

The unilateral gift economy conjecture

Genevieve Vaughan

American Review of Political Economy

Cite this paper

Downloaded from [Academia.edu](#) 

[Get the citation in MLA, APA, or Chicago styles](#)

Related papers

[Download a PDF Pack](#) of the best related papers 



["The Significance of Genevieve Vaughan's Writings for the Post-Colonial world"](#)

Kaarina Kailo

[The Demise and Appropriation of the Gifts of the Finnish Welfare Society](#)

Kaarina Kailo

[The Gift Economy in Maternity and Childbirth in Italy](#)

Elena Skoko

The unilateral gift economy conjecture

By, Genevieve Vaughan*

Abstract

I offer the conjecture that unilateral maternal provisioning constitutes a basic economic model for all with implications and a logic of its own. Market exchange is a derivative of this model, which contradicts it and creates its own area of life. The two models interact without our awareness because we have not taken unilateral gifting seriously. Renaming exploitation as the taking of unilateral gifts reveals another way to connect the dots between unwaged housework, surplus labor and 'nature services', and these are also connected to colonialism, corporate globalization and ecological devastation.

*PO Box 2285 Austin, Texas 78768 USA.; Email: genvau@gmail.com

Introduction

I characterize unilateral gifting, distinguishing it from what it is not: exchange. Unilateral gifting is not only possible, it is necessary for nurturing young children who cannot give an equivalent in return. Those who consider it impossible ignore this enormous fact.

The unilateral gift economy is commonplace: its core feature is the other-directed work necessary for mothering young children successfully. Its goal is not profit but the well-being of the receiver. Unilateral giving is difficult, even dis-adaptive in the market context but rather than consider this a defect of gifting, I suggest that it due to a deep flaw in the economy of exchange. In fact, unilateral giving is prior to exchange ontogenetically in every life and phylogenetically in gatherer-hunter and matricentric cultures some of which continue to exist. (Narvaez and Valentino 2014, Goettner-Abendroth 2012) The market and especially the capitalist market is a gift plundering and channeling mechanism. Though it has brought much technological progress it cannot solve the many dire problems it is creating

I describe the gift logic vs the exchange logic and address the issue of value through a discussion of commodity exchange as Marx describes it in the first book of Capital. I discuss use values as seen within the maternal economy as well as outside it and an other-oriented ‘gift value’ that transforms into exchange value in the market interaction.

Although gifting is universal and all children who survive receive that model, it is not visible as such because it is interpreted by market-centered cultures as hormone-driven deviance from the ego centric norm or as virtue which is promoted and regulated by religions and moral precepts. I suggest that the patterns laid down by giving and receiving form basic structures of communication and cooperation and that the quid pro quo patterns of exchange to which children subsequently have to adjust, contradict these structures. Gifting is mainly qualitative while exchange uses quantification as its primary instrument. Thus, the flow of gifts is unrecognized and profit seems to spring from the work and machinations of entrepreneurs and corporations, which enhances their self-esteem. This ‘upward’ flow is also an important factor in intersectional hierarchies. There are many corollaries and hybrids that are spawned by the coexistence of gift and exchange but that seem to exist on their own *sui generis*.

The unilateral gift conjecture raises the possibility that regardless of gender, we are a maternal species, that would be more properly called *homo donans* (the gifting ‘man’) than *homo sapiens*. However, the present situation of economic, environmental and social crisis seems to contradict this possibility. If we are indeed a gifting species, how have we arrived at this point?

New infancy research gives a clue to a surprising possible answer.

The unilateral gift economy

There is an economy that we don’t see and we don’t name but from which we derive our basic sustenance and subsistence. It is as invisible as the air we breathe. I call this giving and receiving/receiving and giving a basic *economic* action, which satisfies fundamental material human needs.

Every human life begins with a first breath, the gift of air that opens the lungs and transitions the baby away from the nurturing economy of the placenta that provides oxygen and nutriment free to

the fetus (Jordan 2017). During the early years, children must receive free care from motherersⁱ to survive. My conjecture is that this free nurturing is the basis of all economies and that it also lays down the first permanent patterns or blueprints of our communicative interactions and relations. Gifting has a self-propelling transitive logic of its own and a syllogism: If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C. Free need-satisfying gifting implies the intrinsic value of the receiver for the giver. Taking free giving seriously makes possible a radically different world view.

