

Homo Donans Materno

Genevieve Vaughan

For many years I have been trying to bring to light a view of the gift economy based on mothering, a free provisioning economy that is fundamentally neither instinctual nor sentimental but structural. Taking the power of definition and calling maternal provisioning 'economic' displaces the market from its hegemonic place in the concept of the economy. It makes us take mothering seriously in a new way and lets us take the market less seriously. I am not suggesting that giving and receiving do not have important emotional and psychological components. In fact infancy is the period of the development of mind and body before they are separated by the culture. However, looking at 'free' as a mode of distribution of goods to needs allows us to depersonalize and desentimentalize maternal gifting, revealing that it has a logic¹ of its own that contrasts with the *do ut des* logic of the market and even with the Maussian logic of giving, receiving and giving back. In fact the first two steps of giving and receiving already bring about important human consequences. In the mother-child¹ relation giving without a return is

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necessary for the survival of the infant who cannot give back or measure an equivalent return gift. Maternal gifting creates a transitive path of goods and services and implies the value of the child for the mother, who takes the initiative towards her or him. Receiving these goods and services in a competent way along with the implication of her value creates in the child a sense of self esteem as we shall see. Doing these acts of giving and receiving together creates positive relations between the two parts of the dyad. Although the child does not exchange *quid pro quo* with the mother, this does not mean that the child does not respond or that she or he does not also give. In fact the child gives signs of all kinds, cries, smiles laughter, gestures and body products like urine and feces. There are 'protoconversations' that have been found in all the cultures where psychologists have looked for them, in which mothers and infants take turns with smiles, sounds and gestures. These happy interactions have even been recorded with musical scores. (Trevvarthen 1979) But in fact these are turn taking interactions not obligatory exchanges. *Quid pro quo* market exchange, where I give you this only if you give me that, has a logic of its own that is different from that of the unilateral gift. In exchange the interaction is centered on the self. One gives in order to receive not just in order to satisfy

the need of the other. In fact the need of the other is used for the satisfaction of one's own need. While repeating the unilateral gift towards still others creates community and gift circulation, in exchange every ego-centric person stays in a solitary position, competing with others. Value is given to oneself and to the things exchanged, not to the other exchanger.

The logic of unilateral nurturing continues throughout life even when other more complex logics are also functioning. Freud taught us that what happens in infancy molds adult life. So I would say that giving and receiving unilaterally among adults derives from and repeats emotions and relations formed in infancy – even without our knowing it. Moreover, even Maussian three-step gift exchange and market exchange itself take much of their significance from being variations on the theme of the mother-child gift relation. For example it would seem probable that the capacity of symbolic gifts to create recognition has its roots in the construction of the self that happens in the child through the gifts of maternal care. Considering the unilateral gift 'economic' gives us also the possibility to see it in terms of Marxist 'structure and super structure'. This lets us think of moral and sentimental values of care not as autonomous aspects of the human personality

but as values coming from the practice of the maternal economic 'base'. In the present society it is difficult to sustain these values because gift-giving and market exchange are locked in a parasitic embrace that seems symbiotic.

The values of care are the values of the maternal host not of the market parasite - but the host does not even know that it exists as an independent way of doing things because the market has been so efficient in imposing itself, reinterpreting its parasitism and making it appear legitimate.

Mothering is the original interface between child and world. We are all connected as beings who have been nurtured by others. The bridge that unites us is formed in our first years and it is created by giving and receiving within interactions with our carers. Unfortunately the logic of exchange contradicts this original relation and creates internal logical and psychological contradictions as soon as we are old enough to participate in the market.

There is a lot to say about gifting when its maternal roots are taken into account. Let me mention only a few.

It is possible to trace a spectrum of gifts from the most thoroughly unilateral through the benignly reciprocal to 'symbolic gift exchange', to forced reciprocity, to manipulative gifting for power over others, to market exchange, where gifts

are transformed into profit by manipulation and exploitation. There are many gradations in this spectrum and I can only suggest their complexity here. However if we do not have the idea of unilateral gifting as the first step we lack the beginning of the spectrum and so cannot recognize the gradations as such, with the result that we only see a disorderly jumble of kinds of gifts, which we then attempt to classify

There are many social metaphors based on exchange or on the gift. For example both vengeance and justice require payment for crime. The feeling of guilt stimulates us to prepare to pay. Now there are proposals of new solutions such as restorative justice that are informed by the values of giving for the satisfaction of needs: the needs of the victims as well as those of the perpetrators. Telling the truth is more a gift than an exchange because it satisfies the other's need to know, while a lie satisfies its teller's need or desire to deceive and has become an accepted strategy of the market.

