

For Matriform

## **The Maternal Species**

by Genevieve Vaughan

Thank you so much for the invitation to talk about the Maternal Gift Economy

I want to begin by saying that in trying to think our way out of the end of the world box we are in, we have usually left the maternal gift economy out of the story.

In order to show how to put it back and create a different paradigm I will be discussing the differences and interactions between gifting and the process of exchange. I know that capitalism is wider and more complex than the act of exchange, but my main focus here is on the two processes: gifting and exchange.

Human mothering establishes a multi use pattern of unilateral giving and creative receiving that can be generalized and projected at many levels. It underlies much of what we do and since it is so prominent and necessary for all in early childhood, it also informs and gives meaning to many of our experiences in later life. The importance of this pattern for Western patriarchal philosophy, psychology and economics has largely been ignored by academia because until recently very few of the people who were doing the thinking in those disciplines had had the experience of mothering.

I call mothering an economy because *free* is the most widespread way of creating subsistence on Earth. In the maternal gift economy, the motherer satisfies a child's needs in an ongoing way, sometimes helped by other motherers, family members or even whole villages and if the child survives it is because she has received this free nurturing. S/he cannot pay back an equivalent in exchange for what s/he has received and even if the motherers expect to be cared for by the child in their old age, the child does not know it, so for h/er the care is free. If she is being nurtured by a paid caregiver she does not know that either. Even when we are living in a market economy we are surrounded with free gifts of nature, of light and air, language and (sometimes) the good will of others. I suggest that unilateral giving and receiving is the first and basic economic model for everyone because without it we do not survive.

Exchange, *quid pro quo*, negates the unilateral mode of production, direct transfer and consumption of gifts. Its strong logic contradicts transitive gifting and makes it seem illogical and uninformative. Instead, I propose that unilateral giving-receiving has a fundamental logic of its own that has not been recognized but that underlies much of our thinking and behavior. The take-over of one economic mode by the other is a major cause of the huge problems the planet is now facing.

Looking at maternal gifting as an economy changes the semantic field of economics. Eliminating the hegemony of the market from the concept lets us see both indigenous 'gift economies' and market exchange economies as deriving from the maternal practice. Gift economies play out the mother child relation of giving and receiving in various ways while exchange economies contradict gifting and surreptitiously take gifts.

Let me begin by mentioning a few of the characteristics of child development that have been revealed by recent scientific 'infancy research'. The researchers do not address the unilateral provisioning of the child as such, but it is the background and premise of their study. The focus is usually on the child, not the mother. (In fact, I have read books about the developing child that, although they discuss our simian ancestors do not ever specifically mention the human mother. ) Fortunately there is now a field of study - interpersonal neurobiology - that emphasizes the mother-child dyad and the right brain to right brain synchrony that happens during appropriate care (Allan Schore).

I don't have time to discuss much of this ever widening field but will just mention a few important moments of 'child development'.

These are 'joint attention', 'mind reading' and 'serve and return'. First though I want to mention that there is a lot of reciprocal mirroring between mothers and children.

Andrew Meltzoff says that children use proprioception, imitation and self- other body mapping to understand the subjectivity of others and develop their own. "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)

This establishing of identity is carried out in various capacities modelled by mothers and learned by children. 'Mind reading' is understanding what the other person is thinking in the sense of understanding her needs and intentions from her behaviour. 'Joint attention' is giving and sharing a perceptual 'gift' usually by pointing. 'Serve and return', also called 'protoconversation', uses the metaphor of tennis to describe the dyadic back and forth interaction between mothers and children. "Young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures, and adults respond with the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them." (www.Harvard Center for the Developing Child (accessed 2023) This reciprocal interaction is credited with stimulating many of the *one million* new neural pathways that are formed *every second* in the brain of the developing child. Although 'serve and return' may sometimes be called an 'exchange' it is not *quid pro quo* but a game of synchrony and communication.

I believe that together with the 'like me' relation, this important brain-building relation-creating game is an infant precursor of commodity exchange, which is later inserted into this pre formed mother-child interpersonal space and thus seems completely acceptable and natural.

Marx says something like this in a footnote to his description of exchange. Correcting for the differences in age and gender, the similarities with the mother-child interaction are almost uncanny.

