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Radically Reinterpreting Who We Are as a Species

We are in a time of almost terminal crisis. The contradictions become deeper and more adversarial every day. This can lead us to destroy the planet in the short term through nuclear war, in the longer term through environmental devastation and in the mid term by social insanity and a widespread perversion of 'human' values such that the strong feel justified in massacring the weak backed by oligarchies safely pulling economic and military strings from 'elsewhere'. There are many who think this crisis demonstrates that our species does not deserve to survive. I believe instead that it shows that something is deeply wrong not with the species but with who we think we are as a species.

In fact, we think we are *homo sapiens sapiens*, the knowing beings, who know that they know. This is not true. We do not actually *know* who we are and we don't know that we don't know. Patriarchy, now merged with Capitalism, has blinded us to the fact that we are all, women and men, members of a *maternal* species.

Lacking this common understanding, we are interpreting the world and acting in ways that are contrary to our real shared species identity, which continues to be formed by an underlying biological and cultural blueprint or template that is established through the model of unilateral maternal care in our earliest days. The consequence of the lack of such unilateral care is the death of the child, with the evolutionary consequence that all the surviving members of the human species have had unilateral receiving and giving as their first interactive *model*. Thus we begin life as *homo recipiens and donans* and our basic cognitive and communicative structures are established by our experience at that time. These structures last throughout life and make it possible for children to perform the mothering of vulnerable infants themselves in their turn, when they are adults.

As shown in the Wanda Trevathan's edited book about helpless Infants and human evolution our capacity for child care (unilateral giving and receiving) provides the basis for the survival of the *unfittest* - our very vulnerable children - while the usual concept of evolution, developed by Darwin emphasizes the competitive survival of the *fittest*, the winners of the battle to survive, a more patriarchal and individualistic approach, that is said to have been inspired by the competition among Capitalist enterprises of Darwin's day .

Thus as a key species-specific capacity, human mothering-and- being-mothered is the potential basis of a world wide social structure that would be congruent with its other oriented logic and its evolutionary success.

At present, however, bilateral exchange, quid pro quo, which is the principle of the market, logically contradicts and overrides unilateral giving-and-receiving at every turn. The spread and dominance of Capitalism displaces gifting into a separate realm and an inferior dependent position, where the gifts of the many are made to nurture the market and the few. That is, the unilateral gifts of free, 'unwaged' work outside the market, of the domestic 'sphere', of the surplus labor time of workers inside the market, of low cost natural resources and of the still remaining free gifts of Nature like air and sunlight, all flow together into the profit of capitalist gift-takers. These are called by different names: housework, exploited work, cheap products, but to the capitalist they are unilateral gifts, even money he or she

has *made*, gifts of profit that by h/er ingenuity and effort, s/he has elicited from the many and given to him or her self. The language of the market does not acknowledge unilateral gifting and this constructed blind spot keeps the still existing maternal *systemic presence* subjugated, inaccessible and unknown. The idea of unilateral giving as saintly or divine overshadows real everyday unilateral mothering - and children's unilateral receiving- placing them in the background.

Let's go back to the pre market, pre patriarchal time of every child's life even in Capitalism. This is the time before children understand quid pro quo exchange, an understanding that only begins around age 3 and develops over childhood to competence in adolescence. The interpersonal neuropsychology of infancy now shows how basic interactive structures in the brain are established epigenetically by the child's experience after birth, and they are 'sculpted' as s/he grows older by 'pruning', the cell death of neurons in pathways that are not actually stimulated by the child's experience. From this I understand that children's crucial life experiences of having needs and receiving the appropriate satisfaction of their needs by their motherers, are sculpted *into* their neural pathways as the basic pattern of their interactions. I believe that this basic pattern of unilateral receiving and giving functions throughout life, though it is also varied in many ways some of which, like the interaction of exchange itself, are deeply contradictory, with the consequence that the continued existence and importance of gifting is not recognized. Though specific memories of early childhood are forgotten in what is called 'childhood amnesia', the simple pattern of giving and receiving remains: A gives to B and B receives from A. Each participant has to perform h/er part. The giving is not complete if the gift is not received and of course the receiver cannot receive if the gift is not given.