I believe there is also a metaphor of the gift hidden in violence: hitting is 'giving someone a thrashing', 'letting them have it'. Hitting others touches them physically like maternal gifting does and like gifting, it establishes a relation – not of mutuality and trust but of domination. People who undergo a heavily masculinizing gender construction, which is in opposition to the

female mother construction, often use this contradictory derivative of the gift, and they often use it to make others give more gifts to themselves.

The market functions according to the capacity to take gifts. Marx's surplus labor is the part of the labor that is not covered by the salary and is taken by the capitalist. It is forced from the laborer but given free to the capitalist. In a similar way the gifts of household labor pass to the capitalist through the family members who have received the nurturing and who contribute their surplus labor.

Back in 1988 the feminist economist Marilyn Waring began to try to quantify the value of household work. Now one of her collaborators, Duncan Ironmonger tells us "Household production is now recognised as an alternative or parallel economy to the market. Rather than being a satellite to the market economy, the household economy is best considered a binary star". (Ironmonger 2003).

In 2012, Ironmonger estimated the USA's 2011 Gross Household Product at 11.6 trillion dollars (as compared to a GDP of 13.3 trillion)(Ironmonger and Soupourmas 2012) If we add to this free production the global 'ecosystem services', which have been estimated at some \$125 trillion a

year compared to the monetized economy's \$75 trillion GDP, (Costanza et al. 2014) we can see how the market economy actually floats upon a sea of gifts.

Moreover profit, the motivation of the market, is made of gifts. In fact the market is a mechanism for channeling the gifts of the many towards the few. Generalized poverty is useful to this end because in abundance everyone could live happily without working for those in power. In order to carry out the purpose of creating poverty we have invented wars, which waste the accumulated abundance.

There are many things that are visible in a new light from a point of view that includes maternal gifting so I will try to justify this perspective more thoroughly.

Infant psychology

In the last few years I have discovered an external validation in the new infant psychology, which, because it views infants differently, leaves a space for viewing mothering differently. In the 1980s the frame by frame study of films of mother child interactions spurred this new psychology in which babies are understood as being highly social from birth (M.C. Bateson 1979). Colwyn Trevarthen, Stein Braten, Andrew Meltzoff and many others have revolutionized the study of young children,

breaking away from the conception of Freud, Piaget and Skinner who saw infants as passive and solipsistic. This new understanding makes the care-giving mother a partner in altercentric interaction, with an alert and intelligent other, who is already able to represent her supramodally as 'Like Me'. solipsistic (Meltzoff and Brooks 2007) In her interchanges with the mother the child is not only a receiver but also a unilateral giver: of gestures, vocalizations and bodily products.

Other recent researchers (for example Giacomo Rizzolati, Vittorio Gallese and Michael Arbib) have shown how the child's mirror neurons simulate the activity of the mother so that each person in the dyad subconsciously knows what the other is doing and feeling. This would be particularly important for the material nurturing interaction, but giving and receiving have hardly been studied as such by mirror neuron and infancy researchers. The only comment I have seen is by Stein Braten "...we should expect, for example, that in humans give-mirror neurons should be activated during own giving and while watching the other give and that grasp-mirror neurons be activated during own grasping and while watching the other grasp". (2002)

To me the research on mirror neurons communicates the

extremely important idea that each partner in the maternal dyad at least subconsciously knows what the other is feeling when giving or when receiving (and vice versa) and perhaps also knows *that* the other knows. Emotionally, at least to some extent, receiving is giving and giving is receiving.

Just as mothering is mostly lacking from the framework of ideas around the gift economy, material giving and receiving is mostly lacking from the framework of infant psychology².

Although it would seem to be an obvious component of this study, mother work – feeding, carrying, dressing, cleaning the infant - is not investigated, while more typically psychological communicative interactions, vocalizations and gestures are.

