

A gift economy based on mothering

Genevieve Vaughan

The recent economic crash has shown the deep sickness of the system of which we are a part. Only palliative measures upon which huge amounts of money have been spent have been tried until now. There is no radically different analysis available.

I believe that the answer to the question of why women have been oppressed for centuries is also the answer to the question of what is wrong with the present economic system and to the question of what kind of economic system we should be trying to create. In order to answer this question we need to connect the dots in a radically different way, which I will try to sketch briefly in these few paragraphs. We can begin the sketch by considering the direct giving of goods and services to satisfy needs as an alternative economic way, a gift economy based on maternal care. The maternal economy provides a mode of distribution: giving directly, which is often invisible as such, and coexists in our society with the over-visible economy based on exchange: giving-in-order-to-receive an equivalent. The two economies diverge in a very elementary way in everyday life and they have important psychological and relational consequences and interactions.

The logic of direct giving contrasts in many ways with the logic of exchange. It is transitive and bridges the gap between self and other, creating positive relationships. Exchange, by requiring an equivalent, cancels the gift; it is ego oriented, self reflecting and places people in competition with each other. The gift economy requires a creative receiver who uses the gift or service, while the exchange economy diverts attention away from the receiver onto the object, and treats the other as means for acquiring it. Giving/receiving is oriented towards the other and gives value to the other, exchanging is oriented towards the self and gives value to the self. Giving/receiving is mostly qualitative, exchange is mostly quantitative. Giving/receiving establishes relations of mutuality and trust, exchange establishes separation, independence and adversarial behavior. The gift economy, the economy of direct provisioning, is necessary for young children, who are born dependent and unable to practice exchange. They cannot give back an equivalent of what they have been given. Children receive more than material sustenance with the gifts and services they are given. In fact an early nurturing environment is necessary for the development of neuronal connections.

Although the market economy in which we live is based on exchange, gift giving still permeates society at all levels though unseen as such. It is important to take it seriously as an alternative and bring it to light individually and collectively. Every act or word of kindness perpetuates the mothering logic. Without them life would hardly be worth living. Yet we validate exchange, self interest and cost benefit reasoning.

The two logics influence us without our knowing it and they have echoes or resonances at many levels. For example telling the truth is a gift to the other person while lies, like exchange, are mainly ego oriented and give an advantage to the one who tells them. Justice as payment for crime is an exchange based concept, while restorative justice is gift based.

Finding the answer to the question of why women have been oppressed requires us to see that although the gift mode of distribution, the economy of direct provisioning, which is established everywhere by maternal adults for children, is the human way of doing things, it has been redirected and has become the source of profit for adult economies and cultures of exploitation based on exchange. The economy of exchange appears to be based on the equivalence of the products exchanged but actually it is motivated by the extraction of other's free gifts at all levels. In fact it is these gifts that make up profit whether they are composed of the uncounted and unrecognized work of housewives and mothers (which would add some 40% to the GDP in the US if it were counted in monetary terms), the free resources of Mother Nature (calculated at \$33 trillion in 1998),¹ the profit that comes free to the capitalist from the "surplus value" of the work of laborers, or the differential of level of life between under- and over-developed countries.

Because infants cannot survive without a great deal of maternal care, everyone has the early experience of being the receiver of unilateral giving/provisioning. This is the case whoever actually does the mothering- whether women or men, birth mothers or aunts or grandmothers, whole villages, or even paid care givers (the child does not know the care is paid for). Granted the quality of the care may change according to who does it, but if the child survives, it must have been at least adequate. Society usually allocates the job of mothering to the birth mother and gender has largely been constructed to ensure this allocation. This gender construction has the effect that (at least in Western culture) from very early on boys are expected to renounce participation in and the practice of the maternal gift economy upon which their lives depend. They are trained away from their human maternal identities when they are most vulnerable, and are encouraged to construct their gender identities around an adult model of independence, power over, and ego orientation, which is often also violent. In a kind of transformation of giving, physical violence reaches out and touches the other person to harm by hitting and to establish relations not of mutuality but of domination. Wider scale systemic violence is held in place by physical violence.

The economy based on the appearance of equal exchange cancels gifts and creates an appropriate non-nurturing systemic arena for the exercise of a gender identity based on the renunciation of maternal giving. Although it appears 'neuter' the market system is gendered 'male' in that it cancels, devalues and disguises the maternal gift economy while exploiting gifts of all kinds. Paradoxically men's gifts are harnessed by the system to provide the gift of profit

¹ For valuation of "ecosystem services"

http://earthtrends.wri.org/features/view_feature.php?fid=15&theme=5

to capitalists and the means of giving to their wives. Even more paradoxically, many women participate the anti-maternal system so that they can supply what is necessary for their own maternal giving.

