

Reclaiming our maternal heritage

By Genevieve Vaughan

There is a maternal economy, which already exists before, beyond and within the economy of Patriarchal Capitalism. Mothering is a mode of distribution of goods and services to needs. It is free - and it has to be free because young children cannot give back an equivalent in exchange for what they receive. This view requires a change in the concept of 'economy' to cover not only market exchange but free provisioning. Broadening the category 'economic' in this way allows us to glimpse an alternative economic logic, one which is unfortunately not valued in our society.

Many of the conflicts between the genders take place because one gender is identified with and is expected to practice one kind of economy while the other gender is expected to practice the other economy (which appears not to have a gendered identity). In fact the market economy takes from the free provisioning gift economy. Profit itself is made of an extra margin of free gifts over and above expenses. This means that many free gifts are flowing to the market from women, men and nature, from the poor to the rich and from the Global South to the Global North. Profit is made of free gifts taken by the few from the many and accumulates at the top, thus creating a generalized

situation of scarcity 'below' which allows those at the top to maintain control. If too much abundance accumulates it does not 'trickle down' but is wasted on wars and armaments, re enforcing the control of the many by the few. Scarcity created in this way makes provisioning-gift-giving difficult and thus at an individual level also gives the gender that is not identified with the provisioning gift economy, control over the gender that is.

Mothering small children is thus the practice of an economy which is in opposition to the market economy. Small children require adults to give to them freely without expecting them to give back something in exchange. In fact though little children do affectionate turntaking interactions with their mothers and respond to them, they do not understand economic exchange until they are 4 or 5 years old. The logic and the psychology of the economy of giving directly to satisfy needs are different and in opposition to the logic and psychology of the market economy.

The logic of exchange upon which the market is based, requires the return of goods or services of an equivalent value, and is therefore reflexive and ego oriented. It concentrates on satisfying the needs of the ' giver'. The logic of gift giving is transitive and other oriented. It concentrates on satisfying the needs of the receiver. It gives value to the

receiver by implication while exchange gives value to the ego by implication.

Many so called 'pre' capitalist indigenous economies did not have markets as such. Their gift economies were elaborations of the maternal provisioning gift economy, not of the market. It is therefore possible to avoid the detour of the market and base an economy directly on the principles of the maternal economy. This is the direction in which our society should move to solve the terrible problems that have been created by Patriarchy and Capitalism. In fact Patriarchy and Capitalism have merged because they share the values of competition and power-over, accumulation, individualism, exclusiveness and lack of concern for others. This has created a destructive system at the micro and at the macro level. While mothers and other gift givers can and do succeed in this system in spite of many challenges, the system itself is the problem and needs to be radically changed.

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 a giver, who was previously a receiver, does not

have to lose the value s/he has been given, even when she gives the gift to someone else.

Unilateral giving and receiving create bonds (along the lines of John Bowlby's idea of attachment (1969) while market exchange cancels and breaks them, and indifference is created between the participants (Godbout 1998). In fact 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, self-asserting and thus foregrounds itself while unilateral gift giving focusses on the other and therefore the giver may remain unnoticed. This invisibility of gift giving unfortunately confirms and contributes to the over visibility of ego oriented exchange. In the early processes of unilateral giving and receiving the bodies of the members of the community are actually made by the gifts and services of the motherers, and their minds as well, in that their experiences are formed by these interactions. I think this transitive gift giving economy, the free transfer of need-satisfying goods and services, can also be seen as communication, a material communication, which creates bodies as well as human relations and minds and gives value as well as material goods. This communication forms the co-'muni' -ty from the Latin word meaning 'gifts' i.e. 'giving gifts together'.

Market exchange instead is a kind of aberrant material communication, a non-communication, which is intransitive and stops the gift. The identity logic of the market economy influences us very strongly to validate only the kind of relations that occur 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.

The division between the domestic sphere and the economic and political spheres can be cancelled or bridged by recognizing the maternal gift economy as an alternative economy, which already exists and which actually gives to or subsidizes the economy based on exchange. What is necessary is the liberation of the maternal economy from the economy based on exchange, and the gradual elimination and discrediting of the market rather than the assimilation of the gift economy and gift givers into the market. That is why wages for housework is not a definitive answer to the oppression of women working in the home. Nor is micro credit the long term answer to poverty. We need to eliminate the market altogether and put in its place a generalized maternal gift economy. Even thinking about this possibility and working towards it begins to make cracks in

the monolith and validate the values of gift giving over the values of exchange.

