

Gift Economy: Life for All

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Genevieve Vaughan's book 'For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange' (Plain View Press, 1997) reveals fundamental problems with any economy based on money or exchange and calls for a radical re-think of how we live and work together and how we bring up our children.

It is hardly a revelation that what we generally think of as 'women's work' – child care, nurturing, unpaid work in the home, whether carried out by women or by men – is not much valued in our society. Government initiatives to get mums and carers back into the labour market reinforce the view that this work outside the economic, monetary sphere is somehow second-rate and unproductive, while those paid for caring and nurturing work – for example in nurseries, day centres and residential care homes – are among the lowest paid of our workers. Meanwhile, the unemployed are portrayed as spongers and scroungers; no matter how much time, skill and effort they contribute to their community for free, they are seen as a drain on resources as a whole and a burden on the honest taxpayer in particular.

I've struggled for years with this world view, desperately trying not to feel like a second-class citizen because of my lack of commitment to economic activity; heartened when someone calls for a basic living wage for all; despondent at moves to cut benefits and force people into paid work. When I'm at a demonstration or a vigil and the inevitable hostile man hurls the insult 'Get a job!' from his white van, I generally manage to hold my tongue and stop myself from shouting back 'I've already got a job, thanks!' which amounts to nothing more than a betrayal of anyone who hasn't. If there was time, if the man in his van wasn't hurtling past at speed – which he always is – I'd say to him that it's impossible to judge a person's value to the world from her employment status, and give a few examples. But there never is time, so I just stand and fume and feel misunderstood.

It's all very unsatisfactory and hard to analyse exactly what the problem is, but a few weeks ago I came across a book which addresses exactly these issues; better still, it challenges the core assumptions upon which our economic system of money and exchange is founded, and offers an alternative way of being which is positive, hopeful, life-giving and fair. Thank you, Genevieve Vaughan.

I'll let Vaughan speak for herself. Below are some extracts from her book *For-Giving*, which I hope will convey the essence of her argument, that a fair and just society – one in which everyone has their basic needs of life met – cannot be based on exchange and money but must be based on nurturing and giving.

I believe there is a large part of life that is being denied and ignored... it is the healthy normal way of being, but we are... turning our attention away... in order to maintain a false reality, the patriarchal status quo. I call this unseen part of life 'the gift paradigm.' It is a way of constructing and interpreting reality that derives from the practice of mothering...

The gift paradigm emphasises the importance of giving to satisfy needs. It is need-oriented rather than profit-oriented. Free gift-giving to needs – what in mothering we would call nurturing or caring work – is often not counted and may remain invisible in our society... because it is qualitatively rather than quantitatively based...

Opposed to giftgiving is exchange, which is giving in order to receive. Here calculation and measurement are necessary, and an equation must be established between the products. In exchange, there is a logical movement which is ego-oriented rather than other-oriented.

This ego aspect may be disguised by the apparent benevolence of people working in the exchange paradigm:

While we may be grateful to the exchangers (entrepreneurs) for creating jobs, we should realise that the jobs are ways of getting for the entrepreneur what Karl Marx called 'surplus value' – what we could call a free gift of labour time given by the worker. In order to survive, the worker also has to receive many free gifts from his or her nurturers. Gifts are distributed from the bottom up in the hierarchy, from the poor to the rich, from giftgivers to exchangers, while it looks as if the flow is going in the other direction...



Vaughan argues convincingly that exchange works against the interests of the most needy and in the interests of those who already have plenty. Within the system of exchange, if you don't have anything which is 'saleable', then you cannot expect to have even your most basic needs – for food, shelter and warmth – met. Yet, fundamental to the survival of each and every one of us is the nurturing we receive as babies and children; without these freely given gifts we cannot thrive. If we lived in a world where the nurturing principle was extended to all aspects of our lives, we could all survive and thrive.

Aiding the maintenance of the status quo and the exchange economy is a view of 'human nature' as egotistical and competitive – qualities which are required and enhanced by capitalism. The qualities required and enhanced by mothering are other-orientation, kindness and creativity. Though they are necessary for bringing up children, these qualities are made difficult, even self-sacrificial, by the scarcity for the many which is often the consequence of the exchange economy. They are considered not 'human nature', not part of reality...

Nurturing is the origin of our species – not competition and hierarchy or the survival of the fittest. Human mothers ensure the survival of the unfittest – infants. And all of us are unfit in many ways; our soft skin, vulnerable bellies, short teeth, and varied diets make us animals with many needs that others' gifts can and must satisfy.

