

The Gift Alternative

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Although the South Korean economy is flourishing, the economic (and environmental) situation worldwide is worsening and many people are now convinced that a radical alternative to capitalism is necessary. Most people believe that the Communist experiment failed, so they are looking elsewhere for models. I believe that an alternative model already exists although we have been taught not to see it. It is based on mothering and being mothered, the central social interaction of childhood, which, because it is necessary for children's survival, may be considered a cultural universal.

Some suggest (Liebermann 2013) that evolution, through the adaptation of our species to sociality, hardwired our brains in ways that make us disadapted to the ego oriented cultures of loneliness in which our competitive market economies have thrust us. Darcia Narvaez (2012:197) talks about "the parenting practices that emerged with social mammals some 30 million years ago", and that "mostly match up with the common practices for infants and young children recorded among foraging hunter-gatherers who live

in small, cohesive communities representing the lifestyle of over 90% of human genus history... Ancestral childrearing practices include extensive, on-demand breastfeeding, constant touch, responsiveness to needs of the child, natural childbirth, and multiple adult caregivers" The multiple caregivers ensured support for the birth mother, a characteristic that is sorely missing in our society.

Although some hunter-gatherer groups have trade, most are societies of generalized reciprocity, where everyone gives to everyone. That is, they are societies of generalized nurturing that Narvaez calls "companionship societies".

In our market based society, nurturing has mainly been assigned to the birth mother, who receives support only if she is lucky enough to have an available grandmother or if she has the money to pay for childcare or if she has a feminist husband.

Nurturing young children requires unilateral giving because although they actively and creatively receive, children cannot exchange, that is they cannot give back an equivalent of what they have been given. Unilateral giving is the only way to make human infants survive. Unlike most other mammals they are born vulnerable and dependent and require intense

unilateral care for many years. The unilateral identification and satisfaction of their needs by adults and children's reception of these need-satisfying gifts and services, create relationships of mutuality and trust and form the basis of later relations of community. In fact giving and receiving is a kind of glue that holds communities together.

Giving to satisfy the needs of another also gives value to her or him. It implies the other is important to the giver and is registered in the self esteem of the receiver. I call this implication 'gift value'. As the child grows h/er needs diversify and change. Sometimes s/he needs independence and the mother has to be sensitive to this and other psychological needs, calibrating her giving.

Exchange changes this original logic. In fact, the doubling of the gift in exchange changes the relationship entirely, from other oriented to ego oriented. The attention of the 'giver' is no longer focussed on the need of the other but on the need or desire of the self. Gift value is cancelled by the equal return and is transformed into exchange value while, after the exchange is concluded, the use value of the product is seen as a 'property' of the object without human relational implications. Cancelling the gift transaction in this way creates a whole area of life, the market, that functions according to exchange and exchange value and is based on a

quantitative equation between what is given and what is received. In this way mothering, asymmetrical unilateral giving, is left out of the interaction.

The main motivation of the market, profit, is actually made up of gifts. Marx's idea of surplus value shows how the labor time of workers in excess of the amount covered by their salaries is captured by the market. This extra time is given free to the capitalists but is forced from the workers. To this we should also add free housework and care work that pass through the surplus value in that they diminish the monetary cost of reproduction of the workers and of all the members of society. In fact unremunerated labor in the home would add some 30% to 40% to the GDP in most countries if calculated in monetary terms. We should add the gifts that are 'given' by nature, that are also unmonetized. In 1997 'eco system services' were calculated at \$33 trillion as compared to global GDP in of \$18 trillion (Costanza et al.1997). These free gifts are not recognized as such but they nevertheless unconsciously confer value on the receiver by implication. That is in this case they give gift value – importance – to the market and its protagonists as well as to its values and thought processes. They collaborate in maintaining the dominance of the market over the gift economy.

To the gifts just mentioned can be added the gifts that are extracted through the differences in level of life between countries, in that the livelihood of the worker costs less in developing countries than it does in dominant capitalist countries. There is therefore a greater gift margin that comes from the gifts of women and of the developing society as a whole, which is monetized through the portion of the salary of the workers in the developed country, which is used to buy the imported product. Thus the gifts of workers from both hemispheres flow towards the capitalists but particularly towards those in the Global North.

One more recent development is the commodification of the free gifts of nature and culture, water, seeds, fertilizer and indigenous knowledges and the seizure of those gifts by Northern corporations.

In this perspective it is clear that the market is floating on and permeated by a sea of gifts. In fact the market is a mechanism for channelling gifts away from the many and towards the few. It uses scarcity for leverage and creates the scarcity when too much abundance accrues, wasting enormous amounts on wars, financial market crises and environmental destruction, all of which also redirect profits (gifts) towards the few. The gift economy threatens the exchange economy because it is a more satisfying and

meaningful way of living. If abundance existed for all, no one would willingly work for hierarchies of bosses. The exchange economy creates scarcity, dominates the gift economy and hides its acts of plunder in order to render the givers compliant. If too much widespread wealth accrues it is wasted on expensive wars and symbolic excesses, thereby ensuring scarcity.

The market is anti maternal 1. because it uses exchange instead of gifting as its method 2. because it functions according to the taking of free gifts of labor and resources for profit and 3. because it cancels, discredits and does not recognize or even see gift giving 4. because it makes mothering difficult through the control and scarsification of resources and the isolation of care givers from each other.

