

Why is the World in Crisis and What Can We Do?

MaternalGiftEconomyMovement.org Salon#70

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I have been very busy in the last weeks and haven't had the mental space to prepare this as well as I would have liked, however I hope you will bear with me. I have thought about this end of the world scenario we are living in a lot, and I am sure the rest of you have as well. I think many perspectives are useful. The healing of our collective insanity must be a collective effort. Many important perspectives are being put forward now and I hope we will be able to connect them with each other. I have been watching a series of zooms called Land Back Motherhouse teachings, Complicit no more, put on by Native American women and progressive Catholic nuns, that begins by showing how the Papal Doctrine of Discovery was responsible for justifying the Europeans' take over of Native lands and cultures in the Americas and elsewhere. It continues with Max Dashu's description of the European witch hunts and the Inquisition, showing how the European colonial mindset of dominance was formed. This series of webinars can be viewed on You Tube and I recommend it.

Our salon today is the 70th of our Maternal gift economy series and I believe most of you will already know a lot about the maternal gift economy so I will only outline it briefly.

I consider unilateral giving to satisfy needs the first and basic human economy. It is not exchange - quid pro quo - giving in order to get back an equivalent - but giving directly to satisfy a need. Its focus is not ego centric but alter centric - centered on the receiver. This is necessary in early childhood because human infants are born vulnerable with their brains as well as their bodies not fully formed and they require repeated care from someone else in order to survive. This means that if she does survive, the first and most crucial model any child has is the unilaterally giving alter centric other from whom she receives. My contention is that it is this first model of unilateral giving that the child absorbs and imitates and that forms the blueprint, the basis of the logic of all our lives and our understanding.

As they grow, young children and their motherers do respond to each other, mirroring each other in spontaneous games of bodily movements, sounds and smiles called 'proto conversations' or with a tennis metaphor, 'serve and return'. These should not be considered exchanges however but a kind of early mutually imitative and responsive sociality and practice in repeating and absorbing the giving and receiving model.

My contention is that in societies based on market exchange, quid pro quo inserts itself into this mutually imitative early gift model, taking it over and therefore seeming to be our original human relation although it is bilateral and conditional. We project exchange

backwards into childhood and become blind to the origins of our most important human relations in giving and receiving. Due to the gendered division of labor most motherers are women and I believe we recognize the unilateral gifting and receiving model because we practice it and have not been alienated from it but academia has yet to understand it as the fundamental human model that it is.

I believe that unilateral giving and receiving are a basic interactional and cognitive structure that can be traced in many interactions that we do not think of in those terms. Throwing and catching a ball, speaking and listening, pouring tea into a cup, putting ingredients into a pot, giving heat to the pot, taking the food from the pot and giving it to the family, going from one place to another, walking - giving one foot forward to the earth then the other and many others including physical objects like jigsaw puzzles and Lego where the pieces fit into each other, cogwheels, even machines where explosive power gives motion, electric currents that give light and motion through plugs that allow devices to receive them. Perception is also reception and our own presence is perceived and received by others. Neurons fire as they give and receive impulses.

The basic processes of giving and receiving and passing it on, giving forward again and again are usually seen as *sui generis* and not connected to each other. This makes many of them mysterious and we name them differently, putting them in different categories, categories that I recently realized are mental receptacles, receivers of similar perceptual or conceptual gifts.

There is a kind of denial or reluctance to recognize gifting even in language regarding economics. We talk about housework, unwaged work, not as gifting and gifted work. Surplus labor is that portion of labor that is not paid and thus is gifted to the capitalists as profit, which is then added - given - by them to their capital, increasing it for further investment. Cheap products are often products a large part of which contain gifted work. When women are paid less than men for equal work, that part of their work is gifted.

Alfred Sohn Rethel (1899-1990) was a Marxist who talked about exchange as causing an abstraction in reality, a real abstraction or exchange abstraction, which makes us think abstractly. Ever since the appearance of money in Lydia in 600 BCE European philosophers have been creating abstract systems. Sohn Rethel discussed the preSocratic philosophers in this sense and his work is now also corroborated and convincingly elaborated by classicist Richard Seaford (1949-2023). Sohn Rethel was interested in the origin of the cognitive ability itself and criticized the Kantian transcendental subject, showing that the real-life abstraction of exchange was the origin of much of our abstract thinking. One good example is Newton and Galileo's concepts of inertia at the beginning of modern science. Inertia is the consideration of

motion without a beginning and an end, that is, (in our terms) without a giver and receiver, and this is just what happens in the process of exchange, where the unilateral gift is cancelled and substituted by the bilateral process of evaluation and replacement by money between exchangers who are indifferent to each other, not socially relating givers and receivers.