Within the current system our thirst for war, usually fraudulently presented as 'defence', leads to bloodshed, hardship and starvation for millions.

Huge amounts of money are spent nurturing the justice system, the government, the police and the military, thereby creating the scarcity which makes giftgiving difficult, and exchange a necessary survival mechanism. Abstract systems of laws and hierarchies like the government and the military are delivery systems for gifts, taking them away from the needs of the many in the community and directing them towards the needs of special groups of exchangers who have been socialised with an ego hungry to have 'more'...

Hierarchies are used to continually re-create scarcity by siphoning off surplus wealth. They thereby maintain exchange as the mode of distribution for all. Wars are fought to counter the challenges to hierarchies and markets by other hierarchies and markets. These wars destroy resources, creating scarcity, thereby ensuring the continuation of an environment appropriate for exchange. Preparing for the wars and spending the money necessary for high-tech armaments and the support of large armed forces also depletes the civilian economy in 'peace time', so that abundance does not accrue.

The appearance is the opposite. Employment in national war industries is highly visible and lucrative and appears to 'contribute' to the economy. However, these are jobs which produce nothing, gifts from the public to the workers. Paid for by tax money and devoted to the protection of the group or system, they seem to have the generality and social significance to which all in the society aspire. Unfortunately, the content of that generality is not nurturing but the propagation of death...

Patriarchal capitalism... is revealed as a parasitic system, where those above are nurtured by the free gifts of their 'hosts' below. Profit is a free gift given to the exchanger by the other participants in the market and those who nurture them. Scarcity is a necessity for the functioning of the system of exchange and is not just an unfortunate result of human inadequacy and natural calamity... [P]eople outside the market support those inside the market.

Vaughan makes some suggestions for things we can do to challenge the status quo and to bring about change in favour of giving and nurturing.

What we must do is stop giving value to the kind of consciousness which is based on exchange and mutual exclusion, to equality in the market, to making our products or ourselves or our children 'competitive', and try alternatives which are altogether different...



Genevieve Vaughan

Technologies of various kinds, including earth-friendly technologies, have the potential for providing abundance for all. This abundance threatens exchange by making it irrelevant and unnecessary. Giftgiving in abundance can provide for everyone... In abundance, forced giving, as it appears in exchange and hierarchies, has no reason for being because needs can always be satisfied by a multitude of ready sources...

While it may appear difficult to create giftgiving projects in present reality, I suggest that many ways are actually possible that are not being recognised as such... There are many experiments with women's land trusts, movements for self-sufficiency and living lightly on the earth... [T]hose working against racism, and for the liberation of peoples, against the destruction of the environment, against the puer-ile games played with radioactive waste and chemical time bombs, against war, militarism and military spending are all giving enormous time and energy to satisfy important general needs for social change...

[O]ne of the major causes of poverty is the system based on exchange. Creating projects to bring people into the market system will not change the causes of poverty. We need to create a change in consciousness, which will let everyone identify the systemic causes and focus on changing them.

It is important to create alternatives to patriarchal capitalism, experiments based on the ways economies were organised by different groups of so-called 'primitive' peoples outside the market system... These projects need to be made possible by monetary gift-giving – funding... Though funding may appear to be parasitic upon capitalism, it is then parasite upon the parasite... Funding gift economies... is giving for giving.

It is impossible to do justice to Genevieve Vaughan's work with a few quotes. Vaughan is a linguist and much of the book is a detailed linguistic analysis, arguing for recognition of the gift aspect of language and examining the ways in which language has been distorted from its original gift-based function. As philosophers have concentrated on definitions, the communicative needs which language satisfies have been forgotten or suppressed and language is reduced to words taking the place of other words in a closed system of exchange. This process has been central to the development of our exchange economy.

Inextricably linked with this process is the gender differentiation which Vaughan says we create and impose on ourselves as we go along, but [which] is made by cultures to seem biological and, therefore, impossible to change. The argument is complex, but in its essence amounts to the fact that from the outset male babies are labelled as different and separate from their nurturing, caring mothers. Denied the nurturing role, they are encouraged to be competitive and dominant, characteristics which are required for 'success' in the exchange economy.

I'll finish at the beginning, with Vaughan's hopeful message in Chapter 1: 'Where to Start':

Capitalism and communism are both patriarchal. The philosophy of social change which is wider and deeper than both of them is feminism... Patriarchy has infected women and men for centuries, distorting our view of the world and warping our socio-economic practices. The agenda of feminism is to liberate everyone – women, children and men – from patriarchy without destroying the human beings who are its carriers and the planet where they live.