The care that is necessary for the young child's life: feeding, cleaning, regulating the temperature etc. is given unilaterally by motherer(s) (I use this term, 'motherer' to be inclusive of whoever consistently performs the work of mothering independently of relationship or gender) and it is received unilaterally by the children. In the early part of life, the child does not and indeed cannot give back an equivalent for what s/he has been given in an exchange of *quid pro quo*.

The trajectory of the gift

As soon as a child is born, s/he receives the gift of air and the care of her mother(ers). Nursing at the breast is the first experience and physical sensation of direct interpersonal giving and receiving and it occurs between mother and baby when each physically experiences the giving and the receiving of the other. The baby feels the mother's giving and her own receiving while the mother feels her own giving and the baby's receiving with the result that the two experiences become one. Mirror neurons also facilitate each one's knowledge of the experience of the other other.. This is an original postnatal integration with the other, a kind of merging. Bottle feeding is similar, but in that case, experience of the other is felt more through holding and touching, eye contact, pheromones etc. Later, the distance between motherer and child increases when the motherer feeds the child semi-solid food.

I call the bridging of the distance between the giver and the receiver the trajectory of the gift. This trajectory is immediate in breast feeding where gifting is grounded in physical sensation

on both sides¹, similar when bottle feeding (without the immediate physical sensation of the mother), and grounded again in the many different activities of care, during which, as the baby grows, each participant can alternately experience the roles of giver and of receiver. The baby also experiences herself in the role of gift when the motherer gives her to someone else to hold.

In family gatherings babies may be passed around to many. I read about a tribe in Africa where the members would sit in a circle and pass the child around lovingly, each one holding h/er for only a few minutes. The child must have felt h/erself as a gift given again and again.

The experiences of early childhood establish patterns and relations that continue in important ways throughout life. Implications of the value and intrinsic importance of the other are established through giving and receiving that create knowledge of the other and reciprocal self esteem, bringing the individuals and the community together. Giving unilaterally to the other to satisfy h/er need gives value to h/er (recognizes h/er intrinsic value) by implication. Passing the gift on to still another implies her value as well. And a syllogism can be identified here - If A gives to B and B gives to C then A gives to C. Passing the gift on, giving it forward, unites the givers and receivers through the implication of each one's intrinsic value by means of the gifting relation to the others and to and through the gift.

Early experiences of the maternal gift economy resonate throughout life and the interpersonal logic of the gift continues to create meaningful relations at many levels. Researchers on the gift economy in anthropology and sociology do not usually recognize the unilateral gift because their fields have been influenced by Marcel Mauss's 1923 book *The Gift* where he proposes that there are three steps of the gifting interaction: giving, receiving and giving back, believing that the step of giving back was the relation-creating element. Mauss - and those who followed him- did not realize that the first two steps - giving and receiving - already create a relation between mother and child and that giving back can alter that relation (as in exchange) or confirm it (as in the early game of 'serve and return', which I will describe below.)

Unfortunately, as older children and adults in Capitalism, we are all looking through the glasses of an antithetic economy based on *quid pro quo* monetized exchange. Quid pro quo actually contradicts the interpersonal gifting implications of the intrinsic value of the 'other', giving value instead to the products as use values and exchange values as expressed in money.

Moreover, the context of the market economy in which unilateral giving usually has to take place, often makes maternal gifting difficult and even self sacrificial because the gifts to be

¹ A variation on this takes place when the child sucks h/er own fingers, feeling both sides of the activity, though there is not any actual transfer of nurturance.

given are not immediately available. They have to come through market mechanisms of previous exchange before they can be given free to the child².

In capitalism, the nuclear family, the lack of community, and the widespread condition of single mothering make it difficult for many mothers to practice the maternal gift economy because, indeed, often no one gives to *them*. Many blame mothering itself for this, but it is actually the capitalist socio-economic **gift-extracting context** in which mothering has to take place that forces mothers to self sacrifice.

