

## **The Maternal Gender**

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### **Hypotheses for a system-changing view**

- 1 One hypothesis I explore in this paper is that both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, although there have always been at least two sexes, there was/is first one gender that then divides into two (or more). The first is the gender identity of the mother. Then in heterosexual patriarchy when the child is old enough to understand binary categorization, this common identity divides into females (who can potentially become biological mothers) and males (who cannot). In fact, the first identity of all children is formed in nurturing interaction with their motherers but that identity is usually heteronormatively denied for boys by about age three. Then, like their mothers before them, girls are often encouraged to adapt by over valuing and over nurturing those of the ‘non maternal’ gender.
2. The second hypothesis is that the so called ‘domestic sphere’ is actually based on an alternative economic mode, a gift economy, which provides the free satisfaction of needs, comparable to indigenous gift economies. The domestic gift economy presently co exists with the market economy based on quid pro quo exchange, which plunders gifts.
3. These considerations bring me to conclude that gender under Patriarchal Capitalism has an important unrecognized economic component. If mothering is identified with gifting, both masculinity and the presumeably neuter market system can be seen as ways of rejecting the maternal economy, creating a way of seeming to survive without free gifting, while at the same time forcibly taking the gifts of women, of workers and of nature.

## **Identifying with the motherer**

Recent infant psychology has revolutionized the view of the baby – and thus at last also the view of the motherer.

Says infancy researcher Andrew Meltzoff "There has been a revolution in our understanding of intersubjectivity." Freud, Piaget and Skinner contributed to the "myth of the asocial child", who was passive and solipsistic. This myth "is now being overturned by research on preverbal intersubjectivity, neonatal imitation and mirror neurons." Neonatal imitation requires "a close coupling between perception and action that undergirds intersubjective engagement with others...self-other connectedness is functional at birth" (Meltzoff and Brooks 2007: 153-154) Gaze following, and understanding goals and intentions soon develop. "Intersubjectivity is a precondition for culture not the outcome of it"(ibid:163) Says Meltzoff

We are not born social isolates. We are fundamentally connected to others right from the start, because they are seen as being "like me." This allows rapid and special learning from people... I can learn about myself and potential powers by watching the consequences of your acts, and can imbue your acts with felt meaning based on my own self-experience. As children's self-experience broadens, their appreciation of others' minds and behavior is enriched and refined. This propels infants beyond what they see or know innately. Social cognition rests on the fact that you are "like me," differentiable from me, but nonetheless enough like me to become my role model and I your interpreter." (Meltzoff 2013:69-70)

The maternal caregiver, who is necessary for the child's survival, is the first model for the identity of the child and this identity formation takes place in the context of giving and receiving.

Another important new development is a shift towards the integration of attachment theory and neurobiology in what is being called 'interpersonal neurobiology', as proposed by Allan Schore (1994,2003) and others.

Schore sees the brain, especially the right hemisphere of the brain of the mother as actually interacting with the right brain of the infant. The mother holistically (and mostly unconsciously) regulates the preverbal child's emotions and the child's right brain registers and learns from her regulation how to self-regulate, thus providing a stability that allows the child's identity to develop. (Schore 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" (Schore 2015:2-3) This tremendous growth spurt requires stimulation by the social experiences of nurturing that the child has with her mother. These experiences are incorporated into the neural connections while the potential connections that are not activated in this way disappear in a massive die off called "synaptic pruning".

In this regard interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel says that "our social experiences can directly shape our neural architecture". (Siegel 2012:15)

I believe that this new interpersonal neurobiological research gives a new answer to the Nature/Nurture question by showing that Nurture actually *becomes* Nature.

(Mothering determines the synaptic connections)

It is during this attachment period that children are completely dependent on their caregivers' unilateral giving. This 'gift economy' is a mode of distribution which directly provides the goods to the needs. In ontogenesis, it usually begins with the production of milk by the mother's body and continues throughout the child's life in the 'domestic sphere' with the motherers' elaboration and at least partial production

of other goods to satisfy needs. It also continues throughout adulthood in so called 'pre' market indigenous gift economies (It is a misnomer to consider these economies 'pre' as if the market were superior – instead it is perhaps just more toxic). In the market context the mode of production and distribution of gifts is subjugated and its logic is contradicted by the mode of production of goods for exchange. Capitalists own the means of production but the market itself expropriates the means of giving.

