

Theory and Practice of the Gift Economy (Matriarchal Studies Conference, St Gallen, Switzerland, May 14, 2011)

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Back in the 1960's I had already realized that the market itself was the problem not just capitalism. In the 70's and early 80's I began to think that an economy without markets like the indigenous people practiced, and like other women and I were practicing in our families, was a gift economy and I started trying to promote it. In the early days of the 80's no one was interested or even understood what I was saying but over the years interest in a free economy has grown among people seeking alternative ways of living and the internet has made the term 'gift economy' almost a household word.

There are many examples of the gift economy, in mothering, in subsistence economies, which Veronika talks about, in movements for free stores, and free schools and on the internet, which allows a way of collaborating and of forming groups in a horizontal many-to-many way. Wikipedia is a good example of the internet gift economy in action. Couch surfing is another. Most of these initiatives fill in gaps in the market economy though, and to a certain extent they rely on it. Widespread commerce in computer hardware is necessary for wikipedia to exist and couch surfing requires not only the computer but the ability to use commercial means to travel from place to place. Still these new initiatives are a very positive development because they show that a different paradigm of behavior is possible and that this paradigm brings about a positive change in relationships among people. As long as it does not threaten mainstream economics too much, the gift economy can spread everywhere. The accessibility of free music on the internet has threatened the corporate music business world however. One CEO I heard on tv said despairingly "We have done everything we can to beat them, but you can't compete with free".

Actually the market is limited and floating on a sea of gifts. As someone said in the recent movie *Us Now*, the kind of Capitalism we are living in has only really been so extreme during the last century. Before there were more relations based on trust, outside the market. This economic system, Patriarchal Capitalism, or Capitalist Patriarchy is limited in time but also geographically and culturally. The gift economy still exists in indigenous and matriarchal societies though it is largely unrecognized or discredited as traditional or primitive by the mainstream people who are usually telling the tale. I believe the gift economy also exists in the West in the so called domestic sphere, in the free housework and childcare done mainly by women. In fact free work is gift work, given to satisfy needs. This is subsistence work as Veronika says, or what some economists call 'provisioning'. We should consider it not just as an add on to the market economy, a sort of instinctual behavior. Instead unilateral giving is a mode of distribution, an actual economy of its own that has been largely the province of women, and more specifically of mothers. In fact this maternal economy is the basic human economy from which other economies derive and of which they are elaborations. By

considering gift giving as an economy on its own, we can re frame the oppression of women as caused by a struggle between kinds of economies. We have recently come out of the struggle between the economies of Communism and Capitalism but a more fundamental distinction and more universal struggle continues to exist between the economy of gift giving and the economy of the market.

There are two main oppressive factors causing this struggle. One is patriarchy and the other is market exchange. Patriarchy is the hierarchical control of giving (and of the givers) mainly by men. Exchange is the denial and cancellation of gifts through requiring a quantitative equivalent in return. Patriarchal capitalism is the combination of patriarchy and exchange so that gifts are controlled and leveraged through the market mechanisms, re named as profit, accumulated and re invested in order to leverage and take still more gifts. The values of male dominance have been abstracted and generalized and used to motivate market exchange and capitalist accumulation for hegemonic power.

Another advantage of considering mothering as economic is that we can attribute a super structure to it. That is we can see that the values of direct giving and receiving: other-orientation, mutuality and trust come from a practical life sustaining interactive behavior rather than from a specific innate moral sense. One of the great weapons that Patriarchal Capitalism has for dominating the gift economy is its ability to propose its own superstructure not only by creating an ethics based on the market but also by imposing its own epistemology. In this way it eliminates mothering from consciousness, not only because mothers are rarely seen in positions of patriarchal power but because mothering is not used as an interpretative key for understanding the way we know the world. Sometimes women and mothers are not even seen. This state of denial is so strong that it allows a well known social philosopher like Pierre Bourdieu to write a whole book criticizing patriarchy, using the Kabyle culture as his main example, without taking any account of the complex culture of the Kabyle women, which is so well described by our own Malika Grasshof in her books. That is Bourdieu writing against patriarchy gives us a stunning example of patriarchal blindness.

I continue to be surprised by how wide the gap is between patriarchal capitalist superstructural epistemology and a hidden mother based gift economy and epistemology. And actually this patriarchal epistemology and ethics are part of the reason for wars and exploitation. They leave us believing there is no alternative so we accept their decisions as inevitable. If we want to make peace we need to bring into consciousness a mother based interpretation of the world that will redefine humans as a maternal species, not a war mongering species.