I characterize gifting as ‘material communication’ and affirm that what is now called ‘economic’ is a variation on this original communicative and community-making gift economy. (It is community-making because it actually forms the bodies of the people in the community.) Conditional giving is a variation on free giving. The constraint of an equivalent return drastically alters the original interpersonal logic, causing a contradiction of the communicative, life-nurturing maternal intention. Even three- step reciprocal exchange: giving, receiving and giving back as theorized by Marcel Mauss(1923) – or delayed reciprocity as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) emphasize the return, making the primary human logic that of debt so that the original initiative to give is considered not altogether altercentric and it seems that human relations are always based on the obligation of a return ‘gift’. Instead the relations between motherers and young children are based on imitation, not obligation.

Marx’s description of the exchange of commodities in the first book of *Capital* (1962), shows how use value is distinguished from exchange value in the process of exchange, which mediates a transfer of property relation between the two exchangers. In the domestic sphere, use values that are given and received also mediate relations among the family members, but these are relations of mutuality and trust beginning with the relation between motherers and children. The repeated personal transfer of nurturing goods and services keeps the children alive and helps to create the positive relationships because it implies the value of the child for the giver. That is, if the child had not been valuable for the giver, she would not have unilaterally satisfied her needs. I call this ‘gift value’ and consider it prior to exchange value. It can register in the child as self esteem.

In the domestic sphere use values are embedded in and facilitate these human relations while in the market use values are suspended from use, frozen in stores, rendered impersonal and general in an exchange abstraction (Sohn-Rethel 1978) until the process of exchange is completed and the

goods can serve the actual satisfaction of needs in the family and elsewhere. Use values pertinent to the home may be considered the means of giving just as those pertinent to the factory may be considered the means of production. In both cases, in Capitalism they are the private property of others, not available as gifts to the people who need them. They must pass through the exchange abstraction in order to be reactivated as gifts. Beyond the very beginning of life, the Capitalist mode of production for exchange takes over.

However, market exchange is clearly not the primary economic interaction. Instead free giving-and-receiving is primary. Understanding that *exchange* is a variation on *free* demotes exchange from its conceptual hegemony over the semantic field of economics, by introducing the ontogenetically prior and indeed broader practice of unilateral giving/receiving. This terminological adjustment can bring with it a deep change in perspective regarding a number of basic economic phenomena such as commodification, profit, capital, accumulation... and reproductive work.

Under the conceptual hegemony of exchange, free gifting appears to be perhaps a failed exchange or even more commonly, a different kind of human capacity and behavior, which is understood as moral or psychological, not economic. This removes attention from the material communicative character of gifting, making it appear to depend on unusual acts of individual free will, compassion and goodness, sometimes requiring hormonal or perhaps religious motivation.

Because it is necessary for children's survival, the unilateral gift economy is universal. Not only do all children who survive receive unilateral nurturing, if their faculties are intact, they also receive the model of this unilateral gifting behavior. The model becomes useful in many ways, functioning as a basic structure or blueprint underlying material and verbal communication. This gift model is altered and overwritten by the derivative and contradictory model of giving-in-order-to-receive, which begins to be understood at 3 or 4 years of age, while the understanding of market functioning is completed only at 10 to 12 years (Berti and Bombi 1988).

Though it is unrecognized, hidden and misunderstood, gifting continues throughout life at many levels in positive and negative ways. In my view the interaction between hidden gift and over-visible exchange constitutes one main internal mechanism of capitalism. Seemingly neutral and

equal exchange hides the flow of gifts that are traveling upwards. In this perspective it becomes evident that the market and those who are privileged by it, are in the systemic position of receivers who are being grotesquely re mothered by a population that is forced into the role of free givers.

Patriarchy (Lerner 1982) has merged with the market, supplying the motivation of accumulation - growth to superior size and power, competition, individualism that drives Capitalism. In the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe capitalist patriarchy made gender the basis of the economic division (Federici 2004) between household and waged labor, thus providing the reproduction of the labor force free to the capitalist. This division makes the free work of the housewife pass through the salaried work of the family members (including herself), contributing to the surplus value that forms the profit of the capitalist. That is, profit is made from the surplus labor of the worker, which includes not only the worker's own unpaid labor but also a portion of the free (unwaged) domestic work, with the addition also of some portion of free 'nature services'. The workers are forced into a gifting relation with the capitalists, without realizing it and they give them value (or at least importance) as well. The capitalists believe they have *made* their profit, that it is not a gift they are receiving but something they deserve.

