philosophy that makes the connection between the maternal economy and the free gifts of nature on the one hand, and the exploitation of gifts by economic patriarchy on the other hand, our attempts at creating

gift economies will remain isolated, individualistic, and impossible to generalize.

Mothering is already general in that it is determined by children’s needs, which are quite similar everywhere at the beginning of life. People who are attempting to live without money, to create eco villages outside the system, urban gardens, Internet gift projects, people who do volunteer work, who create alternative economic models of sharing and the commons, and people who try to practice the gift economy directly in their lives and businesses, are all attempting to give the gift of social change without recognizing its defining presence, or roots, in mothering and/or being mothered, which—to some extent anyway—we have all experienced. This keeps the spread of social change incremental. Alternatively, recognizing the deep and universal maternal roots of the gift economy accesses a wider and more general framework with reference to which change could become exponential.

Lack of attention to material nurturing also allows many “owning class” people in the Global North to remain disconnected from the worldwide poverty their economic, political, and warmongering policies are causing. By refusing to change these policies, they fail even to try to nurture the billions of victims and vulnerable people of the future. Generalization and respect for mothering would foster a shift in attitude among those who are now functioning within the old devastating paradigm, opening the way for deep social change.

Erasures of Maternal Materialism from Academia

Continuing to look at the academic world, we can see that the maternal gift economy has been erased from many academic disciplines. Mothering has been considered an

“externality” by the discipline of economics; it has been excluded from the study of language structure and it has even been eliminated from the anthropological study¹⁰ of gift giving, creating a blind spot with regard to the common *maternal* origin of many aspects of society.

The blind spot regarding language fosters the illusion that the source of language is separate from the source of life. If we understand that maternal relations of giving and receiving projected into sound are the functional patterns underlying the phenomenon of language, then language’s mysterious and abstract character would be dissolved. Language would be rescued from appropriation by elites, and given back to the life-oriented practices of mothers and children. The domination of language by men would be thwarted, showing that men also practice mother-child nurturing as they speak (without acknowledging it of course).

Like linguists and economists (which I discuss in my other article in this issue), anthropologists leave aside the basic pattern of maternal gifting. Following Marcel Mauss, they consider the adult gift interaction to consist of three steps: giving, receiving, and giving back. Anthropologists investigate the rules of reciprocity, recognition, and status that seem to undergird gifting in various societies. Since they do not recognize the importance of maternal gifting, they do not see “gift exchange” as deriving from a prior experience of unilateral giving and receiving in childhood. Rather, they see gift exchange as taking place among adults according to *sui generis* conventions and rules. Like linguists, they appeal to rules and conventions for their explanations.¹¹

The Gift of a Gift is a Gift: Meta Gifts

Regarding language I identify what

I call “world gifts” and “word gifts.” Both things¹² and words are gifts: that is what they have in common. Word-gifts are gifts of world-gifts. They give aspects of the world as salient. They are “valence tags.” Words are also need-satisfying bearers of the gift value, which is attributed to the other by satisfying h:er (communicative and cognitive) needs and thus value is attributed to them as well. Words are both gifts and bearers of gifts. Although it is commonplace to use the expression “exchange of words” or “conversational exchange,” I believe dialogue is actually an interaction based on turn taking learned in early childhood “proto-conversation,” which can not be assimilated to market exchange.

Considering both the things in the world and words as gifts forms an area of connection between them.¹³ This is a radical departure from a post-modern view of language and indeed of semiosis, in which the “sense of a sign is another sign.” In that idealistic conception, meaning comes from placement and displacement within an infinite network of signs, without a direct relation to an “external” reality.

Understanding the world as made up of gifts at the levels of perception, of cognition, and of language creates a common ground that unites mind and world, inside and outside. This is a maternal common ground, an experiential, if abstract and impermanent, commons that is constructed through mothering and being mothered.

