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The maternal economy

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In his essay *The Gift*, Mauss emphasizes the three obligations regarding gift exchange: the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. There are also in the societies he discussed, the “objects of consumption and common sharing” regarding which Mauss “found no trace of exchange”.(p.80) It is these objects and the process of providing them that concern me. I believe the work of provision and care is also gift giving, and should be allowed the same dignity and attention that is given to symbolic gift exchange and to market exchange. Dividing the household from the rest of society and not seeing the private sphere as the root of the public sphere, make direct gift giving invisible. Consequently, both direct giving and the exchange of gifts may be used to validate market exchange, and may appear as a primitive form of the market rather than as a possible alternative to it.

The idea that the gift is always reciprocal and that it is the ability or obligation to give back that creates social bonds does not take into account the maternal giving which necessarily happens in all societies. In

fact small children are dependant and cannot reciprocate, at least not for many years. Mothers, usually women, are thus forced into a role of unilateral giving. It is not the biology of women that makes mothers have to give to their children, but the biology of children that requires someone to give to them unilaterally, and societies have usually interpreted the fact that females give birth and lactate to assign this work of mothering to women. Men can perform the mothering role as well but their gender identity, at least in male dominant Euro America is usually constructed in opposition to gift giving/mothering. In this early construction, which I call masculation, boys give up the prototype of the gift giving mother for their human identity and replace it with the prototype of the dominant father.

The gifts and services of the mother are unilateral from the point of view of the child who receives them, and within the time frame of childhood, the child does not and cannot repay the mother an equivalent of what s/he has been given. Children begin to understand exchange around the age of 5. Before that time and after it as well they engage in much imitation of their mothers and other care givers and in turn taking with them, which should not be considered identical to market exchange, which is giving in order to receive an equivalent return.

Misogyny and matrophobia in the context of the market economy cause us to devalue maternal gift giving and render it invisible.

Unilateral gift giving has also been discredited, by considering it instinctual and illogical or even saintly. However I believe it is

commonplace and functions according to a relation-creating logic of its own, which, although it is simpler than exchange and seemingly less informative, is actually fundamental. In giving unilaterally to satisfy a need the giver recognizes the need of the other and makes or procures something to satisfy it. This implies the attention of the giver to the receiver and the ability to act (intentionally) in h/er behalf with a kind of functional other-orientation. The gifts that are given are also historically and geographically determined as to their specific content. We continue to do this giving throughout our lives, though we may not be conscious of it. Giving unilaterally to someone requires knowledge of the other to the extent that one must recognize or guess h/er need and provide some appropriate gift or service, which will satisfy it. The purpose of the gift, its fruition, is the satisfaction of the need of the receiver and h/er well-being. The receiver is thus an important element of the transaction. I am not speaking of the gift of munificence, which is simply given without a specific receiver, perhaps to demonstrate the importance of the giver. Unilateral maternal gift giving requires a receiver. On h/er part the receiver must be able to use the gift she has received to her own benefit, for example a child must be able to swallow and digest the food, to respond positively to the various kinds of care s/he is given and to grow with the nourishment provided. The receiver is not passive but must creatively use what s/he has been given in order for the gift transaction to be complete. If she cannot use it, the gift transaction has failed. Although the gift can come to fruition even if the receiver is not

conscious of it, the receiver can also be conscious of the other as the source of the gift or service and of h/er consequent well being. This creates a positive expectation regarding future gifts and a relation of mutuality and trust between giver and receiver. Gratitude is also not a necessary component of the interaction, however it does often occur as part of a positive response of the receiver, which acknowledges the giver and the gift. No struggle for recognition or dominance need occur in this interaction, and in fact if it does, the relation changes from positive to negative, from mutuality to competition and domination.

Thus giving and receiving, the unilateral satisfaction of needs, already creates positive human relations, which are beyond or before reciprocity, debt and obligation. I believe the relational theme, which develops into gift *exchange* actually begins in unilateral gift giving and receiving, which is more basic and more widespread than gift exchange or market exchange. The three kinds of transactions are distinct from each other. Lets look first at the distinction between unilateral gift giving and market exchange.