## **Gift or Exchange**

The interactions of giving and receiving are much more basic than the interactions of exchange, which require the categorization of products as values, as well as their quantification and measurement. The kinds of human relations the two modes establish are different as well. Gifting creates mutuality and trust while exchange is ego oriented and adversarial, with each exchanger trying to get more than the other, creating separation, competition and other adversarial behavior. Gifting is concentrated on satisfying the need of the other while exchange is focused on using the satisfaction of the need of the other to satisfy the exchanger's own need. Children begin to learn to exchange when they are around 3 years old (Berti and Bombi 1988) though it may take them many years to arrive at a full understanding of the market and money. Until then, unless they are thrust out of the family niche by poverty or neglect, they remain at least partially engaged in the economy of receiving and giving, which sustains them.

Meltzoff's Like Me bridge and first identity formation of the child take place in the gift economy mode, the mode of the mother, not in that of quid pro quo exchange. I believe that the gift mode lays down in each of us a pattern of interaction that is generalized to the wider world, to receiving and giving perceptions, to the presentation of self, to the gifts of communication and language (Vaughan 1997, 2007, 2015) The patterns of giving and receiving provide fundamental modes of knowledge and interaction that have been left out of patriarchal exchange-based

philosophy and they can provide answers to many patriarchal questions and quandaries.—Indeed, an epistemology and an entire worldview can be constructed on the basis of maternal giving and receiving. Language itself is a construction of unilateral word gifts. The market and patriarchy have conspired to blind us to the circulation of gifts in nature, in society and in the human individual body and mind.

### **Hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic capitalism**

Giving and receiving provide the basic mode of existence for infants of both sexes. Both sexes form their first identities with their caregivers (who are usually female) in the first years of their lives. However, in heterosexual patriarchy when they learn categorization boys begin to realize they are *supposed* to have a different identity from that of their female motherers. Giving and receiving is all they have ever known so when they are displaced from their original mode of material and social existence by their gender categorization, their original “Like Me” bridge is broken. I believe this is a traumatic experience for little boys, especially those who do not have any nurturing male models.

Like their traumatized fathers before them then, little boys begin using hitting instead of giving to create and assert a gender identity different from that of the mother, but which will make others give and give in to them. Hitting is a kind of derivative of giving. Like giving, hitting touches (violently) the other person and establishes a relation with them, though one of domination not of mutuality and trust. Girls, who are expected to continue in their identification with the mother and gifting, often adapt to the alienated male gender and over-give to the males (who dominate them) creating a false ‘feminine’ gender identity, which they soon discover has depreciated and has made them inferior. Those who refuse this role may choose to perform masculinity but many remain gift givers despite the appearances.

## **The parasitic system**

The exclusion and invisibility of the gift economy has altered our view of market exchange, allowing it to occupy the whole conceptual field of economics and not letting us see the relation between the two economies. This is a relation of parasitism that appears to be a symbiosis. Exploitation is the forcing or manipulation of others to make them give. In fact, the profit of the market comes from the the surplus labor of the many (which is free to the capitalist but forced from the workers), from the free reproductive work of women and from the unremunerable gifts of nature. Thus, the market is parasitic upon the gift economy not vice versa.

The maternal gift economy functions according to an other-oriented transitive logic, in which an agent investigates the need of the other and makes or procures something to satisfy it. This interpersonal logic gives value to the receiver by implication. When gifting is repeated it creates an ongoing relationship between individuals and the continuing circulation of gifts to others creates communities. There is even a syllogism of gifting 'If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C.

Gifting develops and diversifies in many ways and in fact exchange itself is only two-way gifting, forced and made contingent upon an equivalent return. However, this change is enough to create a contrary logic for exchange, a logic of ego orientation that requires the exchangers to determine that each product is equal to the other or to a quantity of money. Value is given to the objects exchanged or to the ego, not to the other human being.

There are many corollaries or 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 perpetrators as well as those of the victims. Telling the truth is more a gift than an exchange because it satisfies the other's need to know, while a lie satisfies the liar's ego oriented need or desire to deceive and has now become an accepted strategy of the market in advertising and propaganda. War itself, with its attacks and counter attacks, is based on a metaphor of exchange. War also serves to create the scarcity that is necessary for the exchange economy to dominate the gift economy. If there were abundance, if gifts were circulating and everyone had enough to nurture each other, people would not work for bosses who exploit them. On the other hand, in the present situation of scarcity created by the market, gifts can be used for power over others in manipulative ways by Mafias of various kinds. Moreover, mothering would not be so difficult if it were not happening in the context of scarcity for the many created by exchange. Thus, wars create the conditions under which mothering and the gift economy are made dependent on the market and on successful and dominant men.