Early childhood gifting games encounter commodity exchange

I believe that some of the encounters between the market and the gifting interactions that take place in early childhood facilitate the take over of the gift economy by market exchange and patriarchy.

Studying the typical development of children in early childhood, researchers at Harvard have found that as early as 3 - 6 months of age babies begin to engage in mutually imitative social games with their motherers that, using an analogy with tennis, the researchers call 'serve and return'. These games, which are facilitated by mirror neurons, provide the infants with a way of understanding the other by responding to and at least partially repeating what the other is doing.

I believe that this widespread early interactive communicative structure based on giving and receiving and facilitated by mirror neurons can be 'invaded' and 'occupied' by the deceptively similar quid pro quo exchange structure later when the child begins to understand and engage in exchange. This makes exchange seem natural and allows economists and philosophers (if they think about it at all) to project the market backwards into infancy, so that it may seem that there is no maternal gift economy and even no communication that is not 'transactional', *quid pro quo*.

In fact most academic economic thinking that considers early childhood allows us to see the giving and receiving life-sustaining model without recognizing it as such, believing it is only an as yet *under developed* moment of exchange. My contention is that the serve and return game is an expression in play of the mutual relation of trust and delight in taking initiatives towards the other that are received and repeated by the other in initiatives towards the self. This gives the baby a chance to feel what it would be like to nurture the motherer and a chance for the motherer to see what the baby understands her nurturing to be like. In non market societies the obligation to reciprocate would likely be influenced by this sort of social interaction not by quid pro quo exchange. Knowledge of the other and long term connection among adults can be achieved by repeating the mother and infant interaction using gifted objects (and/or services) This can apply even among social groups and to travellers who bring gifts to far lands and take gifts that are given to them there back home. Symbolic gifts

² Of course the mother's ability to produce breast milk also depends on her well being, which depends on products she buys in the market.

can also be passed around from one group to another (as was exemplified in the Trobriand Islands Kula ring.)

The maternal gift economy is not only different from exchange but that it establishes basic human relations that continue throughout our lives even when they are later overshadowed, co-opted, contradicted and colonized (!) at almost every turn by *quid pro quo* exchange and exchange-based relations.

Early childhood takes place in a maternal gift economy because the child *cannot* give back to the motherer an equivalent of what s/he has been given (even if s/he is expected to take care of her parents in their old age, the child does not know it nor does s/he know it if a nanny is being paid to take care of h/er)..

I do not deny that capitalism and patriarchy have created a complex system and that it is necessary to trace capitalism's many developments in order to understand it. However, the simpler beginning of life in the unilateral gift economy and its subsequent contradiction by *quid pro quo* exchange has not been investigated as such even though the contradiction of gifting and its replacement by the profit (ie gift)-taking market is a watershed change of direction in the individual's life and in the life of society at large. Many consider exchange to be a natural human capacity and to have always existed, I believe that is because they do not recognize the prior existence of the unilateral gifting economy, considering it instinctual or divine or even 'impossible', as Jacques Derrida insisted.

In fact, like many others, Marx's discussion of economics already begins with exchange, with the product seen as use value and exchange value, without any analysis of the maternal gift economy of childhood and the implications of what I am calling 'gift value', the intrinsic value of the receiver, which is implied and attributed by the giver's satisfying the receiver's needs unilaterally. From the point of view of the maternal economy, exchange and the market are *stage two* in contradiction with an invisibilized gifting *stage one* that precedes exchange in every life and remains as the bottom layer of the market economy.

In fact the market is second *both* historically and in every individual life. It diametrically contradicts the maternal gift economy. and infused by Patriarchy, subjugates it, its principles and its gifts. This can be clearly seen historically in the European invasion of the Indigenous Americas as well as more recent Colonialism that has caused subjugated countries, continents and hemispheres to give unilaterally-that is to "mother" - Patriarchal Capitalist countries, international markets, and financial enterprises.