Interpersonal neurobiology

An interesting move towards a somewhat more central focus on the mother is a shift towards the integration of attachment theory and neurobiology in what is being called ‘interpersonal neurobiology’, as developed by Allan Schore, Daniel Siegel and others. Here the brain, especially the right hemisphere of the brain of the mother is seen as actually interacting with the right brain of the infant. The mother holistically (and mostly subconsciously) regulates the preverbal child’s emotions and

the child's right brain registers and learns from her regulation how to self-regulate. (Schoore 2003) Moreover, astonishingly, "the rate of synaptogenesis in the developing infant's brain is a remarkable 40,000 new synapses every second and brain volume increases from 400 g at birth to 1000 g at 12 months" (Schoore 2015:2-3) During this tremendous growth spurt the social experiences the child has with her mother are incorporated into the neural connections (Shore quotes Hebb (1949) "neurons that fire together wire together") while the potential connections that are not used disappear.

Daniel Siegel elaborates

"Given that interpersonal relationships guide how we focus our attention and therefore how our neural firing patterns emerge, our social experiences can directly shape our neural architecture. Put simply our relational connections shape our neural connections. This interactive process occurs throughout the lifespan". (Siegel 2012:15)

This interpersonal neurobiological research shows how *nurture (gifting) becomes nature*. The care given by the motherer is incorporated into the physiology of the child's brain.

Although I consider this a very important shift in perspective, I have to insist that the most important early interpersonal

experiences for infants are those of receiving goods and services, because these are crucial for the infants' survival. Thus the patterns of giving and receiving *are necessarily* the original and basic shapers of 'our neural architecture' across cultures.

Most of the interpersonal neurobiological researchers come from the disciplines of psychotherapy, so they tend to concentrate on psychological rather than material interactions. However clearly, the material interactions of giving and receiving are the most fundamental ones. They are the substrata for the psychological interactions.

Since the neurobiological research leaves out the fact of motherwork, nurturework, it is not emphasized that at the level of practice, of daily life, all of the developments of the brain in early childhood are taking place in what is for the child a free gift economy³. The growth of the brain, the neuron activations and emotional responses all arise with regard to free unilateral gifts and gifting.

We might look at this from an adult perspective in which we can contrast free with exchange-based activities, so that it seems that free giving is mainly positive because it is *not*

exchange. However free giving actually has an important positive character of its own in that the needs of the receiver elicit the gifting initiative of the giver, thereby maintaining the infant's life. No third step is necessary. No return gift is required or expected. By this I do not want to say that children don't respond or that the mothers do not respond to their responses. However this is not an exchange of equivalents but rather, according to the researchers, a reciprocal relation-creating syntony. Taking turns in gifting functions by imitation not obligation and the whole interaction is more like a turn-taking conversation than a *quid pro quo* market exchange.

The pre verbal gifting experiences are what create the communication and attention patterns that “form our first relationships and directly shape our neural architecture”. These first free nurture-based relationships are processed in the holistic right brain and are permeated with emotions that mark them as similar in a variety of contexts. The filling of the child's needs ideally establishes mutuality and trust, the positive affect that Schore underlines as a most important aspect of the mother child interaction. This produces a “right brain subjective self system” that “unconsciously generate(s) a background sense of emotional well being” in the “early

forming emotional core of the subjective self” (Shore 2015). In other words, I would say, nurture – receiving and giving – is important in establishing a (positive) sense of the subjective self.

The gift perspective allows us to recognize a commonality of maternal practice, while at the same time allowing for the culturally specific interactions of individual motherers with their children, which ‘sculpt’ the neuron connections in a consistent way that is also culturally variable. Moreover Shore mentions that the left hemisphere, the linguistically specialized part of the brain becomes dominant at about 3 years of age, while the right hemisphere, which has been dominant until then has little or no language. One might even speculate that the interpersonal relations based on giving and receiving that are created and stored in the province of the holistic right brain are made sequential in language and relegated to the left brain. I would like to recall Chomsky’s Universal Grammar in which the basic mechanisms of language acquisition are innate while languages vary. I believe the basic mechanisms are not innate but circumstantial! They seem to be innate because everyone who survives experiences the same circumstance. All of us are born vulnerable and have to be nurtured freely and repeatedly by someone. Not an innate grammar but the learned patterns

of giving and receiving form the communicative mechanism that is actualized in languages and re-proposed verbally in syntax and 'merging'. This mechanism continues to function also at the material level, where it continues to be accompanied by the emotions aroused by needs and their satisfaction.

