

Gift Giving as the Female Principle vs. Patriarchal Capitalism by Genevieve Vaughan

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The purpose of this paper is to cause a shift in perspective towards the female principle as the human norm. This change in perspective would create

— and require — a very different view of some basic tenets of many branches of study, from economics to linguistics, anthropology to philosophy. My thesis is that there is an economic reason for the devaluation of what has traditionally been seen as the female identity. The values of caring necessary for mothering are the ideology of an economic system which has not been allowed to develop because of its co existence with a patriarchal economic system and its values, its ideology.

If we consider economics as the way in which we produce and distribute the material means of our existence it is not surprising that these ways would have deep psychological and social roots. I believe that socialization into two opposing genders is the basis of two opposing socio-economic paradigms. These paradigms may be described as gift giving and exchange.

The psychological root of a woman-based economic way is the necessity for mothering children free, and the root of capitalist patriarchy is the socially imposed male identity as non female and thus in opposition to free nurturing. When a boy finds that he is in a different gender category from his nurturing mother he has to develop a gender identity which is based on something other than gift giving, even if at an early age gift giving and receiving are necessarily the basis of his life. This change of categories and his relation to a non mothering male ideal create a pattern of devaluation of gift giving and over valuing of so called male characteristics such as competition, domination and rationality. Then traditionally, mothers have given more to the supposedly superior non mothering category.

Capitalism and communism have until recently been locked in a global battle for supremacy. We are witnesses of the cold war, of the enormous waste of wealth on (preparation for) hostilities between the two economic systems. I believe there has been a centuries long battle between the hidden economic system of the Mother, based on gift giving, and the economic system of patriarchy based on exchange. The battlefield is not just the planet but every individual consciousness and it manifests in power relations in which one logic or dynamic is actually parasitic upon the other. This occurs at the level of the individual mind/body, at the level of families, of work relations, of races, of cultures, and of governments and corporations both nationally and internationally with governments and corporations in the parasite position and the general population in the position of the gift giving hosts.

Gift giving (necessary for effective mothering) is creative and other oriented, looks at needs, and fashions or procures something to satisfy them. It is transitive and gives value to other by implication. It is simpler than exchange and by contrast seems uninformative.

Co muni cation — giving gifts together — is actually done at a material non sign level in infancy before sign based communication or language are present. In fact the giving and receiving which are necessary for the survival of infants create the bodies of the people who form the co muni ty. As children grow bonds are formed through giving and receiving in that the mother pays attention to needs of the child and

procures or creates something to satisfy them, so the child exists for her as part of her practice and modifies her daily life. The mother exists for the child on the external as the provider and educator of her needs. This intersection in itself is or creates a bond between them mediated by the means of giving.

Most of what we presently unquestioningly consider economic activity is based upon exchange: giving-in-order-to-receive an equivalent. The practice of exchange requires quantification and measurement and an identification of the values of the products exchanged so that neither person gives more than she or he receives. Exchange is ego-oriented in that it utilizes the satisfaction of need of the other in order to satisfy the giver's own need. Exchange is adversarial, encouraging each person to try to get more than the other. It separates people making them atomistic and indifferent to one another. It gives value to self by implication because it uses the satisfaction of the need of the other to satisfy the need of the self. Mercantile exchange creates a society in which people are alienated from each other, strangers supply each other's needs without caring.

Scarcity is required for the continuing triumph of exchange over gift giving because if everyone had enough no one would be required or motivated to exchange, and gift giving would be easy. Instead in scarcity, gift giving is difficult, even self sacrificial, and exchange becomes necessary for survival. Accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few serves the creation of scarcity and the hegemony of the exchange paradigm.

Accumulation also serves to provide the means for the domination of some over others, those who have more can dominate over those who have less, a process which rewards the dominators whose ego orientation has been constructed and validated by exchange.

We practice exchange so often in our daily lives that it seems natural. It therefore creates a deep and repeated model or template which is unrecognized and uninvestigated, and all the stronger because of it. For example the need for reciprocal assessment of the products being given and received creates a moment of self reflection in an equation of value which is a powerful influence on other areas of our thinking including our philosophical ideas of self reflecting consciousness. On the other hand, gift giving which has usually been taken for granted and considered uninformative, transfers value by implication from giver to receiver in that the giver would not have given to the receiver if she had not been valuable to her. Gift giving is also transitive and creates a syllogism, if a gives to b and b gives to c, a gives to c.