After a fashion, it is with the human being as with the commodity. Since the human being does not come into the world bringing a mirror with him, nor yet as a Fichtean philosopher able to say "I am myself", he first recognizes himself as reflected in other men. The man Peter grasps his relation to himself as a human being through becoming aware of his relation to the man Paul as a being of like kind with himself. Thereupon Paul, with flesh and bone, with all his Pauline corporeality, becomes for Peter the phenomenal form of the human kind. (1962 [1867]: 23)

But in exchange the logic of *quid pro quo* cancels the mother-child 'serve and return', giving and receiving interaction and a quantitative 'Like Me' relation between commodities - or commodities and money -takes its place in the interpersonal space of exchange in the market.

Even though gift and exchange are often confused and we don't notice the difference, they are radically different and create opposite kinds of relationships.

All this has the effect of backgrounding mother child unilateral giving and hiding its continuing presence and generalization.

Because exchange is in the foreground as necessary for life and gifting, gifting is backgrounded and seems dependent and unimportant, even infantile. However it is the basic human interaction and source.

The attachment to exchange makes us look at gift economies as childish, immature. Instead, gifting is the healthy root of human life in a maternal species that has been infected by a false logic that contradicts it

Although it is universal the unilateral gift is not seen as fundamental and it is infantilized and made to take second place – just because market exchange comes in to play later in life and abstracts from it. Free giving continues to happen and it is diverted towards capital and capitalists through the exchange mechanism.

So let me quickly describe some characteristics of unilateral giving-receiving.

We can give and receive one to one, one to many, many to many an almost infinite variety of things.

The giver 'reads' or 'mindreads' the needs of the receiver and gives an appropriate need satisfying gift.

Receiving is not passive but active and creative. For example, even the child nursing at the breast has to suck at the nipple, swallow and digest the milk.

We can also receive many different kinds of things, together with others or apart.

Unilateral giving gives value by implication to the receiver and to the means of giving, the things that satisfy the needs.

There is an attribution of intrinsic value to the child.

(If the child had not been valuable to the motherer, s/he would not have satisfied h/er needs.)

The child receives this implication with a feeling of self esteem.

Mother and child are merged when the child is in the womb and they (re-merge) in gift interactions of breast feeding, holding and carrying. This and the identification and satisfaction of the child's needs by the mother creates a knowledge of the existence of the other for both mother and child. No solipsism is possible.

There is a trajectory of the gift from giver to receiver in many different instances. An object is given from hand to hand.

The baby herself experiences being given from hand to hand (for someone else to hold) Serve and return is turn taking giving and receiving smiles and babbles. The giving-receiving trajectory is grounded at both ends by similar sensations, mirror neurons and mind reading.

In breathing in and out we feel receiving and giving in our own bodies, in nursing at the breast, both baby and mother feel the giving and receiving of the self and the other. With mirror neurons they register each other's experience.

In joint attention and reciprocal mind reading, gaze following allows us to see that the other sees what we see, that she receives the same perceptual gift. With gaze following we see the trajectory of the gift at both ends for the other and for us so that we receive a triangulated perception in common.

On the other hand, in exchange we often do not feel or even see the receiver or the initiator of the trajectory of the product that we sell or buy.

There is a transitive logic, a syllogism of the gift: If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C and so on. This is the community-creating logic of gifts that 'go around', studied in anthropology in the Trobriand Island's Kula Ring.

There is also giving forward to unknown others without knowing what the effect will be, and this can also create community relations with gifts 'going around'.

In fact, this giving forward could be called 'recursive' giving because the act of giving is repeated with the same or different gifts and givers.

Unilateral gifting is basically altercentric, other oriented, it satisfies needs at many levels: physical, cognitive, communicative, needs for comfort and cleanliness, needs caused by fear and distress, needs for right timing, companionship, play, and many others.

Unfortunately, there is also giving to harm. For example, hitting crosses the interpersonal space as does the gift but it hurts the receiver. This variation on the gift has been a major instrument of Patriarchy.

I have just been writing an article for a book on semiotics where I describe giving-receiving as (in semiotician's terms) the 'primary modelling device' for signs and language. I also describe it with an even more technical analogy as the basic human 'operating system'. But these are abstract terms for something that comes from lived experience, just the way things *have to* be done for human children to live, and it is this universal real life practical model (expressed in many cultural variations) that makes us who we are as a species. We are *homo donans*, the giving being, not homo sapiens; not sapiens because we have almost eliminated giving and receiving from our self concept – so we don't know who we really are.