The model of the motherer, unilateral recognizer of and appropriate responder to the needs of the child, is available for assimilation and imitation by every child in early infancy, though pathologies of behavior can occur when this model is distorted or incomplete. Unfortunately, there can be cases of pathological cruelty towards children by parents, older children, paid caregivers, dysfunctional orphanages and even governments that slaughter 'enemy' children by bombs and starvation as is happening now in Israel's genocide of Gaza (statistics were 50,000 children killed even before Israel's recent bombing and starvation policies after it

broke the ceasefire). By destroying the means of giving and so not allowing mothering to take place and the gift mode to be established in children's lives, the Israelis backed by the Americans are destroying the gift-web of life, mutilating future generations of Palestinians. Many psychological studies are done on pathological or incomplete mothering and its effects on children and adults in later life. If this war is the consequence of the Nazi's genocide of the Jews, what will be the consequence of Israel's and the USA's genocide of Palestinians? Rendering mothers impotent to give unilaterally to nurture the lives of their children risks producing a model of depravity for the next generations. It changes our maternal species-being by eliminating the gift relation and gratuitously "giving death" instead.

I think of psychotherapist, Hungarian Jew Gabor Maté, whose mother gave him away as a baby to a woman on the street to save him from the pogroms. She gave him life twice, the second time by giving him to another motherer. Understanding that gift his mother gave to him of someone else's maternal giving, Maté has become a great giver of psychological understanding and council.

The gift logic as the basic human mode of being and its distortions

In this second part of my talk I want to describe what I consider the template of the gift in order to show the continuance of the gift logic and experience throughout life as a basic human mode of understanding and engaging with the world. Because in Capitalism, the maternal gift economy is underground and our attention is directed not only onto the market, but onto the market of ideas and a philosophy that has excluded maternal thinking for centuries, we do not recognize the gift template that undergirds our thinking and we interpret the world in 'neutral' giftless ways, in terms of bodily life experiences that are to some degree removed from gifting but still invisibly maintain its patterns. An example of this would be throwing and catching a ball but there are many others, some of which I will mention in a minute.

My hypothesis is that the patterns of giving and receiving established in early childhood are reused in pan human adult capacities like language (or ball throwing and catching), but seem sui generis because we don't recognize the maternal gift economy template as their origin.

If we make the effort to recognize the gift economy in the experience of the child and the mother, we can recognize it as our 'common template' or 'blueprint' and see it in the other free/unpaid aspects of the economy I mentioned like housework and surplus value that are free gifts to the capitalists, nurturing (adding to) their capital and their self esteem.

There are many feminist economists now who do study gift work as care work but their aim is usually to give it a monetary value and bring it into the exchange economy. My alternative is to start the economy (and economics) over again basing them on unilateral maternal gifting and eventually phasing out the market, creating a society that recognizes that we (both men and women) are a maternal species.

Feminist economists, have addressed the problems of women in the economy from the viewpoint of 'stage two' and have tried to get equal pay for equal work as well as wages for housework and economic recognition of the care economy. They or shall I say we, though I am not actually an economist, do not usually stand far enough outside the market paradigm to recognize the maternal gift economy, because, however well intentioned and radical any of us may be, economists are usually employed in what some call the Academic-Industrial-Complex and have to participate competently in a patriarchal intellectual tradition that for centuries has excluded the point of view of the maternal gift economy or has captured it in ethical or religious and symbolic categories.

Many people do not realize that making more women successful in Capitalist Patriarchy does not solve the problem of the exploitation and the capturing of the gifts of billions of other humans who live in other parts of the world (or other parts of town) as well as the gifts of nature, and that this is a large part of what is leading us to this time of planetary and human devastation and tragedy, a worldwide ripping and tearing of the web of life. Nevertheless, I still believe it is possible that feminists who understand the situation can change it from within, joining with their feminist sisters (and brothers) locally and in the Global South and East to quickly cause a necessary worldwide peaceful revolution.