Males are placed in a superior category because of their physiological difference from their mothers, thus any desire they have to return to that category (or to their understanding before they recognized that they are required to be different from their nurturing mothers) is stymied by the seeming requirement of losing the physiological difference — that is fear of castration. The opposition to the unilateral gift giving mode is thus not just philosophical, sociological and economic but psychologically invested and distressed. If gender is constructed through socialization, physiological changes would actually not create a return to the nurturing category however. The solution to the problem fortunately lies not in castration but in socialization. If both males and females are socialized towards the values of gift giving, while at the same time changing the socio economic institutions in which exchange and the privileging of males has manifested, we can create a society not just of homo sapiens but of homo donans.

In a recent book, the “Making of Manhood,” David Gilmore uses the term ‘manhood script’ to describe the identity based on competition and domination that is expected cross culturally from men who are supposed to ‘act like a man’. Manhood thus becomes a performance in a way that being a woman does not. The girl is typically encouraged to continue nurturing like her mother who is a model ready to hand while the boy is encouraged to perform according to a ‘script’. Other recent books, “Real Boys” by William Pollack and “Boys will be Boys” by Miriam Miedzian show the difficulties of adolescent boys trying to adapt and to perform according to a gender identity script constructed around values of ‘manhood’. These values: independence, competitiveness, aggression, risk taking, and rationality are very similar to the values of capitalism. While these values undoubtedly have some positive aspects and many men and some institutions succeed in tempering them with kindness or do not embrace them, they often degenerate into isolation, fighting, aggression, dominance, carelessness, egotism and authoritarianism. And the appropriation of other’s gifts. The ‘manhood script’ together with the exchange economy cancel and neutralize gifts, seeing (misinterpreting) behavior as merely based on cause and effect or other interactions which do not appear to transfer value or cause human bonds of mutual inclusion.

Needs have been looked at narrowly and unkindly because receiving and dependence are seen negatively and because the market category of ‘effective demand’ promotes the idea that only the needs for which people have the money to buy products count. Or needs have been seen as individualistic, the needs of an economic man whose marginal priority list is manipulated by advertising and the media to the advantage of the corporations. Instead needs should be honored as necessary for the well being of humans in their development and for the completion of the gift transaction. Receiving is as important as giving in the gift transaction. Creatively receiving to use the product or good is the completion of the gift. Needs are educated by their satisfaction and each human being arrives at the specificity of her experience as the result of all the ways her needs have been satisfied. It is the manhood script that denies the emotions that are necessary for identifying and responding to needs, and therefore the needs themselves. Moreover the specific need for status comes from a society in which male dominance is replayed in many different areas. By owning a superior consumer object (a ‘phallic’ possession whether or not it even looks phallic), for example, a person succeeds in being put into a superior category, that is, he or she is made ‘male’ again and again — and then seems to deserve even more nurturing. The greed that motivates our society is largely based on this kind of constructed desire. The values of the manhood script have been projected into Capitalism so women can embrace them as well. Meanwhile the desperate need in which billions of people now find themselves is a direct result of an economy based on the hegemony of the exchange paradigm.

At the same time nurturing is defined narrowly — as feeding young children — which creates a discontinuity between (our understanding of) mothering and (our understanding of) the rest of life. Need satisfaction is often defined as simply ‘activity’. Instead many kinds of activity can be seen as need satisfaction in some sense. Conversation, language itself, giving someone a job in the exchange economy, protesting nuclear proliferation or the World Trade Organization can all be seen as satisfying needs at different levels. Exchange has created a realm which is non nurturing because the reciprocal gift cancels out the transitivity, the other orientation and the implication of value of the other. The environment in which gifts are invisible but still continue to flow is useful to the dominance of exchange.

Re viewing our definitions in terms of the gift paradigm we can see that women's free labor in the home can be seen as a gift, to the family and to the system of exchange itself. Profit can be seen as a (leveraged) gift of the worker to the capitalist through what Marx called 'surplus value'. International exploitation of raw material and labor or profit from speculation on the value of currency can be seen as a gift from one country to another. The pollution of the environment can be seen as a (forced) gift from those of the future to corporations of today. Whenever there is a 'free' area such as our genes, it is privatized and taken as a gift to those who can appropriate it, perhaps by saying they 'deserve' it because of the legal category they belong to. Because these different kinds of appropriation have different names, their commonality as free but leveraged gifts is usually invisible. Yet a spectrum of gifts can be identified, from those that cause least harm and even pleasure to the giver (and receiver) to those which, like slave labor, or the destruction of the rain forests or the creation of agricultural monopolies, cause the most harm. Some gifts flow free like milk or language, satisfying the needs of the receiver with little effort, others are difficult and time consuming, like the housework of a lifetime, or any hard work for low pay. It is said that there is no free lunch but women have been cooking lunch for free for centuries. By this we can see that portions of free gift labor are hidden inside commodities and salaried jobs. Some gifts along this spectrum are entirely hidden by the exchange processes they are part of, like profit. Others are still called gifts though they are involved in processes of reciprocity and equivalence that border on exchange, like Christmas gifts.