## The exchange abstraction

Alfred Sohn Rethel (1899-1990 ) was a Marxist who after years of puzzling over the description of commodity exchange and money in the first book of *Capital* came up with the idea of the exchange abstraction. His work has gained a lot of attention recently among critical Marxist circles, and conferences have been held and many articles written about his work.

What he says is that the practice of commodity exchange itself creates or is an abstraction on the plane of reality that causes us to think in abstract ways. Money and commodities are not alike yet they are equated abstractly in ways that are very important for our activities regarding them. Engaging with this abstract equality in the reality of our daily lives alters our thinking and this is evident in philosophy from the Pre Socratics' Parmenidean One to the idea of inertia in Galileo and Newton to the a prioris of Immanuel Kant. Sohn-Rethel sees the fact that a product is in stasis in a store waiting to be bought is an abstraction from use, and the movement of the product from its status as one person's property to another's is an abstract motion.

Both Marx and Sohn Rethel saw exchange process as cancelling the use and the materiality of the object, and that was the reason for its abstraction.

“Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values [Wertgegenständlichkeit]; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects.”

I propose that it is not just the materiality of the object that exchange abstracts from but the economy of the gift.

Like so many others Marx and Sohn Rethel did not grasp the specific character and importance of women's free labor in the home or see it as a different kind of economy. When we name it and put it into the discussion, we can see that what exchange abstracts *from* is not just the materiality of the object but the previously existing free economy of mothering/being mothered that has a basic structure of its own, which is replaced by commodity exchange and everything that is built upon the logic of exchange.

We are so used to the logic of exchange that we take it as the basic paradigm and we don't look behind it at the previous - and still existing- logic of the unilateral gift.

Starting our thinking about economics from exchange and the market keeps us from seeing that economies really begin in unilateral maternal gifting practice both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. Our fixation on exchange and its complex developments in capital makes us think that gifting, which is simpler than exchange, is unstructured and uninformative. However, as we have seen above, it has a number of fundamental aspects that are lacking in exchange.

Moreover, the opposite of the abstraction of exchange is not concrete in the sense of Marx's 'coarsely sensuous objects', rather it is the pre-exchange integrated body-mind of

the mother-child experience and of the Indigenous cultures that were, and have remained to some extent, free from the capitalist market. This kind of approach may validate the alternative intuitive understanding of the world that many women seem to have, 'starting from themselves', as the Italian feminists used to say. The title of Sohn Rethel's book, *Intellectual and Manual Labor* does not take into account that many women do both, even just working in the home. Even though we participate in Capitalism, many of us have experience outside of it as mothers and as children, experience that is not determined by the exchange abstraction and is consonant with the maternal economy. Many men do not have much of this experience.

By not taking gifting into account, the analysis of commodity exchange and money separates itself from the domestic sphere and makes it aneconomic, but unilateral giving is the first economy, and it is the ground from which the exchange economy deviates and in which it is embedded. Thus, the discipline of economics, which doesn't understand this, mainly exacerbates the problem.

Adding the unilateral gift and its logic to the analysis has a number of consequences because it makes visible a continuity with the many free moments of the economy that are not seen as such. In fact all of the unpaid labor and resources that are visible to a critique of the capitalist economy – that is all of exploitation, can be seen as the taking of free gifts, so that capitalism can be seen as *nurtured* by the maternal gift economy. Making this visible is a key to changing it, so it is not surprising that the unilateral maternal economy has been programmatically *unseen*, hidden in its importance, made to appear inferior, unreal or saintly and women kept in the household 'barefoot and pregnant' by dominant husbands. We pull a veil over the gift, a veil that is made of categorizations, false descriptions and names (domestic sphere, domestic slavery, women's biological destiny, feminine essence and for the child - immaturity, ignorance )giving to the exchange economy one more gift, the gift of the gift's effacement while the market is foregrounded as real and necessary.

The maternal gift economy is nurturing its oppressor, a gremlin wetiko economy.

We desperately need to name and describe the maternal gift economy objectively and make it visible. In fact, the seeming lack of a deeply alternative paradigm, (which I believe we already have in the gift) keeps us thinking and making decisions within the old one based on exchange.

The maternal economy already existed before the market economy and before money and capitalism. In fact since it is necessary for the children of our species to live, it is universal and connects us with the people who came before us, whatever kind of society they were in or are still in, but especially matriarchies have been able to elaborate and generalize the other oriented, altercentric values that accompany, produce and are produced by necessary unilateral gifting to infants and young children.