Unilateral gift giving takes place according to a transitive logic, a movement of goods, which also implies the value of the receiver. In fact if the receiver were not important for the giver, s/he would not have given the gift to h/er. There is also a syllogism of gift giving "If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C." This syllogism underlies the circulation of gifts, which are passed unilaterally from one person to another. The value of the receiver is implied here also, and the giver, who

was previously the receiver, does not have to lose the value s/he has been given, even when she gives the gift to someone else.

On the other hand, market exchange takes place according to an intransitive identity logic. By making the transaction contingent on an equivalent return the unilateral gift is cancelled and the transaction becomes ego oriented rather than other oriented. Unilateral giving and receiving create bonds while market exchange cancels and breaks them, and indifference is created between the participants (Godbout 1992). Indeed exchange is adversarial in that each person is trying to get more than the other out of the supposedly equal exchange (Hyde 1979). Exchange is self-reflecting and self-asserting while unilateral gift giving concentrates on the other and therefore the giver often remains unnoticed.

In the early processes of unilateral giving and receiving the bodies of the members of the community are made, and their minds as well, in that their experiences are formed by these interactions. I think this transitive gift giving transfer of need-satisfying goods and services can be seen as communication, a material communication, which creates bodies as well as relations and gives material goods as well as value.

Market exchange instead is a kind of aberrant material communication, a non- communication, which is intransitive and stops the gift. The value of the other, which would have been implied by the gift transaction is cancelled. By using the other as means for the satisfaction of h/er own need, the exchanger implies h/er own value, not

the value of the other. Attention and (exchange) value are also attributed to the product, the commodity, not to the human beings involved. Gift exchange is intermediate between these two extremes of unilateral giving and market exchange, and all three can coexist simultaneously.

The identity logic of the market economy influences us very strongly to validate only the kind of relation that occurs in giving to receive an equivalent or to make a profit. Moreover market exchange emphasizes the ego orientation of *homo economicus* and considers other orientation as an unrealistic moral penchant. Instead I submit that there exists an ongoing maternal gift economy that is transitive, satisfies needs and creates relations. It is not primarily moral but functional. The term 'economics' has been identified with market exchange. I believe we should call maternal gift giving, mothering, a mode of distribution, a way of distributing goods directly to needs, a mode, which is economic on a par with exchange. That is, we should broaden the term 'economic' to include the unilateral maternal relation-creating gift economy. The economy based on exchange could therefore be seen as derived from the unilateral gift economy by a doubling back of the gift, making the counter transaction obligatory and requiring an equation of value-in-exchange.

In so called 'symbolic' gift exchange, the obligation to reciprocate is based on traditions and there is a variation in the motivation, the timing

and the circumstances of giving and return giving. In fact, in gift exchange, the increase on the gift that is included with the return gift might be considered as a unilateral and free part of the return gift, a maternal addition to the otherwise equal reciprocation. In the market this 'extra' of course becomes interest on the loan, an instrument of domination, which can transform the relation between exchangers into a hierarchical one. In paying off the loan the relation is cancelled, while in giving a gift unilaterally a relation is created. Gift giving unilaterally can take place on an egalitarian basis. It can also be used beyond hierarchy as a means of empowerment. In fact as regards childhood, mothers and caregivers bring children *up*. That is, they encourage them to become equal as physical and as socialized beings. There is also a lot of domination of children but this unfortunate fact does not negate the existence of widespread positive horizontal and maternal gift giving.

In the market, where anonymity is commonplace, exchange maintains the distance between players, but in a community practicing gift exchange, the interactors continue to be part of the group because they use their reciprocal (unilateral and bilateral) value-conferring gifts to maintain the community. Their exchanges continue to contain elements of maternal unilateral giftgiving.

We should look at the kinds of reciprocity that take place in so called 'pre' market and 'pre' capitalist societies as influenced more by maternal

giving than by the logic of exchange, which influences reciprocity in capitalist market society, and which also influences the investigators who live in capitalism while studying 'pre market reciprocity'.