There has been some question as to whether there is such a thing as unilateral or other oriented gift giving. That is because the point of view of exchange is continually ratified and self ratifying, as we look at everything, from exchanges of gazes to exchanges of love or information in those terms.

Gift giving has been disempowered and has even been branded as the cause of women's victimization, but it is the dominance of the exchange paradigm that has been causing the subservience of women and the oppression of most of humanity. My strategy for social change is to bring forward gift giving as the model upon which to base our human and economic relations, while we phase out exchange completely.

Gift giving is an enormously fertile human behavior and logic I believe gift giving is the basis of communication and of language and even perhaps of intelligence. We have not seen this because the more visible self reflecting logic of exchange has been winning the conflict between paradigms, using misogyny as its tool. Gift giving has been seen as inferior, almost unconscious, physical and practical, beyond or beneath reflection and speculation, in the dark, having to do with the mindless material body. By calling need satisfaction in wider areas of life 'gift giving', we can begin to extend the idea of gift giving and of the female principle to a much wider variety of events and phenomena than have been acknowledged by the exchange paradigm and patriarchy.

Reciprocity is sometimes considered to be the bond making aspect of gift giving. However my point is that bonds are created also by unilateral gift giving in that the giver attends to the needs of the other, and finds or creates something that will satisfy them in their specificity while the giver receives something from the outside which is appropriate to her needs. An interpersonal relation is established without the constraint or complication of reciprocity.

A certain amount of modeling does go on between mothers and children. And, children do take turns, smile when they are smiled at, put their finger in their mother's mouth when she is feeding them etc. I call this turn taking rather than exchange. The mother does not feed her child in order to be fed by her, or in order to make the child put her finger in the mother's mouth. She feeds her to satisfy the child's need.

I think that we tend to read everything in terms of mercantile exchange, whether this is the reciprocal gift giving of so called primitive groups or the actions of our own children. That is because exchange is a very potent metaphor, but we can also leave it aside and let gift giving and imitative turn taking shine with their own light using them as the interpretative key for many other aspects of life.

If we see mothering as unilateral gift giving — required to be unilateral by the physical dependency of children, we can see it as the basic theme, which begins again in every life, and which is altered culturally but can never be completely erased because it is necessary for the survival of the species.

Unilateral gift giving and turn taking develop into communication, and symbolic gift giving, as well as into reciprocity, bilateral qualitative or quantitative exchange or barter, exchange for money, manipulation, emotional or material blackmail, usury, capitalism, imperialism. However the gift theme is not obliterated by economies based on exchange but only pushed underground, re named, split off. Gifts continue to be given at all levels, though usually unrecognized, and gifts are given to exchange itself. For example the free housework that is done by women has been estimated to add some 40% to the GNP in the US if calculated in money, more in some other countries. This free labor is a gift women are giving to the monetized economy as a whole. What I am trying to point out is that the variations on giving and receiving which can be identified as different kinds of exchange are all variations on a theme of unilateral gift giving. It is not unilateral giftgiving that is a variation on a basic theme of exchange.

The feminist movement has addressed the power relations of patriarchal parasite and host at the level of the individual and the family, creating some improvements in women's lives and attempting to educate the males with whom they live. This revolution in mores has not however, adequately addressed the wider issues of systemic exploitation and parasitism. Capitalism has benefited by absorbing First world especially Anglo women into the dynamic and values of exchange — though it continues to pay them less — perhaps to maintain them in a gift giving position. It has given many women a voice and an authority within the system which they could not have before as the private gift providers — or servants — for men and children. Most women continue to maintain the gift paradigm internally at the same time they are engaged in exchange, so they have two opposing value systems within themselves. They do not realize these are economic paradigms. At the level of the globalized economy the dividing line between parasite and host no longer appears as gender but configures as North-South, first world — third world, rich and poor, educated — uneducated, or simply the lucky and the unlucky — so that the actual gender based character of the exchange economy is further disguised. This disguise functions also because the similarities in values between individuals and systems has not been taken seriously. By seeing both individual and systemic values and characteristics as derived from the application of a struggle between economic logics at different scales, and those logics as deriving from the construction of the male gender in opposition to gift giving, connections can be made by which feminists can be empowered to engage with gender issues not just at the level of individuals but also as they are manifested in institutions and in

global and local exploitation and relations between categories such as race and class.