The fact that women can rise to the 'highest' positions in this economy shows that its gendered character is not biologically but socially based - and what is socially based can be changed. Similarly the fact that women can achieve top positions in the military shows that organized military violence is not biologically but socially based and systemic. - and can be changed. Many women in capitalism have found themselves ill at ease with the requirements and values of their positions because they have not given up the values of the need-directed maternal economy. Those who cannot or do not want to give up their place in the system have the possibility of working to shift values and practices from 'within'. Those who are relegated outside the system can begin to understand the importance of their own gift giving work. Men who for reasons of character or personal history have not given up the values of the maternal economy, can do this as well.

Contrary to appearances the system based on exchange is deeply threatened by the possibility of a gift economy. In fact in a situation of abundance, gift giving would be easy and delightful and people would not need to submit to working within hierarchies of power, but would simply provision each other according to an adult elaboration of the model of the mothering economy. This is indeed what happened in many indigenous societies and is one of the reasons European capitalism has tried to eliminate or colonize them..

The idea of "effective demand" -needs of the people who have the money to buy the products to satisfy them- has deflected attention away from the human needs which people cannot pay for and which in a gift economy, would be in the forefront. New consumer needs are created on the basis of effective demand and greed is stimulated because it is functional to the system which creates scarcity for the many. The market system promises abundance and progress but actually channels the hidden gifts of the many to the few thereby creating the context of poverty for the many that it needs in order to maintain leverage and control. When too much abundance accrues in the system, it does not 'trickle down' but is wasted in wars and symbolic excesses, while continuing to enrich the powerful at the top. A philosophy of human nature as greedy, aggressive and war like functions like a self fulfilling prophecy to maintain the market , excessive capital accumulation and the unreasonable waste of resources and human life.

The maternal gift givers are denigrated by considering them childlike (recalling the gift economy of childhood, which adults have supposedly renounced), or 'primitive', an earlier stage of human development with regard to the supposedly more 'advanced' participants in the market mechanism. However the market has caused immense harm by focussing the whole society on taking gifts for profit in the present, penalizing mothers, children and other gift givers as well as Nature and future generations.

Anthropologists have interpreted gift economies as based on exchange of gifts, but even in those societies mothers had to give to their young children unilaterally. Even the West many social forms, like welfare, philanthropy and the

movement for a basic wage, though usually led by men, are still unconsciously influenced by the unilateral maternal economy. Indigenous 'pre capitalist' societies elaborated their economies in different ways from ours, maintaining more maternal elements. Capitalism is not progress beyond those societies. It is an oppositional anti-maternal elaboration of the same maternal gift giving themes. Pre capitalist societies are not earlier forms of capitalism, but maternal economies that were (and some still are) developing in alternative ways.

A recent strategy of the system has been the commodification of previously free gift areas such as water, seeds, indigenous knowledges, even clean air (in debt for nature swaps). Access is denied to the gifts of nature and people have to pay the corporations for something they do not provide (but only own) like water or for products like infertile GMO seeds. Meanwhile a few people in the Global South and a few in the North have gotten richer, and a few have been partially absorbed into the market by well intentioned but misguided initiatives like micro credit. As we said, the solution is not to absorb more people into the not-giving anti-maternal market, but to peacefully dismantle it and to share the wealth created through the work of generations (and Mother Nature) according to a maternal model of egalitarian provisioning.

The rise of globalization transferred many gifts from the global South to the North. When too much abundance threatens the system, scarcity is created by wasting wealth by destroying it in war. Recently in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, more than a trillion dollars have been spent. Whether intentionally or not, recent financial bubbles have also had this function. It is easier to control an impoverished population by force than a wealthy one. "Us" versus "them" mentality creates the social anxiety that makes people bond together as a group in front of an enemy. This fear-bonding replaces the positive bonding that takes place through unilateral gift giving. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the US needed a new enemy and found terrorism. The fear that *anyone* may be a terrorist places us all in a paranoid stance, which is diametrically opposed to the trust that comes from giving and receiving. However it fits in with the hyper individualism, which is functional to the ego oriented market logic.

After the destruction of the World Trade Center many people in the US were calling for the government to recognize the exploitation our economy had perpetrated on the so called "Third World" and to give donations without strings attached to the people in countries like Afghanistan, who were understandably hostile to us. Unfortunately both Afghanistan and Iraq have suffered the terrible consequences of our government's inability to consider this option, and the people of the US have suffered as well.

Finding workable ways to give is not impossible. Money spent on discovering how to give while respecting all concerned would be a small percentage of the money spent on justifying war. The escalation of tragedy in Haiti from the earthquake to the cholera epidemic in spite of what are probably international good intentions, demonstrates that we desperately need to find ways to give effectively and that giving with the motivation of exchange and control cannot be the solution. When faced with such a large scale failure of compassion one begins

to wonder whether it does not serve hidden agendas of economic and political interests.

The creation of scarcity does not have to be intentional however. It comes from the blind needs of the system itself. Even global warming can serve the purposes of the system. The destruction of our natural ecological niche deprives us of the gifts of Mother Earth, making the gift economy difficult and making Earth seem vengeful – ie ready to make us pay. Guilt and blame are psychological echoes of exchange, which pull us into the market mentality even as we try to step away from it. We are reading Earth's 'motivations' – in terms of our own sickness!