The maternal gift economy still exists today in Capitalism but it is painted into the corner of early childhood only, then made to go underground and serve its oppressor.

Structure and superstructure

In Marxist terms I would say the maternal gift economy is an economic structure prior to and continuing beneath the structure of the market economy and that what appears to be a complicated autonomous mechanism of capitalism exists only insofar as it is sustained and nurtured by the unilateral maternal economy. Thus there are two interlocking economies and their combined superstructures do not allow us to understand what is happening. Although most of us maintain the legacy of the maternal values within, we think of them as personal moral character not as part of the legacy of the maternal human species that we are or could be. And we are disempowered in the social practice of these values because they are seen as only personal morality, individual penchants of dos and don'ts rather than the superstructural elements of a deeper alternative economy that is trying to, *needs* to, break through the market overlay.

### Gender and exchange

Because of the division of labor and the nuclear family as women we are likely to be closer to these values than men because we are not told as children that we cannot ever be mothers, while boys begin to realize early, perhaps around 3, that as adults they will not follow the model of the one upon whom their lives presently depend. Gangs of boy children impose on other boys the idea of the practice of gifting as sissified and replace it with an admiration of hitting. This identification of the maternal gift economy as gendered female creates a presumed need to renounce the maternal economy model as part of the boys' gender role at an early age, leaving psychological space open to be occupied by the market paradigm. And in fact, the journey of the boy child out of the maternal paradigm to follow a male model repeats the journey of the product from its existence in the gift economy to its commodification through exchange for money. This journey leaves a psychological track in the collective mind that makes exchange even more potent and masculinity more abstract and dominant, transforming it into value itself - as money - motivating the fractal repercussions of dominance.

Nevertheless, the boy child, like the girl, remains in need of maternal gifting care for a long time and the model that both genders learn in infancy is transmitted through language, communication and community-formation, continuing in every altercentric act of kindness and truth but also as I have been saying, in physiological processes of breathing out and in, the circulation of the blood, metabolism, perception as creative reception of the potential gifts of our surroundings. Understanding and deploying the gift paradigm brings to life and to light connections and relations that have not been seen in a philosophy deeply entangled in the abstractions of exchange.

We all share the origin in the gift so even when we embrace the masculine identity and the exchange paradigm, we all continue to have and share with others an unrecognized original basis of understanding of the world in terms of the maternal model of giving and receiving.

In our market economies where many have been deprived of the gifts necessary for their own and their children's survival, resources are privatized and made scarce and the survival of everyone through exchange and competition, seems to be necessary. Thus, those who compete to succeed in the market world are more highly valued than those who give

directly to satisfy needs and many of them are rewarded by 'gift value' and consequent self-esteem implied of them by the extracted gifts of surplus value. Patriarchy and the exchange abstraction combine to deny the gift paradigm, take gifts and value from it and give them to successful capitalists.

### Misreading the economy

By taking exchange as primary, not seeing gifting or dividing it into categories (like duty, morality, 'nature', induced by hormones, a feminine 'essence') the whole economy is misread.

We don't see the *willed* trajectory of gifts, their movement between and among people who identify the needs of the others and satisfy them, creating well-being as well as experiences, relations and expectations of solidarity.

We need to look at the variety of gifts as part of a single category like we do with other categories: beauty for example, which we may see in a forest, a child's face, a theorem, a sunset.

Just naming gifting when we encounter it would go a long way towards shifting the paradigm. There are other names that frame gifting in other ways, because they include special characteristics in its category. For example we don't call exploitation 'gifting' but for the exploiter what s/he receives is free. So we should call it a forced gift or a stolen gift but maintain the core concept of gift to the receiver that nurtures her needs – even if they are only (artificial) needs for profit, for capital. And this would give gift value to the capitalist as the receiver (which, as I have been saying, is possibly a motivation for greed)

In the criticism of capitalism for example, critics talk about cheap labor and unwaged labor, but this can be seen as labor much of which is a gift to the Capitalist receivers, passing to them from women's reproductive labor that provides new generations of the work force, along with their domestic labor that nurtures their family members already in the workforce (including the women themselves) and that makes up part of the surplus labor that is not paid by the capitalist and is therefore a gift to him or her.