If we look at gift exchange as a variation on unilateral gift giving, and both as kinds of gift giving, which 'precede' the market but still coexist with it, we can see some of its present day manifestations as examples of the take-over of gift giving by the market logic. The internet, which was free, is now becoming commodified in many of its parts, while open source software gives an example of gift exchange, which first functioned according to the maternal logic of need satisfaction, then moved towards the Big Man reward of recognition as takes place in gift exchange, and finally is succumbing to the market at least in part, when its Big Men use their reputations to get good jobs with software corporations.

The coexistence of the logic of unilateral gift giving and market exchange creates a number of paradoxes with uneasy resolutions. Gift giving, in accord with its principle of other-orientation, gives to its 'other', which at a general level is exchange. In this way it colludes with its own oppression. Exchange, in accord with its own ego-oriented principle, considers that it deserves the extra gifts it gets. ('Deserving' appears to mean that it has given a lot already, and the present gifts are its reward). In this way the exchange mode validates its own supremacy. It

competes with cooperative gift giving and wins, because in fact gift giving does not usually compete.

The free gifts of housework would add some 40% to the GNP in the US (Waring 1988) if they were counted in monetary terms. They are an immense gift that (mainly) women are giving to the market economy. Unilateral gift giving can re propose itself in the market arena as well. See for example the recent phenomenon of remittances made by immigrants from the global South in the North, which have now reached many billions of dollars. Profit itself can be seen as a free nurturing of the capitalist, which is forced from the worker. Marx's surplus value, the value of the labor that is not paid for in the salary, is free of cost to the capitalist though extracted or leveraged from the worker. The gifts of nature and culture – water, life forms, seeds, traditional practices- were once free but now are rapidly being commodified. From this point of view, we can see that the market actually floats on a sea of gifts, and is irrigated by it, though it usually appears that the market itself is the agent, which is creating the wealth.

The logic of market exchange is a deep magnetic template underlying our thinking. Guilt and retributive justice are cognates of exchange, where one must pay back for wrongs done according to an assessment or quantification of their negative value. Attempts to prevent crimes by finding and satisfying the needs that give rise to them, are cognates of unilateral gift giving. The market functions as a huge sorting mechanism,

sorting commodities in and gifts out. The same thing happens in our thinking: we sort and categorize, leaving aside the transitivity of unilateral gifts. Even consciousness itself is seen as self-reflecting, a kind of internal equation of value.

The movement for restorative justice, which has begun recently is a positive development, which contradicts the exchange-based institution of retributive justice. In the general population however, the logic of exchange is not only prominent but it has been intensely psychologically invested, causing knee jerk, gut reactions. In fact after the attack on the Twin Towers, Bush prepared to counter attack while he notoriously advised the population to go shopping. His call to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice, to make somebody pay, struck a chord in a population, which already strongly embraced the ideology of market exchange.

The appeal to equal exchange pervades our society and is also part of the arsenal of the propagandists and spin-doctors, who are hired to validate war. In fact lying follows the logic of exchange while telling the truth follows the logic of the gift. The lie is ego oriented: one person satisfies the other's communicative need (or need to know) as a means to satisfy his or her own need, which may be completely different. Telling the truth is other-oriented, that is, it satisfies the need of the other. Thus the lies of advertising and propaganda fit perfectly with the logic of exchange, while telling the truth remains a gift outside the market.

Abundance is necessary for unilateral gift giving to flourish. In scarcity unilateral giving becomes difficult and even self-sacrificial for givers, who have been dispossessed of the means of giving and who live in communities where there is no circulation of gifts. The Capitalist economy creates the scarcity, which hinders gift giving and allows the few to control the many. It alters the flow of gifts in order to maintain control, overnurturing some and undernurturing many. The world is spending \$1 trillion on armaments this year (of which half is being spent by the US) when \$80 billion would be enough to take care of all the basic needs on earth. Moreover, future generations will not be able to practice unilateral gift giving *or* gift exchange because of environmental devastation and privatization.

The market is not just a benign way of moving goods from one place to another. It is a self-perpetuating and self-aggrandizing human logical mechanism for grasping unilateral gifts and determining their destination. The top 2% of the world adult population now owns more than 50% of the physical and financial resources (capital) of the world, while the bottom 50% of the population owns just 1% . (from World Institute for Development Economics Research report, Dec. 2006).

