

Shifting the paradigm to a maternal gift economy

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I have been working on the idea of a gift economy since the 1960's. In the early days no one was interested or even understood what I was saying but over the years interest in a free economy has grown among people seeking alternative ways of living and the internet has made the term 'gift economy' almost a household word.

There are many examples of the gift economy in indigenous societies, and now in EuroAmerica and elsewhere in subsistence economies, in alternative communities, in movements for free stores and free schools. The internet allows new possibilities of collaboration and of forming groups in a horizontal many-to-many ways. Wikipedia is a good example of the internet gift economy in action. Couch surfing is another. Most of these initiatives fill in gaps in the market economy though and to a certain extent they rely on the market economy. Widespread commerce in computer hardware is necessary for wikipedia to exist and couch surfing requires not only the computer but the ability to use commercial means to travel from place to place. Still these new initiatives are a very positive development because they

show the possibility of a a different paradigm which brings about a positive change in relationships among people.

A paradigm is a framework, a relatively stable group of coordinates and interpretations which determine a world view. Unfortunately the contemporary gift paradigm does not include the connection with a maternal source even when women themselves are participating in it. What is needed is a radical rethinking, a revisioning of economics – and language- material and linguistic co-mmunication from a maternal perspective (latin 'muni' means gifts so com muni cation means giving gifts together).

In order to do this rethinking we have to look at mothering in a different way, as a or the basic economy, a mode of distribution, the direct distribution of goods and services to needs. This kind of distribution is not imposed by some essential characteristic of mothers but by the nature of dependant infants, who cannot nurture themselves nor can they exchange. That is they cannot give back an equivalent of what has been given to them. A free economy of unilateral giving has to take place for children to survive. In fact motherers, whether the biological mother, the extended family or the whole village, actually create the bodies of the members of the community through this free giving.

Although children are dependent, they are not passive and

receiving itself is not passive. It is the creative complement of the gift, without which the gift or service does not really exist. The receiver must accept and use the gift or it is wasted and becomes negative.

Actually the market is limited and floating on a sea of gifts. Profit itself is a gift as it comes from the part of the labor of workers which is not covered by the salary, their so called 'surplus labor'. But there are also the gifts of housework and of nature which are exploited by the market, which does not have to pay for the reproduction of the workers or the cleanup of pollution. As someone said in the recent movie on the internet gift economy, *Us Now*, the kind of Capitalism we are living in has only really been so extreme during the last century. Before there were more relations based on trust, outside the market. This economic system, Patriarchal Capitalism, or Capitalist Patriarchy is limited in time but also geographically and culturally.

The gift economy is practiced in indigenous and matriarchal societies though it is largely unrecognized or discredited as traditional or primitive by the Euroamerican mainstream people who are telling the tale. My contention is that something like this gift economy also exists in the West in the so called domestic sphere, in the free housework and childcare done mainly by women. In fact free work is gift

work, given to satisfy needs. This is subsistence work or what some economists call 'provisioning' . But we should consider it not just as an add on to the market economy, a sort of instinctual behavior. Instead this maternal economy is the basic human economy of communication from which other economies derive and of which they are elaborations. By considering gift giving as an economy on its own, we can re frame the oppression of women as caused by a struggle between kinds of economies. We have recently come out of the struggle between the economies of Communism and Capitalism but a more fundamental distinction and more universal struggle continues to exist between the economy of gift giving and the economy of the market.

There are two main oppressive factors causing this struggle. One is patriarchy and the other is market exchange.

Patriarchy is the hierarchical control of giving (and of the givers) mainly by men. Exchange is the denial of gifts by requiring a quantitative equivalent in return for what is given. Patriarchal capitalism is the combination of patriarchy and exchange so that gifts are controlled and leveraged through the market mechanisms, re named 'profit', accumulated and re invested in order to leverage still more gifts. The values of male dominance have been abstracted and generalized and

used to motivate market exchange and capitalist accumulation for hegemonic power.