It has been extremely hard to calculate housework – gift work – in monetary terms because the gift economy is mainly qualitatively not quantitatively cognizeable.

In one telling study, feminist economists Ironmonger and Soupourmas (2012) , using time-use criteria, estimated the USA's 2011 Gross Household Product at 11.6 trillion dollars as compared to a GDP of 13.3 trillion.

If we add to this free production the global 'ecosystem services', which have been estimated at some \$125 trillion a year compared to the global monetized economy's \$75 trillion GDP, (Costanza et al. 2014) we can see how the market economy actually floats upon a sea of gifts.

It should be clear even from these brief considerations that including free gifting as a basic economic category can provide an alternative perspective on economics, which allows a different and clarifying interpretation of many specific issues as well as of the economy as a whole. My purpose in writing this article is to suggest this possibility. I believe our blindness to *free* has much to do with the economic, social and environmental crisis the Earth is now undergoing. We have misinterpreted who we are as a species and this has created a negative self- fulfilling prophecy.

We are *homo donans et recipiens*, the giving and receiving species, not just *homo sapiens* (because indeed we do not know who we are) and certainly not *homo economicus*.

Here are just a few of the adjustments in understanding that are possible when free gifting is included in the category ‘economic’.

Gift value and exchange value

Gift and exchange are locked in an exploitative embrace in which would-be gifts are transformed as they are transferred to and through the exchange mechanism and its implementors. The relation-creating capacity of gifts is cancelled for the moment in the abstraction of exchange. Gift value, which was previously attributed to the receiver by implication, splits into exchange value, which is still relational but overly general, directed towards the agora, the whole polis, towards the market as a whole, and use value, which is overly particular but impersonal, in that it is only the utility of the product in relation to whomever is using it. That is, neither exchange value nor use value creates a relation between individual persons. The implication of value is not directed towards the receiver as it is in the gift but is placed upon the item in exchange. Each commodity, ie. each transferable item that is not-a-gift, can be seen as similar in this to any other commodity and within this not-a-gift similarity their differences are only quantitative. This allows their value to be measured by exchange with a common standard item, which is transferred but is also not-a-gift, ie. money. The implication of (exchange) value is given to the items in the exchange process, with reference to all similar items but without reference to the individual people involved. However, individuals who are motivated by needs and desires (for the satisfaction of which free gifts are not available), do perform the exchange and each exchange takes place in the context of all the others in the market. Thus, the elements of need or desire for and the availability of every use value influence the relative exchange value of each item at the time of the exchange. (Interestingly the terms ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ apply in a depersonalized way to conceptual areas very similar to ‘gift’ and ‘need’.)

The distortion of the original maternal relational pattern or blueprint creates in the market a surface level with a touted appearance of equal exchange that hides a deeper level in which gifts are being given surreptitiously and included in the price of the commodity. They are given – extracted – from the hidden free surplus labor of workers, from women’s free reproductive labor, from the

unpaid work of previous generations (and from the previous socialization of the biosphere) as well as from expropriations and pollutions of nature for which no restoration is attempted.

Abstraction

The multi-faceted market system is centered upon what Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1976) called a ‘real abstraction’. That is an abstraction on the material plane, where goods are held in abeyance while the abstract material exchange is performed. This process he says, now forms our ‘social nexus’ and has deeply influenced philosophical thought without our knowing it, creating a real external *a priori* structure for our thinking. My contention is that what the exchange abstraction abstracts *from* is the unilateral gift economy, which nevertheless continues to exist unrecognized, and which serves as host in relation to a parasitic market economy. In fact, the value-conferring capacity of gifting continues to exist in capitalism as free (though extracted) unrecognized gifts travel upwards towards the capitalists. While it seems that they are *making* profit, capitalists are actually receiving the (unacknowledged and mis-defined) gifts of the many, free to the capitalists but coerced from the workers. As with other-oriented maternal gifts, this ‘free’ transfer confers gift value upon the capitalist receivers by implication, creating in them a sense of self-esteem, which seems to expand with the quantity of wealth each one accumulates. This is probably part of the motivation to accumulate and succeed, that is, what we also call ‘greed’. There is also a competition among individuals that provides a different kind of value implication to those who receive more gifts than others, as if they were children preferred by the Generalized Motherer. All their giving ‘siblings’ then look at them with awe as the ‘deserving’ 1%.