The mechanism of the market, in a self-confirming game of smoke and mirrors, makes it appear that *it* is the source of wealth and the distributor of need satisfying goods. However it is the flow of unilateral gifts from the many to the few that is actually creating that (captured)

abundance. The free portion of the cheap labor of the many, the low cost raw materials and the margins caused by level-of-life in different areas, function to subsidize the market and create the profit, which motivates it. In fact the market is actually parasitic on the gifts of the many.

It is the invisibility of the flow of gifts and the ostentation and visibility of those who reap advantages, which make it appear that the market is the source of good for all. Reciprocal gift exchange in this situation, the exchange of favors, serves to solidify a capitalist class community.

Festivals and monetary gifts circulate to create networks and dependencies in mafia-like corporate cultures for groups like Enron or Parmalat, but also for the political-military-industrial elites. Elections are financed in this way and politicians' dependence on gifts that they must later reciprocate seems to be the normal way for democracy to function.

Moreover, the values of patriarchy inform the exchange economy. The drive to accumulate and dominate, independence, indifference to the needs of others, competitiveness, serve the market, motivating it to such an extent that we should call the system we live in 'Patriarchal Capitalism' or with a slightly different emphasis 'Capitalist Patriarchy'. Patriarchal Capitalism is systemic and general. Therefore individuals of any sex can participate in it successfully and it is not biologically based and inalterable..

By looking at unilateral gift giving as an economic structure in the Marxist sense, we can see that it is what gives rise to the superstructure of values of care rather than some supposed essentialist moral superiority of women. Similarly with exchange, we should place first the economic logic of the market and second the values of *homo economicus*: ego orientation, domination, and greed. In fact this displacement allows us to see these values as motivations that serve Patriarchal Capitalist economic 'growth' and market expansion rather than as individual defects. In this light we can see our species not as pathological and murderous, deserving of the race to death in which it seems to be engaged, but a species caught in a logical trap of its own making, which paradoxically rewards and requires from individuals, the very motivations which damage the many and even the planet on which we live.

The academic world, which is deeply influenced both by the market and by patriarchy, leaves out unilateral gift giving as an interpretative key, and it is both a challenge and a feminist adventure to try to restore that key and thereby create a more comprehensive world view, a view that can understand humanity not just as *homo sapiens* or *homo economicus* but as *homo donans*.

To restore the interpretative key of unilateral gift giving, I have been working on a theory of language as virtual verbal gift giving in abundance, in which we satisfy other's communicative needs with verbal products/gifts. Looking at it in this way we can see that not only *homo*

sapiens but also *homo loquens* is *homo donans*. That is, being human, using language and gifts and services is basically altogether about directly satisfying needs. We have been caught in the exchange paradigm, and in a kind of supply side semiotics and linguistics where we look at language as (self interested) self-expression rather than as a transitive satisfaction of others' communicative needs.

The unilateral gifts that need to be given now are the gifts that change this system, the gifts of activism of all kinds, that try to prevent and roll back the social crimes against the unilateral gift, which steal and waste the means of nurturing of our children and our children's children, destroying the abundance that the planet, Mother Earth, is unilaterally giving us if only we are able to respect and receive it. These gifts of activism need to be directed towards the causes of these crimes, not to make their perpetrators pay, in the exchange mode, but to create solutions which will satisfy the needs, which give rise to the crimes, according to the mode of the gift. Some of those needs are actually caused by the perspective of the exchange paradigm itself, so validating the gift paradigm can already have a positive effect.

Validating the gift paradigm can also encourage feminist movements and movements of indigenous peoples, who are closer to the mode of distribution of the unilateral gift to unite to oppose the perspectives of Western Patriarchal Capitalism. Latin American leaders such as Hugo

Chavez and Evo Morales are reclaiming their indigenous roots and moving towards gift giving.

Framing activism as unilateral gift giving can empower women and men to see it as the generalization of maternal practice, and this has the added advantage of validating the gift paradigm at a general societal level and far beyond the nursery. Including unilateral gift giving in the definition of the human is itself a strategy for creating peace.