Globalization of the economy is the present context.

What was once a relation of exploitation between men and women, exchangers and gift givers, is now also a relation of exploitation between classes and between first world and third world at home and abroad. The dynamic of rape, of the invasion of virgin territories moved from the interpersonal level to the invasion and appropriation of the Americas by the Europeans to military, economic and political imperialisms of all kinds, and now back to the intra personal level as Vandana Shiva says, as the virgin territory of the gene pool is invaded by genetic engineers who privets the genetic patrimony of all through staking claims of intellectual property rights.

The idea of 'virgin' territory brings with it the idea of free, unexploited, and unencumbered gifts easily transferable to the new 'owner' as his 'right' validated by law. (The virgin, having been imitating her gift giving mother, is ready to practice what she has learned, giving free gifts to the successfully socially gendered male who will be her mate.) The gift giving way has been focused on individual exchangers or manhood scripted males and the gift has passed through them and been passed on to the system in which they operated.. As an alternative system of economic behavior, gift giving has been captured by exchange or destroyed by the exchangers, because of the threat gift giving in abundance poses to exchange by making it unnecessary. The slaughter of native peoples by the Europeans effectively destroyed alternative economies many of which had important elements of gift giving and were matrilineal. Many invisible gifts of nature and society are now being destroyed by monoculturalization and monopolization.

The situation in which we live is dangerous for life on earth because we are paradoxically giving gifts to the exchange paradigm to help the destruction of gift giving and the appropriation of gifts of the many by the few, depriving the many of their inheritance from Mother Nature and Mother Culture.

What can we do?

Step 1. Realize a common (women's) perspective comes from an economic way. Validate that way as the norm. I believe it has been canceled from many different disciplines, made invisible, disqualified and devalued. It can be restored to view. For example I have developed a theory of language as gift giving.

1 Realize men have been socialized in to a psycho-economic way, and identify what that economic way is in contrast to gift giving. After investigating it for a long time I have come to the conclusion that exchange economics is artificial and self similar to the socialization into male gender.

2 Bring back men (and women) to the economic way of the Mother, abolishing 'economics'.

3 Let humanity flower according to gift giving, having found a dynamic which PRODUCES the human characteristics, of language, nurturing, sociality, relationship. So we will create and find our common human identity by dismantling an artificial dominant identity, an achievement which will liberate gift giving and the nurturing identity from the host position at the same time that it dismantles the parasite position.

At the individual level of mores, women have been persuaded to renounce over arching theories so as

not to buy in to patriarchal hegemonic attitudes. This attempt to salvage one's own good conscience allows the real world big picture evils of exploitation to continue while the person with the good conscience continues to operate on an individual level without rocking the larger boat. If we individually renounce patriarchal excesses while continuing to succeed in the system which exploits others we cannot have a clean conscience. Allowing the level of mores to overwhelm the level of political need for a common perspective is one more step in the direction of disempowerment and collusion with the patriarchal system.

By identifying the female principle as deriving from an economic logic, a mode of production and distribution based on gift giving necessary for mothering, with its attendant ideology, we can account for the commonality of women in widely different situations. A socio economic practice and logic, not biology would account for the so called 'women's values'. At the same time some of the differences among women and the fact that many women often do not behave in an other oriented way, can be explained by saying that they have become immersed in the practice and the logic of the exchange paradigm and patriarchal capitalism. On the other hand some men practice the gift economy and espouse its values. However the fact that most men are not brought up to be mothers or to be like their mothers usually maintains them in a patriarchal exchange mode to some extent. It is ironic that more nurturing family men can now be seen in the very countries which have imperialist businesses and policies. The very fertility of gift giving sometimes makes it appear that exchange, not gift giving is the creative process. But actually the gifts that are given to exchange constitute that free portion which motivates the market and makes it possible. For example not only is profit the gift of surplus value but the shopping without which the market would be impossible is done free. (It is usually called 'activity' not 'labor') There is a transition now going on towards exchange as Internet shopping is now proving lucrative to its promoters. It may appear that capital in itself is creative or in another field, that the rules of grammar generate meaning rather than the transitivity of the gift, its ability to transfer value, to create bonds, and to be shared by many as common ground, the source of common identity. Or in still another field it appears that laws create the bonds of society.