Another advantage of considering mothering as economic is that we can call on Marx's categories of structure and superstructure to explain what we usually call gender differences and male and female values. The economic structure of gift giving would produce an ideological superstructure of the values of care while the economic structure of market exchange would produce an ideological superstructure of competition and domination. That is, direct giving and receiving produce other-orientation, mutuality and trust and these values come from a practical life sustaining interactive behavior rather than from a specific innate moral sense. The participation of biological males in the structure of this maternal gift economy, first as children and then in some aspects even in our society as adults, would produce their other-orientation, their so called feminine side, which in EuroAmerica has often been submerged under a ideology of male dominance. The participation of biological women in the economic structure of the patriarchal market would have the superstructural effect of giving them what we usually call 'masculine' values based on exchange, competition for dominance. In a more positive light these values include equality and justice, but

they also diminish compassion and forgiveness. However women too maintain their childhood gift economy values throughout life and they are not altogether symmetrical with men because they often do give birth to children and in our society have to mother them in a nuclear family or as single mothers while men do not (though there are also a few single 'motherer' fathers). The practice of the gift economy furthers the values of the gift economy. However, in situations of scarcity and duress caused by the market system, practicing the gift economy can become difficult, dangerous and frustrating.

One of the great weapons that Patriarchal Capitalism has for dominating the gift economy is its ability to propose its own superstructural view of the world, creating an ethics based on the market and imposing its own epistemology. This view, which I call the exchange paradigm, eliminates mothering from consciousness, not only because mothers are rarely seen in positions of patriarchal power but because unilateral giving and receiving is not used as an interpretative key for understanding the way we know the world or the way we inhabit it.

Actually patriarchal market-based epistemology and ethics are part of the reason for wars and exploitation. They leave us believing there is no alternative so we accept their

decisions as inevitable. The market wants us to pay and pay back and this same logic underlies the attack and counter attack, vengeance and retribution that supposedly justify wars. If we want to make peace we need to bring into consciousness a gift based interpretation of the world that will redefine humans as a maternal species, not a war mongering species. We are already a maternal species. We have simply created an economy that is in contradiction to who we are.

Superstructurally the pervasive (and self confirming) epistemology of patriarchal capitalism takes the maternal gift logic out of thinking. Looking through the glasses of exchange eliminates the gift.

My contrary hypothesis is simple but it has a lot of consequences. The hypothesis is that early child care is based on free giving and receiving and that this kind of other-oriented mode of distribution of goods to needs is the basis not only of another form of economy, a free gift economy but also of language and other sign behavior. Language and sign behavior are one of the main themes of epistemology but they are usually seen as an inherited capacities (inherited is a gift word) or constructions, (I believe construction can also be seen in gift terms).

Patriarchy makes unilateral giving seem unrealistic, sentimental and even saintly but it is actually just a basic transitive interaction in which one person satisfies another's needs. Unilateral gift giving comes before bilateral gift giving. It is the fundamental first step of a transitive logic which requires a receiver and of which bilateral giving is just one possible elaboration. Other possible elaborations of the gift are giving unilaterally at other levels, giving forward, giving unilaterally to many, receiving unilaterally, receiving and passing it on, receiving at different levels and giving and receiving different kinds of things in different ways, giving together with others and receiving together with others. In bilateral giving and receiving which I call turn taking, each person becomes a giver in turn. This develops into reciprocity and there are also many variations on that theme, including what anthropologists call generalized reciprocity, where everyone gives to everyone else. In this kind of economy, relations of mutuality and trust are established throughout the community. In fact maternal egalitarian giving-and-receiving creates the bonds of mutuality, which continue to be created in similar ways throughout adult life, though we no longer recognize them as such.

On the other hand constrained bilateral exchange which is typical of market economies means giving in order to receive an equivalent of what has been given. This is an ego-oriented rather than an other-oriented interaction, and the relations it creates are completely changed. Reciprocal independence, suspicion, competitiveness, dishonesty, fear of lack, anxiety are relational products of exchange.

The market requires scarcity while gift giving requires and creates abundance. The gifts of the many are channelled to the few, actually creating the scarcity that is necessary for the market to function and maintain control but which at the same time makes gift giving difficult. Wars are used to further create the scarcity when the economy and its power structure are threatened by abundance. See for example the destruction of the abundance that had accrued under Clinton in the US economy by Bush's wars on Iraq and Afghanistan.

But lets take a closer look at mothering

Even in scarcity mothers and other caregivers are a kind of special first ecological niche for their children, a niche which takes the initiative to satisfy its creature's needs. In this they are like Nature but more proactive.

Mothers lay down the pattern of A gives X to B from the child's earliest days where X is a need satisfying good or service that the mother (A) gives to the child (B).

This simple pattern is the beginning of a thread of the transitive gift logic that permeates life though we have learned not to see it.

This is a logic of human relations because in childhood it is invested with emotion. That is, the interaction of giving and receiving is the way expectations are created and fulfilled and positive relations are created. Since this interaction is necessary for the child's survival it is not surprising that humans, both children and adults, would have endowed it with a lot of significance.