Since our whole economy is based on exchange, we are continually, daily, denying maternal unilateral giving and its logic of giving value to the unilateral receiver. While it is true that we do give and receive with the goods that we have bought, at present this gifting is dependent on the market economy for its very existence. And market exchange is its logical contradiction.

This coexistence of opposites brings exchange into the foreground and places gifting in an unrecognized background as secondary, something 'other'. We do not see that the market economy is parasitic on the gifts of all, and that profit is actually made up of the gifts of surplus labor and the free gifts of nature. We may rightly say that these gifts are extracted but to the Capitalist receiver they are free.

I want to step back now to briefly describe another abstraction from the maternal gift economy, coming from a change of category.

In their infancy both boys and girls develop their selfhood as givers and receivers in interaction with their motherers, as I said above. When boys learn language, they realize they have a different gender name and are in a different category from their female gift giving motherers, and they are then faced with the need to transfer out of that category towards a model, the father or other male, who is usually not engaged in directly caring for the child. I call this process 'mascultation' that is, making the child male as opposed to 'emascultation', taking away a male's masculinity. (see Vaughan, 1997, 203-226) And I propose that this change of models away from the gift giving mother is an extraction or abstraction of the boy from the maternal gift economy. This creates a situation in which the boy's gender identity follows a path similar to that of a would-have- been gift that becomes a commodity in exchange, reflecting itself in a relation of equivalence with money, the general equivalent of all the commodities on the market. That is, in Euro American heterosexuality, boy children leave their early identity formation with the gifting mother and take on their masculine identity in relation to a male exemplar. Although the underlying gift matrix continues for everyone in language and logic as the blueprint or matrix of life and adult males also do gifting, Patriarchy imposes this altered model for boys. The father or other exemplar of the category 'male' is usually not in constant contact with the child so he is less well known, more of an external authority. Unfortunately, the non-maternal model that is offered to the boy child is often based on a derivative or analog of gifting which is hitting, where there is also a trajectory of motion from one to the other, but it is made not to nurture the receiver but to harm and to diminish the other, making her or him smaller, more childlike, yielding, submissive and

dependent. At the same time the boy is made to understand that since he is male he must grow up to be like the father, not the mother.

So, in Patriarchy, there is a change towards an abstracted model of the human as male, where giving is often transformed into force and power over, the giving hand into the hitting hand and dominance becomes the preferred interaction as a prerequisite to any furthering of the well-being of the other. (Though there is also the excuse for hitting 'I'm doing this for your own good'.) This results in a society of male individualism, where adult males dominate women and children and are in adversarial positions protecting their gifting families and their gift producing private properties against take overs by other males in similar positions. I believe this pattern of abstraction from and domination of gifting is repeated at many levels from the individual to the multitude, and is expressed also in patterns of domination by race, class and religion, from the local to the national and international levels in a struggle for dominance over populations and property of land, that is of gifting nature.

I call this change of gender categories the 'masculation abstraction' and I see it as a precursor in the individual life of the exchange abstraction, the social removal of products from the gift economy and their transformation into exchangeable commodities related to money as their general equivalent.

Although they take place in different times of life with masculation beginning over and over on an individual level with little boys, while the exchange abstraction is continually operating on a social level in the market, these two abstractions reflect and reinforce each other, merging to create Capitalist Patriarchy/Patriarchal Capitalism.

Commodity exchange among adults draws on and reinforces the exit from the maternal gift category that the boy experiences in masculation, creating a context (of the market) that gives validation to his presumably non gifting identity, which was artificially induced in him in childhood by identifying him socially as belonging to a non-maternal gender category. On the other hand, the existence of this 'non gifting' identity validates and reinforces the alienation of commodity exchangers (of both genders) from each other, facilitating and empowering the market processes. So the expression 'patriarchal capitalism' or 'capitalist patriarchy' refers to the merger of the two abstractions from gifting. The male gender abstraction and the exchange abstraction both alter and replace the original unilateral maternal gifting logic. Masculation turns the gift and its other-oriented value-implying process into a mechanism of potential harm and power over others while quid pro quo exchange logically contradicts the unilateral value-implying gift process while at the same time making it possible to give monetized value to monetized value, creating enormous capitals that need to be invested again and again in order to 'grow'.