### **Structure and superstructure**

These variations on the theme of gifting or of exchange are usually seen as having to do with ethics. However, I believe that they are better understood as aspects of the two interlocking economies, each of which takes place in the context of the other.

Indeed the coexistence of the two economies can be viewed in terms of Marx's economic base and superstructure, with the values of care as the superstructure coming from the base of the gift economy and the values of *homo economicus* as the superstructure coming from the base of the market economy. From this perspective, the differences in values would not arise from an ethical or moral aspect of the human personality – or of the different genders – but would derive from the economic logics or patterns involved in the different kinds of practice. Thus, we would not be trapped in saying that, for example, women are more moral than men, but would be able to say that those practicing the gift economy (whatever their

gender) have more other-oriented values than those practicing the exchange economy (whatever their gender). Of course, since the two economies coexist in our society, most of us practice both of them and this can cause important internal conflicts. Perhaps even some conflicts that we read as gender-based could be seen as economic superstructure conflicts.

## **Gender and economics**

The invisibility of the gift economy and its coexistence with market exchange has meant that the two economies have not been seen as such in relation to gender. Boys, who are under the heteronormative mandate to be different from their nurturing mothers, find a field of action in the anti-maternal market where seemingly neuter exchange hides gifts and discredits gifting. This disguises the market's appropriation of gifts by which cancels and redirects them 'upwards'. The market provides a space not only for (a kind of Like Me) equation<sup>1</sup> between a commodity and a standard, money, but also for competition, accumulation, domination and the race to the 'top' which are typical of the masculinist identity. The market also emphasizes binary categorization valuable/not valuable, not free/free, commodity/gift, which bleeds over into other types of categories like gender: male/not male and race: white/not white etc.

The fact that women and mothers participate in the market with success simply shows that, like gender, the market is a social construction not a biological imperative. The participation of women does not alter the anti-gift bias of the market or its exploitative, gift plundering character. In fact, the problems we are facing as a species are systemic and interconnected at many levels and they must be addressed as such. They are not due to the personal qualities of individuals or masses of individuals. Rather they are due to large scale exploitative relations that are hidden in plain sight but interpreted falsely in other frames.

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<sup>1</sup> In Marx's 'fetishism of commodities' we can see that the equation between commodities and money is very like the 'Like Me' relation (Vaughan 2015:389)



It is clear that it is possible for people of the male sex to follow the way of the maternal gift economy, and this is visible not only in modern men who choose to do mothering but also in indigenous matriarchal societies that continue to do gifting and where mothers' brothers take on the role of 'paternal' child care. These men perform a nurturing economic gender without the patriarchal characteristics. See for example the many matriarchal societies described by Heide Goettner-Abendroth (2012).

## Conclusion

The scripts for human gender performances are written at least in part by the economic logics that individuals and communities are following and these depend largely on a continuity with the gift economy of the mother or its rejection and exploitation by the hegemonic masculinist market and the identities it fosters. It is important to acknowledge this because the revolutionary potential of the LGBTQ movement is wider than gender alone. By challenging hegemonic masculinity and its institutional incarnation as capitalism, the LGBTQ movement has an important role in revealing and breaking through the parasitic embrace of the market on the gift economy thereby liberating the gift alternative for all the children of Mother Earth.

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PS 2019 I believe that although gender is very important for each of us in our individual lives, in the context of the lack of recognition of the nurturing gift economy and of the patriarchal exploitative nature of the market economy and their connection with gender roles, these issues function like the red cloak of the bullfighter distracting the bull before striking the death blow. Actually, Trans M to F could be a kind of mask or metaphor for males embracing the gift economy and its values while Trans F to M could be seen as females, many of whom maintain gift

economy identities, embracing the kind of assertiveness and power produced by success in the exchange economy. It would behoove us to find out if this is the case because Patriarchal Capitalism/Capitalist Patriarchy, the system in which we live, is destroying the planet. In fact, I believe that whatever the gender we are all originally *homo donans*, (the gifting being) not just *homo sapiens* (the knowing being). We have been alienated from the basic maternal logic of our species and that is why we are destroying Mother Earth.