Projecting the mother

Following the ideology of exchange there seems to be a continuity and similarity between humanity and a 'nature' that we see in a mechanical way because we are need-satisfying humans who are denying need satisfaction, putting it aside, making it unimportant, taking equal exchange in its stead as the human process and interpreting everything in its light. We are actually not homo sapiens but homo donans.

Giving and receiving have to come before knowledge because we have to be nurtured from our earliest days within and outside the womb. Then, what it is that we begin to know as we mature is a gift, through perceptive capacities which are already organized to respond not directly to raw data but to complex stimuli by which we have been already fed and shielded and which by their color or shape let us know — there may be a gift here. From the focal point of the nipple of the breast to our mother's cry of alarm before we put our finger in the fire, we receive and learn to respond to gifts of emphasis and to salient aspects of the environment. The care giving that humans do towards their children also educates them to different levels of gifts, directly useable gifts and gifts of emphasis that lead to other directly usable gifts.

A mechanistic view of the world does not allow us to consider the parts of our environment as transferring value to us by intentionally satisfying our needs. Yet we live because we are perfectly adapted to use the environmental niches we occupy and to create new ones. Our ability to use the new niches is the gift given by society, by previous generations who have found ways of surviving and thriving in unusual environments and of passing those ways on to us. Our ability to treat parts of the environment as gifts with which we satisfy our own and others needs comes from the work of people of the past. Is it surprising that we feel value implied to us as we successfully catch a fish through a hole in the ice, even if we may not actually impute an intention to Mother Earth to nurture us by putting a fish there? The fish is a gift as similar fish were to our ancestors, because we have learned to creatively receive it. The fact that there is a name for something implies that people before us have found it important enough to need a word for it. The fact that there is a word for something is a gift that means — ‘there’s a gift here’. As speakers of that language we have the ability to creatively receive both the word gift and at least some gift aspects of the gift the word substitutes.

Privatization of the environmental niche captures the gifts that otherwise would have gone from the many to the many, the gifts that would have let us see that society, like nature is our mother. Where we would have bonded with our past, our culture and history, now we find our relation to the past — and to the present — is one of reciprocal indifference, autonomy, and egotism. Each of us competes to have more so that we can be put in the superior category which can legally privatize the niches and seem to deserve more unacknowledged gifts from others, who are now people in the third world we will never see, or people of the past or future whose gifts can be appropriated through privatization or waste.

The fact of mothering itself and the logic of gift giving that it contains constitute a common ground for the identities of all of us. The practice of this logic and the common ground of mothering are social facts not biological ones and they occur both for adults and children in an interactive social context with recognizable implications. (Language (which is a sort of ideal — verbal — gift economy) is a way of collectively projecting the mother onto the — changing — world as our identities’ common ground.) By concentrating on rules and definitions (re naming) linguistics, like exchange economics, destroys this projection, creating a separation from the source and a context appropriate for objectification of women and nature, the exploitation of gifts, and their transformation into profit for the few.

Everywhere the ideology of exchange competes with and cancels the ideology of gift giving and cooperation. We would be perfectly adapted to the ecological niches of society and nature, able to receive their gifts, but we have created a non adaptive social system, patriarchy, by our misconception and over valuation of the male gender as non nurturing and our subsequent belief in its perspective. Thus we have created many new needs which are part of an artificial system which has to be maintained, and we satisfy them.

Is the projection of the mother onto nature ‘true’? I believe that remains to be seen. The more we adapt our society and its needs to Mother nature the more she will freely fill them. (For example if we build small flexible houses rather than skyscrapers we will be not need protection from earthquakes.) And is the projection of her onto society ‘true’? The more we free society from patriarchy and economics from exchange the more society will satisfy all our needs free in a mothering way, and the more we ourselves will follow and find free gift giving and receiving at all levels. So indeed, society will become mothering.

Like the validation of exchange, the validation of the gift economy is self fulfilling. It is not the fault of mothering that it and women are presently disempowered, but the coexistence of mothering with exchange and the unrecognized parasitism that is occurring of the exchange paradigm upon the gift paradigm. But that can be changed by understanding the problem in terms of a conflict between paradigms and by giving value to gift giving.