These two abstractions from and contradictions of gifting- the gender abstraction and the exchange abstraction function together to create capitalist domination rationales for taking over other's gifting and gifted lives and lands altering the flow of their gifts towards the dominators. Weapons as instruments for giving death and seizures of territories and continents by masculated and marketized colonizing cultures are the products of the merger of masculation and exchange.

To answer the first question of the title of this salon Why is the World in Crisis let me say that I surmise that the combination of these two abstractions from the pan-human process of maternal gifting, create a social, logical and psychological mechanism that is the cause for what seems today to be a terminal crisis on many fronts. The environmental devastation, the threat of nuclear war, the horrifying patriarchal capitalist genocide of Palestinians and now Lebanese by Israel, the death by war, starvation and disease of millions in the Global South, the persecution of immigrants, all these have their origin in the parasitism of exchange on gifting as facilitated by masculation and the exchange abstraction. Living in this insanity and considering it normal makes us believe that we are a defective warlike species, and we follow each other over the cliff of despair to what we consider a justified collective suicide.

Actually, we are not defective as a species, but we have altered ourselves economically and conceptually away from our maternal species being.

Following this understanding and continuing to investigate the foundational character of the unilateral gift we can see in this revised chiaroscuro contrast of positive and negative how many of the offshoots of the gift are coopted and contradicted by transforming it into an exchange. For example, telling the truth is a gift because it allows the hearer/receiver to behave and plan according to the genuine assessment of a situation by someone else, the truth teller. On the other hand, a lie does not allow this behavior by the receiver - hearer. Advertising and propaganda have become businesses that make money by promoting false communicative gifts, that is, lies. At the international, North-South level, gifts of aid by wealthy countries that have been given to countries in need, promote seemingly benign strategies of development which are actually devices of hidden exploitation. These and many similar distortions undermine the positive human relations and trust that genuine unilateral giving and receiving originally create. Unfortunately, this discredits giving, as do many other manipulative uses of purported unilateral gifts.

We do not include the maternal economy in our explanation of the world so we see the exploitative interaction as immoral or illegal - but since exploiting women's gifts has been endemic for centuries, this categorization has very little power for change. If we realize that giving-receiving are our basic species schema we can understand exploitation of gifts not as immoral, or unethical but as contrary to the central schema of our species.

In fact, if we Euro Americans recognize our historical responsibility for the present situation, if we realize that the logic of exchange and patriarchy, combined as they are in patriarchal capitalism, the two abstractions merged together, are driving our maternal species insane, we as women who have not been masculated and still have much of the maternal model available, even if we work in the market and don't actually mother children of our own, can join with each other to lead the way out of this tragedy. Together with men who have freed themselves intellectually and emotionally from the combination of the masculation abstraction and the exchange abstraction, we can begin to function again as the maternal species we really are in cooperation with other cultures who are also realizing this now or who have never given up their ancestors' knowledge and practice as *homo donans*, the gifting being. We are all *Homo donans sapiens*, a species of gifting beings who *know* that they give and receive (and who know *by giving and receiving*)! Some groups of us have become insane because we are playing the part of the patriarchal capitalist parasite that is causing itself to be nurtured by the gifts of all, at the same time that it is destroying the gifts of nature and of other more peaceful populations as well as the future planetary giving of gifts.

It is important to recognize maternal gifting as the original and basic human interaction and trace its thread through adulthood and ever more complex human interactions, maintaining it as structural even when it is contradicted by the exchange insanity that presents itself as normality. (See the patriarchal vengeance-exchange now operating in the Middle East.) Recognizing ourselves as gifters and receivers debilitates the syndromes of guilt, which are preparations for paying back those we have harmed. Giving the gift of restoration not the exchange of vengeance to those who have been harmed can be part of the transition to the gift paradigm. We need restorative justice, not justice as *quid pro quo* exchange. Less cruelty in requiring payment could even stimulate less cruelty in the commitment of crimes.