The pervasive (and self confirming) epistemology of capitalism takes the maternal gift logic out of thinking. Looking through the glasses of exchange eliminates the gift.

So I want to try to construct an epistemology, a theory of the way we know, that will connect the gift economy with mothering and with patriarchy. I believe that many of patriarchal patterns are based on maternal patterns, patterns of mothering and being mothered, which are required by all human children, in that they are dependent on their mothers' care for a very long time. These patterns are similar cross culturally because of the similarity in the requirements of children. However they may be performed in various ways and by various players. Child care may be carried out by a single mother, an extended family, a whole village. Men can do mothering too, though they usually don't and I believe the exclusion of childcare from the definition of the masculine identity is one of the basic reasons for patriarchy.

My hypothesis is simple but it has a lot of consequences. The hypothesis is that early child care is based on free giving and receiving and that this kind of other-oriented mode of distribution is the basis of the other forms of economy as well as of language and other sign behavior. The division between physical and mental labor, between body and mind begins when we ignore the foundational power of free giving and receiving for both the physical and the mental aspects of life. Communication is both material and mental from the beginning.

Perhaps it is because other orientation appears in the patriarchal frame as altruism and morality, that there is a great opposition when it is attributed to mothers. This creates a screen against what mothers actually do. Unilateral giving is made to seem unrealistic, sentimental and even saintly but it is actually just a basic transitive interaction in which one person satisfies another's needs. Unilateral gift giving comes before bilateral gift giving. It is the fundamental first step of a transitive logic which requires a receiver and of which bilateral giving is just one possible elaboration. Other possible elaborations of the gift are giving unilaterally at other levels, giving forward, giving unilaterally to many, receiving unilaterally, receiving and passing it on, receiving at different levels, receiving different kinds of things in different ways, and receiving together with others. In bilateral giving and receiving which I call turn taking, each person becomes a giver in turn. This develops into reciprocity and there are also many variations on that theme, including what anthropologists call generalized reciprocity, where everyone gives to everyone else. In this kind of economy relations of mutuality and trust are established throughout the community. On the other hand constrained bilateral exchange which is typical of market economies means giving in order to receive an equivalent of what has been given. This is an ego oriented rather than an other oriented interaction, and the relations it creates are completely changed.

Mothers unilaterally satisfy the needs of children, and they have to do this because when they are young, children do not understand paying back. If their needs were not satisfied unilaterally by someone the children would not survive. This is an important and time

consuming job for most mothers. Very detailed attention is required to the child's physical and emotional needs, and the appropriate ways to satisfy them have to be found.

Mothers and other caregivers are a kind of special first ecological niche for their children, a niche which takes the initiative to satisfy its creature's needs. In this they are like Nature but more proactive. When we project the mother onto nature, we can understand ourselves as the receivers of nature's gifts. We also mother ourselves in that we unconsciously select what to attend to, just as our mothers selected what gifts to give us.

Mothers lay down the pattern of A gives X to B from the child's earliest days where X is a need satisfying good or service that the mother (A) gives to the child (B).

This simple pattern is the beginning of a thread of the transitive gift logic that permeates life though we have learned not to see it.

This is a logic of human relations because in childhood it is invested with emotion. That is, the interaction of giving and receiving is the way expectations are created and fulfilled and positive relations are created. Since this interaction is necessary for the child's survival it is not surprising that humans would have endowed it with a lot of significance.

Mothers give and receive many different kinds of things and babies learn to imitate and do turn taking from very early on. Very young children smile when their parents smile at them, respond to their sister's antics by laughing, try to put a half eaten cookie in their mother's mouth.

We use the word 'exchange' for this giving and receiving but it is a dangerous use, because it assimilates the interaction to the exchange that takes place on the market.

I prefer to use the term – turntaking. The mother takes the initiative to give to the child who receives. The child takes the initiative to give to the mother who receives. This giving and receiving continues throughout life, and it is elaborated at many levels. Recently cognitive neuropsychologists have done experiments which, they say, show that altruism is innate. They drop a clothespin near the child seemingly by mistake and if the child gives it to them, they say she is being altruistic.

Mothering is left out of the explanation of childhood altruism by researchers like Michael Tomasello. But 'altruism' is not hereditary, it comes from being mothered, from someone recognizing your needs and satisfying them day after day, minute after minute, with many different things and in many different contexts. We learn to help by being helped.