Gift and exchange continue to re-present themselves at many levels, in the intersectionality of parasitic relations as manifested in racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism etc. as well as in the now extreme parasitism of the capitalist system upon freely gift giving nature. Those in the privileged categories, the dominant ‘receivers’ of the value given to them by their subordinates, enjoy a sense of superiority that allows them to bond as a group. The syllogism of the gift would imply the value and solidarity of a community of givers and receivers who ‘pass it on’, but here the gifts are captured, accumulated at the top and put back in circulation only as capital to leverage more gifts.

Corollaries and hybrids

Although they are not recognized as such, the logics of exchange and gifting have important corollaries in our thinking. For example, exchange logic underlies the discourse of rights and justice, in that each should be evaluated according to the same standard and punishments should be equivalent to crimes. The legal system serves to mitigate some of the harm done by the gift-plundering system, but it does it within the system's exchange logic. Restorative justice is now fortunately moving towards gift logic. Truth-telling is consonant with gifting in that it satisfies the other's need to know, while lying is similar to exchange in that it satisfies the liars need at the expense of the other. Advertising literally functions this way in that the ad satisfies the sellers' need and its cost is covered in the price of the commodity paid by the consumer.

Given that the logics of gift and exchange have not been recognized as such and our Patriarchal Capitalist system is now so widespread, many hybrid configurations have developed, such as taxes given as gifts to the government by those engaged in market activity. Some of these hybrids are pernicious, such as the Trojan Horse 'gifts' given by rich to poor nations through the IMF and World Bank at the cost of structural adjustment and the facilitation of Northern corporate take overs of local production. The maternal gift economy, still practiced by many people on the individual and local levels gives the idea of the gift a lot of resonance, and it is embraced both by the countries of the givers and of the receivers. Even many individuals working for the World Bank and IMF believe they are facilitating giving to satisfy needs. So it seems also to the peasants who are receiving the gifts of a 'green revolution' until they realize the trap they are in and commit suicide because they are no longer able to provide for (give to) their families. (Shiva 2016:10)

The means of gifting (like the means of production) are being taken away from entire populations. Now the devastation of natural resources (a by-product of capitalism and of war) depletes the means of gifting even more and those who wish to nurture each other and their children roam the world trying to find a place to survive.

We are behaving in ways so contrary to an actual unilateral gift giving model that it may seem that the conjecture is false and in fact we are not a gifting species, *homo donans* after all. How is this possible?

Construction of the self and commodity exchange

Recent infancy research and interpersonal neurobiology provide interesting insights not only on infants but also on the importance of mothering.

Repeated mother-child giving and receiving create the relations of mutuality and trust in early childhood. As interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel affirms:

“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)

Vittorio Gallese (2007) describes the functioning of ‘mirror neurons’ that reflect in one’s own brain the neurons that fire when we perform an action that we see another person performing. He calls this ‘embodied simulation’. Although investigation of gifting has been sketchy, it is clear that, as Stein Braten remarks “...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”. (2002:291). The mirroring of gifting as well as gifting itself, has a fundamental place in the child’s early development.

At psychological level, infancy researcher Andrew Meltzoff (2014:69) talks about the ‘Like me bridge’ where children recognize themselves through their identification with their caregivers. “We are not born social isolates” he says, “We are fundamentally connected with others right from the start because they are seen as ‘Like Me’,” an identification that takes place through a kind of kinetic body mapping and projection.

In Marx’s description of commodity exchange and the equation of value in the first book of Capital there is a strikingly pertinent footnote. Explaining the relation between commodities on the two sides of the equation of value in the relative and the equivalent positions, Marx says:

“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)

In the light of infancy research, Marx is wrong. The¹ human being does come into the world bringing a mirror with h/er. The interactive, intersubjective "mirror" is the motherer-and-child interaction. Each simulates the other's experience, especially the giving-receiving experience, with h:er kinetic mapping (and 'mirror neurons'). Mirroring the motherer through her Like Me mapping, the child creates a relation not only to the motherer but also to h/erself.

Though surprisingly similar, the mirroring interaction of the exchange of commodities contradicts the nurturing human identity-forming interaction and produces its own kind of identity relation so that the identification of the commodity as a quantitative exchange value replays Like Me intersubjectivity... without the gifts.

The relation between commodities and money takes over and replaces the other oriented Like Me bridge. Not only for commodities but even for humans, evaluation according to the money standard takes the place of the relation to the need-satisfying, caring motherer, the responsive other, the initiator of relevant gifts who in the nurturing interaction gave value to the child and was known and imitated by h/er. Evaluation by exchange for money takes into account a similar evaluation of all the other products on the market and renders the motherer-child gifting relation secondary.