Unfortunately, the branding of maternal feminism as 'essentialist' has slowed down this process. Instead, I am proposing a view of the maternal human species as having not an essence but a common basic template or blueprint that functions through giving and receiving, which we all *learn* by being unilaterally *gifted to* as infants during early epigenesis *before* we learn exchange.

The Template

So it is in the period of infancy and early childhood that this human *species experiential and cognitive template* is formed, that we learn to talk and understand, to receive words and to give words to other people who can receive them and to give words to other words in syntax, merging them, making sentences. . And we learn to walk, to create a trajectory by giving ourselves as a gift moving from a starting place to a receiving place. We do this by giving one foot forward to the Earth which receives it, then giving the other foot. We put something on the table and the table receives it. We give the water and the vegetables to the pot and the pot receives them. Then we give heat to the pot which receives the heat and transmits it to the water and the vegetables and then we give the food to the family who give us their smiles of appreciation.

That is, although we don't recognize it, giving and receiving is *a* or possibly *the* root metaphor or underlying structural template or blueprint for a very large part of what we do in life. I invite you to find many other examples.

The field of study called cognitive linguistics started by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in the 1980's has brought forward the importance of metaphors for our understanding and view of the world. With the hypothesis of the unilateral maternal gift, I can see that some of the most common metaphors, such as 'Path to goal', 'going out of or into a container' and 'source to target', map directly onto giving and receiving and the trajectory of the gift. I believe that the hypothesis of the fundamental importance of giving and receiving lets us see

these phrases not mainly as metaphors but as referencing the deep gifting structure of our human experience.

Finding these correspondences restores an underlying ***already- interpersonal and physically grounded structure of meaning-making*** to what seems to be a *sui generis* hodge podge of activities and perceptions. As I suggested above with breast feeding, meaning follows the trajectory of the gift from giver to its grounding in a receiver and the receiver actively elicits the gift.

I believe that the tracing of the basic gift structure answers the objection of essentialism because it displaces the attention from the duty and moral value of nurture to a mutually interpretable and lived schema of actions in the world that is practiced not just by motherers but by everyone who began life as a mother's - or motherer's- child. In other words, it is the common template or blueprint of the maternal species, of *homo donans*.

Revealing the gift template in many different aspects of human life (regardless of gender) and seeing it in nature as well (the Earth receives the sunlight through plant photosynthesis for example) removes the idea of nurture as 'essence' and replaces it with an objective social and natural process, a repeatable template that is learned by all children through the experience of receiving and giving in early epigenesis because the alternative to experiencing it is the death of the individual child. Thus, it is evolution - natural selection - not metaphysics or ethics that has provided our species with this common experiential template.

In capitalism gift economies seem to be primitive - that is because they are based on the maternal model - *prima* means 'before' and gifting does come '*before*', at the beginning of every life. It also comes before the market historically and in terms of so called 'civilization'. The gift economies of indigenous matriarchal people are *prima*-tive and ***positive*** developments of the maternal gift economy that thrived *before* their logical and practical contradiction by the market took over. Thus, they can be desperately needed models for us in these times of traumatic Capitalism.

What to do now

We need to start trying to see, normalize and validate gifting everywhere it exists. Free gifts can have a very positive effect on the givers as well as the receivers because they are the foundation of early life, and really of life itself. Recognizing them is empowering to ourselves as givers and receivers and empowering to the gift paradigm.

There are many experiments with gifting in alternative communities and eco villages, but they are not consciously connected with mothering. The well-intentioned, even heroic, women and men who are practicing the gift in these alternative ways need to see the maternal root of what they are already doing and transition towards the matriarchal models that are already there as revealed in Heide Goettner-Abendroth's work and by this movement of Matriarchy Now

Recognizing the maternal gift economy as providing the basic templates of human life, allows us to understand quid pro quo market exchange and its developments as parasitic Capitalism. It lets us see that they are the source of the contradiction and exploitation of our maternal species-specific values and behaviour. This understanding can lead us out of the end-of-the-world situation to which Capitalist Patriarchy has brought us and bring us the gift of a bright Matriarchal Future.