We can all play the different roles in a basic script of care which we learn very early from our mothers. As neuro linguist Patricia Kuhl says - we are learning all about the neurological

aspects of this – but where do the social aspects come from? ¹

Cognitive psychologists Lakoff and Johnson started a kind of philosophical revolution some 30 years ago when they began to revise the concept of metaphor, recognizing it as a cognitive device coming from common human experiences of the body. They say that the corporeal or spatial logic, arising from bodily experience, is what provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought. ² However they only consider the individual body from the skin inward. Instead it would be more accurate if they said ‘*intercorporeal*’ logic and ‘*intercorporeal*’ ‘bodily experience’.

Lakoff and Johnson introduced and made popular the idea of image schemas, very elementary but repeatable patterns of bodily experience such as: "up and down", "path to goal" and "going into or out of containers, which are mapped into language at various levels. I believe the image schema that underlies both material and verbal communication is the interactive, interpersonal sensory-motor schema of giving and receiving, first located not in the body of the child alone from the skin inward but between the mother and child, beginning in a moment in which the child has recently been part of the body of the mother and proceeding through the long period during which s/he is dependent on the mother’s need-satisfying gifts and services for h/er body’s very existence.

. From this point of view, giving and receiving is the underlying pattern or image schema of material *and* verbal communication, expressed and embodied in a routine that the child learns with her mother’s milk, a minimal play or script with three roles: giver, gift (or service), and receiver. This routine which is repeated in many different ways is the interpersonal intercorporeal experience that “provides the basis for the logic of abstract thought”:

The child can play any of the roles of this routine. S/he is a giver because s/he gives smiles, cries and gestures (as well as urine and feces) which are creatively received by the parent. S/he is carried and birthed, given to life by the mother and is given h/herself by adults like a gift from hand to hand. S/he creatively (not passively) receives h/er motherers’ care of all kinds, and also the perceptions and experiences that come from her surroundings. Sometimes this creative reception means that s/he proactively (not passively) goes out to explore the world around h/er, crawling to reach the table, grabbing the keys and chewing on the book. That is,

¹ How do infants link words to perceived objects or action, that is, discover the meanings of words?"The mechanism that controls the interface between language and social cognition remains a mystery." 1(Nature Reviews 2004)

² Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (2002). “ Why embodied realism is required” in Cognitive Linguistics 13-3, The Hague, Walter de Gruyter, p. 256.

the creativity of the reception includes the fact that the child actively goes forward to receive the perceptual gifts.

Two other early mother-child interactions are Mind Reading, which is necessary for satisfying needs, and Joint Attention. Mind reading is not a psychic ability but a down to earth capacity to guess what the baby needs by putting ourselves in her place and by thinking of the context. The baby is crying and she has not eaten for several hours so she is probably hungry. So we satisfy her need for food instead of giving her a bath for example. Young children around the age of 15 months have been tested by psychologists for mind reading ability and it has been found they are able to mind-read some of the contextual information adults have and understand their intentions and desires by following posture and eye gaze.

Pointing for joint attention, is giving a perceptual gift by drawing the other's attention to it. (I would say that in joint attention both mother and child are receivers together of the same perceptual gift. Both perceptually receive the same thing and they bond with each other in the common perception/reception (Cognitive linguists like Tomasello recognize the importance of joint attention but they don't see the image schema of the gift or the giving and receiving aspects of joint attention. Mind reading and joint attention are both part of the mothering process before the child does them on her own or with unrelated others.)

These abilities and their elaborations continue to permeate adult life in many ways but we do not recognize them even though we are doing them and we do not remember that we learned to do them through others' care of us in infancy. For example we watch a movie together, and this is joint attention. Or go to a conference and listen to the speaker together.

These are maternal patterns, patterns that are an integral part of mothering and being mothered, which can be said to also be matriarchal patterns in their adult elaboration of care for the other, and the direct satisfaction of needs through gifting. The understanding of others' needs by 'mind reading' putting oneself in the others' place and by attentive listening is necessary for gift giving but also for the kinds of communication upon which community is founded. Joint attention is also a community building capacity when it is done in a group which focusses its attention on the same thing, creating mutuality, trust and finally also consensus.