This change of perspective is important because it includes the mother and her free labor as the source and does not displace her by attributing the logic of language to 'heredity' (which is also a kind of gift!) This allows us to see that the maternal model is the fundamental structure of our humanity. It is one more proof that we are primarily *homo donans* and not just *homo sapiens* or -worse - *homo economicus*.

Thus at least two kinds of unilateral gifting influence us beyond our conscious knowledge, material gifting and linguistic gifting. They are partly independent from each other: one satisfies communicative and cognitive needs, the other satisfies material needs. Both generate emotional and psychological consequences. There are also other types of gifts for example, perception, seen as the reception of perceptual gifts of our cultural and ecological niches.

In my work on the gift in language I propose the idea of 'word-gifts' and 'world-gifts'(Vaughan 2015). I would like to refer

again to Allan Schore for the maternal explanation of the relation between the two levels. It is through her own responses to the world, which the mother shares with the child that she influences the right brain of the child, emphasizing the emotional values to give to things. Schore says that that the right “hemisphere, which is dominant for unconscious processes, computes, on a moment-to-moment basis, the affective salience of external stimuli. Keeping in mind Bowlby’s earlier descriptions, this lateralized system performs a ‘valence tagging’ function (Schore, 1998a, 1999), in which perceptions receive a positive or negative affective charge, in accord with a calibration of degrees of pleasure–unpleasure” (1998: 342). It appears that the responses of the right brain of the child to the world are initially determined in relation to the mother who signals parts of the world as gifts -valences- to embrace or to avoid.⁴ Therefore from the beginning the child’s perceptions of the world are not solitary but they are already mediated socially by the mother in a multi modal way – visually through the expressions of her face, kinetically, auditorally and chemically. The valences of the world are not asocial but they are informed also by the experiences that the adult mother has had of the world during her life⁵. This helps us see how giving

up the idea of the solipsistic newborn can heal philosophy from the idea of solipsism in general.

I would say that for the mother the child she has had in her womb is anyway a small, unknown stranger coming from the Great Mystery. Perhaps this is why when we try to give to strangers we tend to treat them as children, infantilizing them. But even in this case we have to free ourselves from the idea of the solipsistic infant. Using the maternal attitude towards strangers is right because this is the way we establish our humanity but we should not project maternal giving as patriarchy sees it nor think of the receivers as passive. Maybe the most important thing is to recognize that the other has the capacity to be maternal also, to give again to others. It is obvious that immigrants do this if we take into account that they send billions back to their home countries from far away.

I believe it is our responsibility to give from afar to immigrants and refugees

1. By opposing the wars that create their needs to flee
2. Opposing the multinational corporations that profit from the wars and contribute to their continuation

3. Disseminating the theory and practice of the gift as opposed to exchange
4. Validating the concept of the human as maternal Homo Donans for both genders
5. Responding as much as possible to the immediate needs of those whose countries have become unlivable, so that they can give again to others.

If language is based on gifting our words are gifts that have been given to us by those who have spoken our language. If we write books or speak in public we are offering our words and our thoughts to strangers. But now all our lives are put into question. We have to be able to offer the gift of a livable Mother Earth to the children of the future who are our most vulnerable strangers. Recognizing our maternal origins can help us do this.

To cite Arundathi Roy “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing”(2003). Let me add that breathing in is receiving the gift of air and breathing out is giving the gift of our breath.

Notes

¹ I believe that anyone of whatever gender can do mothering : relatives , friends or even entire villages. Usually it has been done by birth mothers as part of their socially constructed roles.

² Feminist researchers do discuss motherwork of course, beginning with Sara Ruddick(1989) and continuing with the many proponents of care.

³ Even if the caregiver is paid, for the child the care is free.

⁴ Knowing ahead of time that it is dangerous to touch something is also a gift.

⁵ In this regard see Luisa Muraro's *Ordine Simbolico della Madre* which appeared in 1991.