Word gifts stand for world gifts in our verbal “com-muni-cation”; by giving and receiving them we create mutuality and coordinate our joint attention with others regarding both the words and the world. In the practice of joint attention we receive together with others, the specific perceptual and conceptual gifts that are available for us in our cultural and ecological niches. By this attention, things in the world are positively valenced and

evaluated. Even if the perception or experience in question is negative, the attention to it has a positive gift aspect in that it satisfies our cognitive need to know that we should avoid it. The mother’s emotional accentuation and the fact that s:he brings an item to our attention gives the item a gift character, which it would not have had without h:er mediation.¹⁴

Like motherers and children, speakers and listeners form relations of mutuality by giving and receiving gifts and the gifts of gifts. Communicators form relations of similarity with each other as receivers of the same verbal and perceptual or conceptual gifts. They form relations of mutuality as givers and receivers of words in much the same way that they form these mutual relations in the processes of nurturing and being nurtured with material goods and services. Giving and receiving word-gifts satisfies the need of hearers¹⁵ for a common human relation with the speaker and other hearers regarding the world. The word-gifts satisfy communicative and cognitive needs.¹⁶ This is also the case for combinations of word-gifts, where the same giving and receiving relation is projected onto and *among* words and forms the basis of “merging” and syntax. The combination of word gifts into sequences, which form larger internally articulated word-gifts, allows us to remember parts of the world, which we have encountered as gifts before and relate them to each other. Just as we put words in gift relations with each other, we put salient perceptions and conceptions in relation to each other and doing so emphasizes their salience along with their gift and meta-gift character.

For all these reasons I think it is possible to say that language itself is the meta level of gifting and it is held together and internally articulated by the relation-creating capacity of need-satisfying gifts. The gift of a gift is a gift.

Conclusion and Speculations

In conclusion I would like to make a few more speculations. First, the interpersonal relations based on patterns of giving and receiving, which are stored in the holistic right brain, are projected onto the world and onto words, which have been made sequential in language and relegated to the left brain.

While the right brain is dominant in early childhood, the left brain begins to become dominant at around three years of age (Schore, *Affect Regulation*). Does lateralization and the entry into language (sequential verbal gifting) have the effect that as we mature we leave the knowledge of the maternal gift economy behind in our (unconscious or less conscious) right brain, where we cannot access it from the left brain linguistically? If this is the case, then second, I suggest that it is clear the values of the gift economy need, to be socially validated in other ways, such as through giveaways, festivals, and conventional giving such as birthdays, symbolic giving, art, etc. The realm of religions may also be included here, but many of them are patriarchal and they leave the mother-child interaction in the dark while they begin creation not with maternal gift relations, but as Saint John said, with the Word (with the left brain).

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. Even if lateralization and language displace the relational gift economy to the right brain for Indigenous individuals as well, the respect for mothering and the presence of honoured gifting practices in the society at large maintain the gifts of the right brain in left brain linguistic consciousness.

Third, for those of us engulfed in

Capitalist Patriarchy, exchange—especially monetized exchange, which I see as a left brain offspring of language—intensifies left brain domination, cancels and exploits gifting in the wider society, and is now devastating the gifts of Mother Culture and Mother Earth.

Finally, science has left the epistemology of the gift economy aside, so we do not understand that our knowledge is formed in a structure of giving. Giving and receiving as the basic schema of communication is the scaffolding upon which human knowing grows and functions. Instead of the idea of giving and receiving, we have a mechanistic idea that hormones determine our actions (oxytocin making us givers) without the depth and resonance of the social giving and receiving that has taken place for every human being throughout the ages.

We talk about neurons “firing,” or hormones “being released,” or the “transmission” of energy or atom “donation,” or even the “interaction” of a creature with its ecological niche. These are metaphors or masks of giving and receiving that often leave aside the role of the receiver; however, we can restore this role when we see that even light only becomes a gift when it encounters a living entity capable of receiving and using it.

The gift lenses that we get from being mothered allow us to recognize processes that are similar to giving and receiving even when they are not the products of human mothering. But the way we know them is. It is as if the Universe gave itself a meta level through mothering, which we humans use to understand each other and It. On the other hand, there may be many more processes that we don't see that are not similar to giving and receiving. Unfortunately, in Capitalist Patriarchy we have erased mothering and do not recognize the importance of the gift as key to understanding the

world. That is why we so often look at cause and effect independently from needs and their satisfaction, even in biology and neurobiology.