There are also gifts that come under the metaphor of our 'metabolism with nature', recently discussed by John Bellamy Foster and others. This is a metaphor of circulation, as with the blood that is pumped by the heart to nourish and carry oxygen to the cells, and then returns to the lungs to be replenished with oxygen. Marx used the term to reference the 'dynamic interchange between humans and nature resulting from human labor'. For example the production of food depletes the soil that then needs to be replenished by the waste deriving from the food consumption. When the food producers move to the cities we can see that a cycle of gifts is interrupted making the soil give more than it is capable of without itself being in a gifting cycle.

As everywhere the givers (here the soil) need also to receive but this is not accomplished through 'exchange' but through cycles of giving and receiving. 'Exchange' would be the wrong word because it implies a continuity with the market. Instead the 'metabolism' here is a gift cycle that is interrupted by the market.



The point I am making is that the concept of unilateral (maternal) gift needs to be restored to the analysis and the verbal framing even when it is only part of the source of the product that is on the market. 'Cheap labor' for example refers to labor a large portion of which is gifted. (see Jason W. Moore's 'four cheaps') Similarly for 'unequal exchange' Alf Hornborg – the extra portion is gifted. Unwaged work is gifted work and it is important to call it that in order to make the connections.

The theoretical advantage that this renaming and reframing of gifting has, is that it makes visible the continuity between unilateral maternal gifting, for example in the household economy, and the portion of the price and indeed of the value of goods that are free to the capitalists and that then are accumulated as capital to be used for further gift capturing investment. That is, profit is made of unilateral gifts that are given all along the process of production at different levels (whenever there are needs of the production process to be satisfied, for energy, problem solving, detailed work, physical force.) Moreover the worker is often 'supporting h/er family', that is, providing the unilateral givers in the family (herself included) with sustenance, the means of her gift labor and the means of giving unpaid (gift) surplus labor to others.

It is as if there has been a conspiracy to keep the unilateral gift hidden and perhaps this is because if women/mothers and workers – and everyone who is unwittingly giving free gifts 'upwards' were to join forces to modify this capitalist market mechanism, they would succeed and with the combined gifts of their collective intelligence they would understand it well enough to know how to make an alternative work.

For now, the gift has been hidden and discredited by categorizing it as saintly, morally good in a cruel world, an individual choice, masochistic self sacrifice. And indeed, it appears to be masochistic because patriarchy and capitalism, by plundering and dominating gifts, create a context of generalized scarcity that often *makes* unilateral giving self destructive. Unless we understand gifting systemically we will have difficulty justifying it individually, practicing it and generalizing it, defending ourselves while changing the system of gift exploitation. Challenging and changing the understanding of the perpetrator system and of those who are giving to it, is necessary so that we can find real solutions that, I believe, cannot just be technological ones - because the causes of our present earth shaking problems are *social*. They have to do with the production, sale and use of the technology not fundamentally with the technology itself.

In fact at present we can look at the global situation as a set of fractal patterns at many different levels of the unilateral gift economy nurturing the exchange economy, which takes from it. We are creating these fractals because we don't name and see gifting as the basic underlying cognitive and communicative – community making - pattern that it is, what in another field - of semiotics - could be called the primary modeling device.

It is as if our species keeps repeating the pattern in different venues to show us what we are doing wrong: we are a maternal species, *homo donans*, nurturing our artificial offspring *patriarchal homo economicus*.

Here are some fractal gift configurations that I believe are the matrix of 'intersectionalities'.

Women giving to children and to men, to markets and capitalists  
Workers giving to capitalists  
Poor giving to rich  
Nature giving to people and to corporations  
Indigenous people to colonizers  
Colonized countries to colonizer countries  
Subjugated races to dominant races and racists  
immigrants to citizens  
Slaves to 'owners'  
Flows of gifts from South to North that appear to be going the other way.  
Global workers to global corporations (usually based in North)  
'Development' projects and business ventures like the Green Revolution that take while appearing to give  
IMF and World Bank gifts of loans that leverage gifts  
The creation of wars that give the gift of a need for armaments

These and other fractal configurations show gifting to exchange on many levels, with increasing lies, manipulations, concealments and misinterpretation.

Matriarchal studies are crucial now because the maternal gift processes and values are matriarchal processes and values that have been and are continuing to be alienated and 'occupied' by exchange. Capitalism is abstracted patriarchy that is built on taking from the economic maternal giving-receiving premise of matriarchy while at the same time hiding and dominating it. Liberating this maternal/matriarchal economy both in practice and in theory can bring us back into alignment as a mothering species at home on Mother Earth.