There is much more to be said about the maternal gift economy, we have been taught not to recognize or think it is a 'thing'. It actually permeates our lives even when it is hidden from our view by the parasitic market. I have spent a large part of my life trying to see it and to disentangle it from exchange.

This project has led me to believe that 'Western' - European American -philosophy is all wrong because ever since its beginning after the invention of money, it has left out the maternal gift economy as the underlying economic structure that would in Marx's terms, determine the superstructure of ideas and understanding. Thus, male philosophers have eliminated the real origin and basis of human social life while inventing philosophical systems that explained things without it, placing gifting in categories of ethics and 'good' vs 'evil' having to do with personal choices and leaving aside the structural nature of the unilateral gift. Knowing this could allow women (and rematriated men) to rewrite Western philosophy putting the maternal gift economy back

into it, reconnecting with indigenous philosophies and thus taking away the validation Western thinking has provided for masculation and exchange and its violent legacies of death and domination

It has been difficult for us European settlers to grasp and respect the gift economies of native peoples and their corresponding ways of thinking because our own economies are so deeply engaged in the taking of gifts and in denying - not-seeing - that that is what we are doing.

What is to be done?

I.

Since gifting begins with mothering - being mothered, which is done mainly by women, the oppression of women and their exclusion from public life over the centuries may also be seen as the oppression and domination of the maternal gift economy, its logic and its paradigm. Women and the unilateral gift as the logic of life are the answer to the situation we are in that is threatening all of life. Men can also realize this and shift their own understanding and behavior towards gifting, rematriating themselves, regaining the maternal model they lost through masculation.

Misogyny as an instrument of Euro American patriarchy has kept women and the gift paradigm in the background, allowing patriarchy, exchange and capitalism to increasingly wreak havoc, bringing us to the end of the world scenario in which we are now. By bringing the gift forward into the light as the pan human process women and men can begin making different choices that do not depend on neoliberal patriarchal egocentrism for their justification but that hark back to the logic of the other centered unilateral gift model.

Do we have the time before it is so late that changing the way we think and behave will not have any effect? I think we have to try. People everywhere have different views of the situation and correspondingly different pieces of the puzzle and they are trying.

it is possible that if we recognize the unilateral matrix underlying and permeating our lives as well as the way it is contradicted and if we extend the concept of economy to include its maternal basis. And if we see other oriented values as the superstructure of the maternal economy, the matrix, upon which exchange economy is parasitic, we will all be able to see through the exchange economy to its gifting substratum And recognize our true human natures as homo donans - problem solving, altruistic, constructors of social good. In this way we could create the re emergence of the maternal gift after its nearly terminal contradiction by exchange and patriarchy. This would allow us to justify our choices, not as individual morality but as revolutionary maternal practice for social change.

II.

Recognize the maternal gift economy where it already exists though hidden 'underground' in the individual and in society.

Take it, not exchange as the beginning of the thread of our humanity. Recognize and empower it socially and individually. Begin to practice it as givers and receivers without shame or shaming. Reveal and criticize the use of gifting for exchange. Transition as quickly and as safely as possible away from Patriarcal Capitalism to an economy based on the maternal human.

Start by recognizing the maternal economy and its values as the common root of gift economy projects, eco villages, transition towns, even projects for peace, saving the environment, ending hunger, truth telling. Recognize that projects for justice as payment for crime and projects for alternative currencies still follow the exchange principle, while restorative justice and gift economy experiments try to enact maternal gifting without realizing it.

Transition away from money and exchange while continuing to satisfy needs.

Restore maternal values for both men and women. This may be part of what is happening via physiological transition in the trans movement but it needs to happen first in the mind, psychologically and socially.

Begin to solve some problems unilaterally and by unilateral giving and receiving. Problem solving is gifting. Individuals and groups can do this.

Make unilateral giving visible and the object of study and collective understanding.

Respect and understand different ways of knowing - pre exchange and pre gender, different experiential ways.

Learn from Indigenous peoples

Study matriarchies as proposed by Heide Goettner-Abendroth

Create matriarchal councils, matriarchal education

Study and understand the alienating social mechanism created by the combination of the gender abstraction with the exchange abstraction.

All of this depends on whether we have time. Some say we have only 6 years (until 2030). But we have to try.

– **Genevieve Vaughan**

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