Motherers give and receive many different kinds of things and babies learn to imitate and do turn taking from very early on. Very young children smile when their parents smile at them, respond to their sister's antics by laughing, try to put a half eaten cookie in their mother's mouth.

We sometimes use the word 'exchange' for this giving and receiving but it is a dangerous use, because it assimilates the interaction to the exchange that takes place on the market, which cancels the gift. Similarly anthropologists following Marcel Mauss do not recognize free giving and instead speak

of symbolic gift 'exchange', which has three necessary steps: giving, receiving and giving back. This denial of the unilateral gift is what Ivan Illych called the "Mauss Trap".

I prefer to use the term – turntaking. The mother takes the initiative to give to the child who receives. The child takes the initiative to give to the mother who receives. This giving and receiving continues throughout life at many levels.

Recently cognitive neuropsychologists have done experiments, which they say show that altruism is innate. Mothering is left out of the explanation of childhood altruism by researchers like Michael Tomasello but 'altruism' is not hereditary, it comes from being mothered, from someone recognizing you needs and satisfying them day after day, minute after minute, with many different things and in many different contexts.

We can all play the different roles in this basic script which we learn very early from our mothers. Cognitive psychologists Lakoff and Johnson started a kind of philosophical revolution some 30 years ago (1980) when they began to revise the concept of metaphor, recognizing it as a cognitive device coming from common human experiences of the body. They say that the corporeal or spatial logic, arising from bodily experience, is what provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought.(2002) However

they only consider the individual body from the skin inward. Instead it would be more accurate if they said ‘*intercorporeal*’ logic and ‘*intercorporeal* ‘bodily experience’”.

Lakoff and Johnson introduced and made popular the idea of image schemas, which are very elementary but repeatable patterns of bodily experience such as: "up and down", "path to goal" and "going into or out of containers, which are mapped into language at various levels. I believe the image schema that underlies both material and verbal communication is the interactive, interpersonal sensory-motor schema of giving and receiving, first located not in the body of the child alone but between the mother and child, beginning in a moment in which the child has recently been part of the body of the mother and proceeding through the long period during which s/he is dependent on the mother's need-satisfying gifts and services for h/er body's very existence.

. From this point of view, giving and receiving is the underlying pattern or image schema of material *and* verbal communication, expressed and embodied in a routine that the child learns with her mother's milk, a minimal play or script with three roles: giver, gift (or service), and receiver. This routine which is repeated in many different ways is the

interpersonal intercorporeal experience that “provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought”.

Two other early mother-child interactions are Mind Reading, which is necessary for satisfying needs, and Joint Attention. Mind reading is not a psychic ability but a down to earth capacity to guess what the baby needs by putting ourselves in her place and by thinking of the context. The baby is crying and she has not eaten for several hours so she is probably hungry. So the motherer satisfies her need for food instead of giving her a bath for example. Young children around the age of 15 months have been tested by psychologists for mind reading ability and it has been found they are able to mind-read some of the contextual information adults have and understand their intentions and desires by following posture and eye gaze.

Pointing for joint attention is giving a perceptual gift by drawing the other's attention to it. I would say that in joint attention both mother and child are receivers together of the same perceptual gift. Both perceptually receive the same thing and they bond with each other in the common perception/reception.

These abilities and their elaborations continue to permeate adult life in many ways but we do not recognize them as such even though we are doing them. For example we watch

a movie together, and this is joint attention. Or go to a conference and listen to the speaker together.

These are patterns that are an integral part of mothering and being mothered, which can be said to also be matriarchal patterns in the adult elaboration of care for the other and the direct satisfaction of needs through gifting. The understanding of others' needs by 'mind reading' putting oneself in the others' place and by attentive listening is necessary for gift giving but also for the kinds of communication upon which community is founded. Joint attention is also a community building capacity when it is done in a group which focusses its attention on the same thing, creating mutuality, trust and finally possibly, consensus.

As adults we continue to mind read what others are attending to or not. We give them what they need to cause them to turn their attention to something. If I want to call your attention to cats I can point to them, if they are present, but now they are not present, so you need something else, to direct your attention, a word. The word 'cats' satisfies this need. I call this kind of need a communicative need. It is not primarily my own needs I satisfy with the words I speak or write but the communicative needs of the listener or reader. We speak in

the language others understand, use the words they know otherwise they will not understand us. We mind read what the other's communicative needs are and unilaterally give them words to satisfy them. These are virtual verbal gifts, which create relations among givers and receivers, in the same way that giving and receiving material gifts creates relations. Language like mothering is other oriented. Since all our words come to us as gifts passed on to us from others in the linguistic community they carry with them a relation to the group as well as to the individual giver, speaker or writer. This other oriented maternal relation among individuals and with the group is reaffirmed whenever we speak or write. Even when I say ego oriented things, I have to satisfy the others' communicative needs. If I say 'that is my piece of cake and you can't have any', I still have to use the words you understand and this puts us in a social relation to my refusal to give.