The parallel between the equation of value in commodity exchange and the early stages of the development of subjectivity in childhood, bears out the Marxian idea of commodity fetishism in a very striking way.

If there is a kind of projection of our early childhood identification as humans that is incarnated in an equation of value that we engage in daily, what kinds of feedback loops are created with our

ongoing identities? Since we engage in exchange all the time, we are used to it and do not suspect that it is dangerous. We ignore it at our peril though. By following the market logic we are socializing ourselves, through the interactions of our products, to be asocial un-giving homini economici.

The great transformation of children when they begin to understand the logic of quid pro quo, uses the very process of their own identity formation as the corner stone of the (for them) new market exchange process, which they have to learn and to which they have to adapt. While their original identity formation takes place in the gift mode, the assessment of value of commodities in exchange takes place in a gift-denying mode, which requires quantification and at least a surface equivalence of what is given and received so that no one appears to get more than s/he gave (ie. no one seems to get a gift)

The implication of intrinsic value that is attributed to the child when the motherer freely gives to h/er, is replaced by the exchange value attributed to the commodities in the exchange process as assessed in their relation to money. This monetary assessment of value carries over to the worker who is selling the commodity of h/er labor time. Exchange, not gifting, becomes the 'social nexus'.

.

The gift conjecture allows me to consider that the interaction of exchange itself may be the cause of our species' degradation. Like a mechanism we have ingested and that we force upon our children, the very process of commodity exchange erodes our gift giving species being from within.

Conclusion

The unilateral gift conjecture provides a point of view that has long been hidden but could be crucial for the analysis and possible solution of the immense problems created by the gift plundering system.

Gifting has been made exceptional by patriarchal religions and ethical systems that are hierarchical and to some extent based on exchange (as in punishment for sin) and that exclude the leadership of women, who are usually those to whom the work of motherer is assigned. Many people have now renounced these institutions but

without theories of gifting for the interpretation of the world, the neoliberal values of every man

Genevieve Vaughan

for himself hold sway. At every level of society those who might make more compassionate choices have no wider frame to which to refer. Gifting seems irrational, dangerous, even inhuman. Everyone suspects everyone else.

The gift of the future is being denied to our children. The theory and the practice of the unilateral gift economy can give it back to them.

References:

Berti, A. E. and Bombi, A. S. (1988). *The child's construction of economics*. European monographs in social psychology. G. Duveen (Trans.), New York, NY: Cambridge University Press: 175-177.

Bourdieu, Pierre, (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Federici, Silvia (2004) *Caliban and the Witch, Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn, N.Y., Autonomedia.

Gallese, Vittorio, Morris N. Eagle and Paolo Mingone, (2007) "Intentional Attunement: Mirror Neurons and the Neural Underpinnings of Interpersonal Attachment", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 55:131-176.

Goettner-Abendroth, Heide (2012) *Matriarchal Societies, Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing.

Ironmonger D., Soupourmas F. (2012), "Output-Based Estimates of the Gross Household Product of the United States 2003-2010: And Some Interactions of GHP with Gross Market Product during the Great Financial Crisis (2008-2009)", Paper Prepared for the 32nd General Conference of The International Association for Research in Income and Wealth, Boston, 5-11 August (www.iariw.org).

Jordan, Nané, (2017) *Placenta Wit, Mother Stories, Rituals and Research*, Toronto: Demeter Press.

Lerner, Gerda (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Marx, K. (1962 [1867]). *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*. E. & C. Paul (Trans.). London: J.M. Dent and Sons.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1964). *The German Ideology*, S. Ryazanskaya (Ed). Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Meltzoff, Andrew (2014). "Social cognition and the origin of imitation, Empathy and theory of mind." *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognition* U. Goswami ed. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Narvaez, D and Valentino. K eds. (2014). *Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution, Culture, Childrearing and Social Wellbeing*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Shiva, Vandana (2016). *Stolen Harvest, The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*, Lexington, Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky.

Siegel, Daniel M.D.(2012). *The Developing Mind*, Second Edition, New York, The Guilford Press.

Sohn-Rethel, Alfred (1978). *Intellectual and Manual Labor*. London, MacMillan.

^{i i} I use the term 'motherer' to include anyone who takes care of the child in a detailed and ongoing way: birth mother, father, other family members, even whole villages. I include paid caregivers in the category. The young child does not understand the exchange relation.