The idea of the gift economy has been discussed in academia for many years: from Marcel Mauss in the 1920s to Lewis Hyde, Jacques Godbout, Alain Caille, Jacques Derrida' Jean-Luc Marion and many others. It has inspired a number of the movements that want to create an alternative to Capitalism. However these movements even if they are feminist and egalitarian, do not usually recognize the basis of gift giving in mothering. And they do not recognize Patriarchal Capitalism as a parasitic system which functions by capturing and controlling the gift economy.

Examples of attempts to practice gift economy more or less consciously can be found in

Income-sharing intentional communities

Community gardens

Wikipedia

Free Software – where reputation is the reward for giving

however

General Public License (Copyleft)

Creative Commons license
Blood banks and organ donation
Hitchhiking
Ride sharing
Yellow Bikes
Couch surfing
AA
Burning Man
Rainbow Gatherings
Remittances of immigrants to their home countries
Some alternative currencies - time banks
Add also volunteerism and much non profit work
Community solidarity work as seen in fire fighters after the twin towers and citizens trying to help in New Orleans.
Rabbi Lerner's Global Marshall Plan
Governmental aid programs – but these are often exchange based

Many indigenous societies have maintained gift economy practices, and gift-based cultures in spite of the encroachment and persecution of Patriarchal Capitalism. Many of them have female deities, especially mother deities, a fact which helps a culture to focus on the values of mothering. In a sense this is true also for the indigenous and

non indigenous movement to save the environment in that it recognizes Mother Earth as the source of free gifts of air, water, biodiversity, seeds without which humans cannot live. The Gaia Hypothesis (Lovelock 1979) conceives of Earth as a living entity whose parts are all interconnected. Looked at in this way Earth functions according to the maternal principle because the environmental niches of the species intertwine to nurture each of them freely. That is, the species have evolved to efficiently utilize the abundance of each niche for which they are adapted. Receiving is not passive but creative. The lion that chases the antelope is actively and creatively receiving the gift of the environment. The antelope, grazing, is creatively receiving the gift of the grass. The grass creatively receives the gift of sunlight and minerals from the earth.

If we project the maternal gift principle onto Nature we can see humans as an extremely nurturing species – we nurture each other linguistically as well as materially- located within an environment where everything nurtures everything else. The system based on Patriarchy and Capitalism has deprived us of the knowledge of the maternal principle and has forced us into social and economic practices which are in direct opposition to it. This system forces gifts ‘upwards’, diverting the flow of gifts away from the many towards the few and in the process depleting the environment, disrupting the

delicate nurturing weave of species and niches. Not only does this make it much more difficult to evolve towards a 'higher level' but it deprives future generations of what they need to reach their full maternal humanity. In fact I believe we should call ourselves *homo donans*, the giving being, rather than merely *homo sapiens*, the knowing being. As children we have to receive and give before we can know, and receiving and giving also make up part of the structure of our knowing.

Our socio-economic system directly contradicts our maternal inheritance and our capacity to pass this inheritance on to the future. We do not know what is going so wrong and therefore continue using remedies from within the system to fix it. We even interpret the environmental disasters we have created as Mother Earth's revenge, as if She were acting in the exchange mode, unleashing earthquakes and hurricanes to 'pay us back' for the crimes we have committed against Her.

I submit that Mother Earth does not function according to exchange at all. Neither do we, as children of Gaia, *homo donans*. We have mistakenly invented a system which is completely at cross purposes with who we are as a species. The chains of consequences that we set off by capitalist exploitation, technology and pollution are the negative image

of the circulation of gifts in community and the nurturing of the future by the present and the past.

The deeper we sink into Patriarchal Capitalism the less spiritual our behavior becomes and the more harm we do to each other and the planet. Mothering-giving is necessarily other-oriented, directed towards perceiving the needs of the other and satisfying them. It requires a mind that is inclusive and open towards the other to whom one gives, while in exchange one uses the other person to one's own benefit, excluding the other. The openness towards the other allows a greater porosity or permeability of the giver-and-receiver so that s/he is more open to the spirits of nature, who may or may not be similar to humans. It allows us to feel these spirits, tune in to them, not just speculate about them intellectually.