Reconnecting mothering and the economy, and restoring gifting to epistemology lets us see how in our society patriarchal thinking has spread into the spaces left by the denial of the unilateral gift, hiding the evidence that a radically different world and worldview are possible. Recognizing the importance of mothering can reveal the interdisciplinary path to deep and lasting social change that we sorely need and for which, in our social infancy, we are crying out.

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Endnotes

¹The sentimentalist view of mothering and giving and its consequent rejection by realistic feminists has made this suspect.

²I use this variation on h:er because I consider the slash a masculinist symbol. I have substituted it with a colon, [:], 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.

³That we actually need perceptions is shown by sensory deprivation experiments where the brain produces hallucinations in response to a lack of stimuli.

⁴I believe that “equality” feminism is blighted from the start by the model

of equality set by the market. That is, it is a surface equality that serves to hide the plunder of gifts of one or the other exchanger or of society at large. This can be seen in the fact that the advantages of women in the “developed world” nevertheless have trickled up—or gushed up—from the gifts given by and taken from women and men in the underdeveloping world.

⁵Daniel Stern says that infants schematize interactive patterns well before they can talk. He hypothesizes a “schema of being-with” (Stern and Bruschiweiller-Stern). I believe a schema of giving and receiving is even more fundamental; “being with” would thus occur with one's primary giver and receiver.

⁵There is, however, an appeal to psychological well being for the development of “human capital” and a consequent increase in the GDP (Silver and Singer cited in Schore “Understanding”). Leaving the gift economy unacknowledged keeps infancy open to exploitation by the market.

⁶“...Psychoanalytic scholarship has very little to say about poverty or the poor. In spite of references to the poverty of dreams, poverty of affect, poverty of intellect, there is in reality little engagement with ‘real’ poverty” (Kumar 1).

⁷The MAUSS revue has been active in France since 1981 under the direction of Alain Caille. While I thoroughly agree with the MAUSS critique of Rational Action Theory (RAT), I think it does not go far enough to include unilateral mother-child gifting. In fact it falls into the “Mauss trap” in which repayment is seen as a necessary component of gifting. The problem as I see it is not utility, but exchange.

⁸We can also talk about non-verbal, gestural, and written language, but the plane of vocal sound seems to be the most typical and has its own advantages and constraints.

⁹Is it a rule that you have to bend

your knees to sit down? No, it is just the way sitting is done. Similarly to talk about more than one ball, to form the plural of “ball” you have to give it an “s.” With this I do not mean to say that there are no rules in language but only that rules do not create the fundamental structure of language. The presence of language rules upholding sexism and patriarchy is amply discussed in such books as *Making the Invisible Visible* (Taylor, Hardman and Wright).

¹⁰Thus, it is not clear that, for example, gift exchange among adults used for mutual recognition (see Henaff) harks back to the mother-child relation of giving and receiving. Status as the greatest male giver may unconsciously refer to the figure of the mother.

¹¹Structural anthropologists like Levi-Strauss derived their ideas of structure from the linguistic structure envisioned by Ferdinand de Saussure, which was itself influenced by Walras’ ideas of market equilibrium. Levi-Strauss’s infamous idea of the exchange of women could be better seen as the gifting of gifters.

¹²When I say “things” I am including experiences and ideas.

¹³We give things in the world their names so that we can communicate about them; we give the words to each other, satisfying our communicative needs for relationships regarding the world-gifts (those perceptions and conceptions, that given the words, we then perceive together with our joint attention).

¹⁴In *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, Schore talks about “valence tagging” (288) and references Panskepp on the importance of reading facial expressions for tracking emotional responses.

¹⁵I believe the same process holds true in a more general way for writers and readers, but am leaving that discussion to some other place.

¹⁶The needs satisfied in language itself

are more relational than material, and these complex relations are a part of the way language functions. Satisfying material needs also creates relations, forming patterns of meaning upon which the linguistic relational patterns are structured.

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