As adults we continue to mind read what others are attending to or not. We give them what they need to cause them to turn their attention to something. If I want to call your attention to cats I can point to them, if they are present, but now they are not present, so you need something else, to direct your attention, a word. The word 'cats' satisfies this need. I call this kind of need a communicative need. It is not primarily my own need I satisfy with the words I speak or write but the communicative needs of the other. We speak in the language others understand, use the words they know otherwise they will not understand us. We mind read what the other's communicative needs are and unilaterally give them words to satisfy them.

These are gifts of words, virtual verbal gifts, which create relations among givers and receivers, in the same way that giving and receiving material gifts creates relations. Language like mothering is other oriented. Since all our words come to us as gifts passed on to us from others in the linguistic community they carry with them a relation to the group as well as to the individual giver, speaker or writer. This other oriented maternal relation among individuals and with the group is reaffirmed whenever we speak or write. Even when I say ego oriented things, I have to satisfy the others communicative needs. If I say 'that is my piece of cake and you can't have any', I still have to use the words you understand and this puts us in a social relation to my refusal to give.

Both language and economics are based in material communication.

Many matriarchal patterns are patterns coming from the transitive interactions of mothering and being mothered. These interactions create the mutuality and trust that cause physical and psychological well being and encourage the families to stay together. Dominance creates a different kind of relationship based on force. Hitting is probably also a derivative of giving, in that it touches the other person and establishes a relation – of domination though, rather than mutuality and trust.

The pattern of unilateral giving and receiving continues on many different levels throughout life. Gifts given unilaterally can propagate throughout the community, creating a chain of givers and receivers who are all related to each other. This chain is broken when exchange and the market step in. Market exchange requires an equation and measurement of quantity, and it creates an adversarial situation where each is trying to get more than the other. Where gift giving is other oriented, exchange is ego oriented, every man for himself. At the same time many free gifts are given to the market. Indeed the capitalist mode of production is built on top of the gift economy and functions by surreptitiously taking the free gifts of all and making them into profit. It makes gift giving difficult and even sacrificial by creating scarcity, by channeling gifts from the many to the few and by wasting the accumulated wealth on wars and symbolic excesses.

We need to return to the positive relational logic of the maternal gift economy, and avoid the negative relational logic of exchange.

We need to make a social and mental space for the elaboration of the maternal-matriarchal patterns of gift giving and receiving and for the theory and practice of the gift economy, led by women, by mothers and daughters who maintain and honor the values of mothering and being mothered. The example of Matriarchies and even just the idea of matriarchy allows this. Not only has mothering been exploited in Patriarchal Capitalism but the ideas and patterns coming from mothering have been misrecognized, exploited and used against mothers, children and everyone.

Unilateral giving has been taken over by patriarchal institutions like the religions, it has been framed as unrealistic, or saintly and made self sacrificial. It has been re framed as altruism, charity and volunteerism, partial individualistic solutions but hardly widespread enough to be the organizing principle of society itself. And now in a more subtle way the internet gift economy discredits mothering because it practices unilateral and multilateral gift giving but has no idea it has anything to do with mothering. And this is also true for many of the practical lifestyle initiatives of gift economies.

If we do not create or find a mother based epistemology, we will simply accept the domination of the field of giving one more time by men who ignore mothering, and the gift economy movement will lose most of its healing and revolutionary potential. Women will be left to follow their assimilationist path to equality with patriarchal capitalist men. And as we are assimilated and reap the material rewards we will be equally responsible for the evil that is perpetrated by the patricarchal capitalist gift-plundering system.

The superstructure of the gift economy validates other orientation not only towards our individual families but towards all the social groups which are exploited by Patriarchal Capitalism. Not being other oriented in this way contradicts our maternal heritage. The wars that our governments are now engaged in contradict our maternal heritage including the war against poor people and the war against Mother Earth. We need to turn our other oriented consciousness and care towards all the victims of these wars, including Mother Earth Herself. And aren't these wars economic wars of the exchange economy against the gift economy, of the market against the mother? One answer to the question of 'what should we do now?' is that we should create mother based philosophy and epistemology. Philosophical questions like 'Do other minds exist?' and 'Does external reality exist?' are questions asked in the absence of the mother and they set the stage for the exploitation and destruction of other minds and of reality. Matriarchal epistemologies based in indigenous mother-centered creation stories can guide us. Western science, motivated by the market, mainly leaves the mother out of its creation story. We urgently need to put her back in and tell a new story, which is also an old one.