Lying as we said is consonant with the logic of exchange and the system provides many levels of lies, manipulating the knowledge base of the many through advertising and propaganda. It has also altered the definition of the human to make the species appear perfectly in line with the market economy in which it is embedded. Humanity is presented as self interested, wiley, greedy and violent *homo economicus*, barely held in check by violently enforced laws. Instead these negative values are functional to the growth of the economy, while a maternal economy would give us not just *homo sapiens* but *homo donans*. We could re conceptualize ourselves as the giving and receiving maternal species, and act in accordance with this self fulfilling prophecy.

We can call capitalism 'economic patriarchy' because the values of Patriarchy and capitalism coincide – independence, power over, competition for domination. Economic patriarchy takes its sustenance from the free gifts of all. Its power comes from its hold on the maternal gifts of the many and its ability to re direct them. Thus feminists should oppose capitalism - economic patriarchy.

At present the solution to the problem of poverty seems to be the assimilation of more people into the market. However this is not functional. The market has to get free gifts from somewhere. A better solution is to nonviolently dissolve the market and free the givers. I say non violently because using patriarchal means would only perpetuate the problem in terms of power-over. Also most people are not conscious that they are part of such a dysfunctional system. Even conceiving of the goal of changing it in the direction of the maternal economy could create a positive change in mentality and behavior.

The maternal economy actually already permeates life though it is unrecognized. It is practised in every direct need-satisfying act. I believe that it is also the source of our linguistic and communicative capacity, though I do not have space to talk about that here. There are values, indeed a whole culture, coming from the maternal economy, which we continue to hold but which are invisible or appear secondary, unrealistic, even impossible (Derrida 1992). Perhaps we interpret them as morality but actually they are the superstructure of the maternal gift giving economic base. By accessing and affirming these values we can transition away from patriarchal capitalism and eventually dismantle it, turning the whole culture in a different (new-old) direction. Those who have not been made to renounce the model of the mother to construct their gender identity, i.e. women, are the logical vanguard of the necessary systemic change. They should ally themselves with everyone who consciously or unconsciously adopts the maternal economy, across gender, race, class and national divisions,

to change Patriarchy and Capitalism from inside and from outside for the good of all.

There is probably a psychological problem such as the Oedipus complex that permeates the problematic economic system and comes from the construction of the masculine gender as non maternal. This kind of problem would be less likely in a society where the mother's brother is the significant male figure or in other configurations such as the visiting marriages of the matriarchal Mosuo people in China. Nigerian writer Ifi Amadiume (1997) tells us there is no Oedipus complex in African societies where children of both sexes live mainly with the mother until they are 6 years old. In such societies the model of the mother is generalized and, where colonization has not taken its toll, gift economies are still practiced.

Recent attempts at gift economy have been made possible by the abundance available on the internet. Like the various socialist social experiments that have taken place in the past, much of this work remains at least to some extent patriarchal because the deep connection with mothering is not recognized.

Wikipedia

Free software, Copyleft, www.gnu.org

Free cycling, www.freecycle.org

Peer-to-Peer social networking (cooperative individualism modeled on and using the internet) www.p2pfoundation.net

Creative Commons license, www.creativecommons.org

Blood banks and organ donation

Intentional communities

Community gardens

Community pay-it-forward restaurants www.karmakitchen.org

Hitchhiking

Ride sharing

Bicycle sharing

Couch surfing www.couchsurfing.com

Alcoholics Anonymous

Burning Man Gatherings www.burningman.com

Rainbow Gatherings [://www.welcomehome.org/rainbow/index.html](http://www.welcomehome.org/rainbow/index.html)

Some alternative currencies and time banks, for example www.timebanks.org

Community solidarity work

Volunteerism and much non profit work

Remittances of immigrants in the North to their home countries in the South

There is an interesting initiative called Charity Focus which has garnered quite a following. I subscribe to the newsletter myself. www.charityfocus.org

Progressive philanthropy www.thresholdfoundation.org and www.womendonors.org

In addition there has been a great deal of research done on altruism and generosity recently. One interesting initiative among many is Science of Generosity www.generosityresearch@nd.edu

Another is The Center for Building a Culture of Empathy www.progressivespirit.com/empathy

A conference on empathy at the University of Chicago in 2009 <http://ccsn.uchicago.edu/empathy>

I believe that problem-solving is a kind of gift-giving, the satisfaction of a need. This lets me include as gifts all the innumerable initiatives for social change that people as *homo donans* do to solve the problems created by the Patriarchal Capitalist system.

Only when economies are understood as gendered and gender is understood as economic, will we be able to create a mode of distribution and production that works for the good of all. An interdisciplinary investigation which connects the dots in this way, and does not separate economics from nurturing, can show us the path that we must travel, which is not the same one we have been travelling until now with economic patriarchy in charge.

Bibliography

Amadiume, Ifi. 1997. *Reinventing Africa, Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London. Zed Books.

Derrida, Jacques 1992. *Given Time. 1. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.