Unfortunately as I mentioned most of the present gift economy initiatives do not recognize any connection with mothering, and I believe that without that recognition, we will not be able to shift our thinking in the direction of the gift paradigm. Like matriarchy, which you can read about in another article in this magazine, the gift economy promotes maternal values in the lives of both women and men. It is

the generalization of the logic of mothering to the wider social sphere that permits gifts to circulate within a community without an immediate return, satisfying needs and creating and maintaining the bonds that form the community itself. If the society does not honor women and mothering, the gift economy becomes difficult to practice, and seems perhaps, a sort of unrealistic add-on to a supposedly more basic principle of exchange. Or it can be used as a sort of corrective to mitigate some of the exchange economy excesses, as happens with Welfare. The recent gift economy projects seem to be free floating, without the roots, which are in the maternal practice. This lets Patriarchal society claim the new gift economy (on the internet for example) as men's invention, erasing its connection to mothering and denying the generalization of mothering logic and the validation of the mothering practice.

There are some quite mainstream gift practices, for example in Japan, where managers and workers of corporations maintain good relations through gift giving. In many countries there are also traditional gift giving hierarchies, which maintain conservative social structures. Patriarchal religious institutions have often claimed gift giving as their special territory, making misogynist rules and extolling sacrifice as good for the soul. Patriarchal governments give

aid with strings attached to countries in difficulty, creating economic servitude and placing the countries in a feminized position..

In our Western society, mothering is discredited and often essentialistically identified with women-only while instances of the wider gift economy seem to have nothing to do with mothering or even with women. Fathering is distinguished from mothering and said to be its complement. In fact the idea of complementary male and female 'energies' is often embraced, without recognizing the continuity of what we call 'male energy' with the social construct of institutional patriarchy. I believe humanity is maternal – we are all mothered children – Patriarchal dominant 'male energy' is a social invention that should be eliminated. 'Female energy' should not try to complement or be in equilibrium with it. Being in equilibrium with the values of domination only enables them and distorts the integrity of the enabler.

The gift economy works best in a situation of abundance. Scarcity makes gift giving impractical and self sacrificial. So the gigantic social mechanism of the Patriarchal Capitalistic system itself creates the scarcity that is necessary to keep the gift economy in a situation of difficulty. Thus it is not the maternal values we must criticize for making gift givers

self-sacrifice but the artificially created context of scarcity in which gift giving is forced to exist. Mothers do not choose the role of victim. It is forced on them by the context, which does not provide sufficient means of giving and which in many cases seems to be inalterable. Thus it is only by changing the system that mothers can find the abundance necessary to do their jobs and ensure this abundance to future mothers and others as well.

Extending mothering to the wider picture and seeing the problem as a clash between two economic logics, two modes of distribution, allows us to depersonalize the problem. It also helps gift-giving women (those who actually give birth and those who do not) and men recognize the parasitism of a Patriarchal system of which they are unknowingly the hosts. The maternal paradigm is the birthright of all. We learn it in early childhood and it structures our lives and language in many ways, which we cannot see because we have colonized and brainwashed ourselves by thinking and acting in terms of exchange, considering ourselves *homo sapiens* and even *homo economicus*. Instead we are *homo donans*, a wonderful species, which has gotten itself into trouble by misinterpreting gender categorization to mean that the male gender should not be maternal, and then building a non nurturing economic system according to that

misinterpretation. I believe that the more we get beyond patriarchy/capitalism and try to change it , the more we will be open to the good and loving spirits that are already here around us.

Shifting the paradigm towards the gift economy can provide the understanding and the change of consciousness we need to dismantle the pernicious system.

Find out more at www.gift-economy.com

Bowlby J [1969] (1999). Attachment, 2nd edition, Attachment and Loss (vol. 1), New York: Basic Books.

Derrida, J. (1992) *Given Time: 1 Counterfeit Money*. English trans. P. Kamuf, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Godbout, Jacques and Alain Caille', 1998. *The World of the Gift*, trad. D.Winkler. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press.

Hyde, Lewis, 1983 [1979]. *The Gift, Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, New York, Vintage Books.

Lovelock, James (2000) [1979]. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (3rd ed. ed.). Oxford University Press.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. 1923-24. London: Routledge.