Both economics and language are based in maternal material communication which produces both our bodies and our minds.

Many adult communicative patterns come from the transitive interactions of mothering and being mothered. These interactions create the mutuality that causes physical and psychological well being and encourage solidarity. Dominance

creates a different kind of relationship based on force. Hitting is probably also a derivative of giving, in that as in giving, the hitter reaches out and touches the other person and thereby establishes a relation – of domination (unfortunately) rather than mutuality. This pattern, begun early among boys as an alternative to maternal giving, is carried out in adulthood as individual violence and finally generalized to violence among nations. Unfortunately we have imposed an anti-maternal anti-gift economic gender identity on little boys, which artificially forces them away from their potential as *homo donans*, the gift giving being, instead of just *homo sapiens*. This is how patriarchy regenerates in every male child and in every female child who adapts to the (anti gift) male.

The capitalist mode of production is built on top of the gift economy and functions by surreptitiously taking the free gifts of all and making them into profit. This makes everyone hungry for gifts and is the systemic basis of greed. In fact by denying and exploiting the maternal economy, the market alters the creative receiving side of the interaction, transforming it into aggressive taking. Without greed there would be no motivation for the accumulation of excessive capital. The motivation towards hegemonic masculinity is validated by the hegemony of money – and vice versa. The

logic of exchange itself is programming us towards the negative personal characteristics that are functional to the system.

We need to return to the positive relational logic of the unilateral gift economy where goods circulate to needs connecting people and forming community. However if we do not assert the importance of a mother based framework in which to view the gift economy, we will simply accept the domination of the field of giving one more time by patriarchal technologies, sciences and religions that ignore or control mothering, and the modern gift economy movement will lose most of its healing and revolutionary potential. Women will be left to follow the assimilationist path to integration into these institutions or to trying to achieve equality with patriarchal capitalist men. And as we are assimilated and reap the material rewards we will be equally responsible for the evil that is perpetrated by the patriarchal capitalist gift-plundering system.

The values of the gift economy validate other orientation not only towards our individual families and friends but towards all the social groups which are exploited by Patriarchal Capitalism. Not being other oriented in this way contradicts our maternal heritage as do the wars that our governments are now engaged in including the war against

poor people and the war against Mother Earth. We need to generalize mothering and turn our other oriented consciousness and care towards all the victims of these wars, including Earth Herself

How can we shift the paradigm? How can we turn away from the economic structure and superstructure of the exchange economy towards the gift economy which already exists within and around us? Perhaps we can begin by recognizing that environmental niches also function as the giving and receiving of gifts.

We unconsciously project mothering onto the world around us also at a more conscious level when we respond with gratitude to our perceptions as gifts: the warmth of the sun, the cool breeze, the rain. We are intensely mothered children so it is not surprising that we would project mothering onto the world. This projection is not fanciful and far fetched. It is a true projection and we are also, our biological selves, Her. Our environmental niches mother us and we respond to them with knowledge and gratitude and we are also biologically, and perceptually self-motherers. That is, we unconsciously select the perceptual gifts to which we attend just as our mothers selected aspects of our surroundings to give to us. At the same time we are also culturally self-and-other-motherers and receivers of others' gifts. And we

mother each other linguistically, satisfying each other's communicative needs with verbal gifts and combinations of gifts. Giving to Mother Nature and the spirits of nature also causes relations of mutuality and trust, creating a circulation of gifts that bridges the border between human and non human.

By projecting giving and receiving, mothering more consciously onto the environment we bond with the environment, give to it, care for it and communicate with it. This can aid our survival as well as own evolution as a maternal species. Instead at the present we are eliminating the consciousness of the projection in favor of a neutral scientific objective epistemology and at the same time, tragically, we are eliminating the environment's and our own capacity to give.

I have tried to give you just a few of the elements I have been trying to put together for an epistemology based on mothering and being mothered. This needs to be done so that the gift economy movements that are now taking place do not renounce and deny the very maternal and matriarchal patterns that make them function. Mothers and all women have been denied long enough. The maternal aspect of the human must be recognized, restored and loved if we are ever going to be able to function as a viable species.

Bibliography

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