Gender: the misconstruction of masculinity

Patriarchal Capitalism/Capitalist Patriarchy is a system where the values of competition, domination and accumulation typical of Patriarchy have merged with the market values of equal exchange for money. This system uses the misrecognized accumulated gifts of the many to leverage more gifts. It plays out the individual oppression and depletion of the weak by the strong on a social plane, repeating a structural relation of domination at many levels, locally and globally. Competition for domination is the mode

of operation of Capitalist Patriarchy. Exacerbated individualism and the insensitivity to needs are typical characteristics.

A misunderstanding and misconstruction of male gender seems to me to be the basis of this. In a process, which I call 'mascultation', little boys, who are originally immersed in the economy of giving and receiving with their mothers, are told that they are not of the same gender category as she is. Consequently they are expected to give up giving and receiving at an early age and to take as the model of their category the father who is usually not doing maternal gift giving/nurturing. Thus they are encouraged to embrace a non giving identity that often seems to function according to hitting, which is a sort of imitation of giving, in which one touches another to establish a relationship but a relationship of domination rather than one of mutuality and trust. Not all males do this, but it has become a kind of macho ideal.

Like this kind of constructed identity, the market also leaves out gifts and gift giving. In fact if something is exchanged, it is not a gift. Thus the market is an appropriate environment for those who have rejected mothering/gift giving. That is, for males who have given up the maternal way and embraced the mistaken model for their gender, but also for females who in one way or another reject the gift economy or at

least partition it away when they are at 'work'. The market has an anti maternal identity while at the same time siphoning off the gifts of the many as profit. Paradoxically work in the anti gifting market is now necessary for the maintenance of the gift giving domestic sphere.

The world view and mindset of exchange, the exchange paradigm, eliminates giftgiving and mothering from the explanation of the world. It questions the existence of unilateral giving or sees it as a moral or religious issue, saintliness or sacrifice. Instead giving-receiving is the basic human species specific process. One of the reasons it is difficult to recognize gifts is that academia explains them as something else. It creates a blind spot so it just doesnt see them. Western philosophy is an attempt to explain the world without the mother.

By eliminating mothering as an explanatory key for its own society the West also eliminated the understanding of the gift economy of the indigenous and matriarchal peoples that was based on generalized mothering. This made the Europeans and Indigenous Americans mutually incomprehensible and was used to justify the oppression and slaughter of the indigenous people and the seizure of their land. Similar blindness towards other cultures has been used to justify colonialism in all its various guises, including



corporate economic colonialism. The alternative to capitalism is not communism, it is gift based matricentric feminism, matriarchal economics, caring economics – not a modification of capitalism but an alternative to it based on a different logic. Not the logic of recognition but the transitive logic of the gift. The gift logic is not more 'primitive' than the logic of exchange. It is what makes us human in the first place. The logic of exchange runs counter to it and dehumanizes us.

The feminist movement in the US and Europe, which showed so much potential for social change in the 70's and 80's, has in large part been dragged into the market and assimilated, perhaps just because of feminism's own rejection of mothering, aided by its aspiration to equality with men within patriarchal capitalism. Feminist thinkers have attributed women's specificity to a different standpoint and a different voice or to the values of care. They have been ironing out the wrinkles of sexism in Western thought when they should have been making a whole new set of clothes.

This is beginning to be recognized. In her recent book *Confronting Post Maternal Thinking*, Julie Stephens (2012) argues that the present rejection of maternalism among feminists and others is strongly influenced by neoliberalism. I hope Stephens' book is part of the beginning of a swing back

from the elimination of mothering from feminism that has gone on in Euro America for the last decades. We should make giving and receiving, mothering/being mothered, central in our interpretation of the world and create cross cultural movements for social change on that common basis. I am not suggesting that we become hunter gatherers but that we learn from them ways of creating the kinds of societies based on the gift economy and generalized mothering for which our brains have been hardwired by evolution. I am also not suggesting that we all become mothers but that we (both males and females) recover the model of giving and receiving that guaranteed our survival as children.

The task ahead of us now in Capitalist Patriarchy is to reveal gifts and gift giving where they have been cancelled, disguised or hidden, and to continue to connect them with mothering. Although academia is not the only or the main source of knowledge for many women, it has a strong influence and sets the tone for much of the thinking of the general population. Therefore it is worthwhile to challenge the anti maternal mindset of academia.

A first step is to understand mothering/being mothered as economic, a mode of distribution of goods to needs, which is the independant basis of all other economies, whether gift,

exchange, feudal, (patriarchal) capitalist or (patriarchal) communist. All the other economies are merely variations on the theme of the maternal economy.

The recent movement for the gift economy, inspired to a large extent by the free economy of the internet, does not recognize any particular connection with mothering. A second step in challenging academia is to insist upon this connection.

A third step is to take back an important aspect of philosophy and show that language itself is based on mothering.

In my next talk I will sketch a theory of language that is based on maternal gift giving. Since language helps define who we are as a species, reframing language as verbal gift giving and receiving will allow us to understand that humans are actually not *homo economicus* but a particularly maternal species that does unilateral nurturing not only materially but also verbally.

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