

Genevieve Vaughan

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Genevieve Vaughan presentation to the Maternal Gift Economy Conference
November 27, 2020

Starts at 2:08 after Sherri Mitchell's prayer

LETECIA LAYSON

The first person who will be speaking today is Genevieve Vaughan, whose theory of the gift economy has inspired many; we hope you'll be able to grasp the nuances of what makes the maternal gift economy different from all other gift economies. That word seems to have tumbled out and is growing in interest.

Genevieve Vaughan (b.1939) is an independent researcher who lives part time in Italy and part in Texas. She created a multicultural all-woman activist Foundation for a Compassionate Society (1987-2005) and the Temple of Sekhmet in the Nevada desert (1992 – ongoing). She co-created the network: International Feminists for a Gift Economy (2001 – ongoing). Her books are *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange* (1997), *Homo Donans* (2006) and *The Gift in the Heart of Language: the Maternal Source of Meaning* (2015). She has edited *Il Dono/The Gift* (2004) in Italian and English, *Women and the Gift Economy* (2007) and *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy* (2019). A volume of the Canadian Women's Studies Journal dedicated to the maternal gift economy has just been released this year (2020) [9:51]

GENEVIEVE VAUGHAN

Thank you so much, Letecia, thank you to all of the speakers, thank you to Sherri for the prayer, and thank you to all of you 700 people that are out there listening.

I think we need a paradigm shift, a very deep one, and a very long-lasting one, deeper than the ones that we've thought of before. I believe that what is holding that alternative paradigm is the role of mothering that has existed from time immemorial and is so necessary for living at all. I think that the other part of that

is that children who accept and understand when they're very small this model of mothering, which is a model of giving unilaterally because the children can't give back an equivalent of what they've received. So there is this free economy at the beginning of life. It's in that economy that we learn all of our basics as human beings. We learn how to perceive and what to make of what we perceive. And how to receive. And also we imitate our mothers in how we give. We have a life that circles around this logic of giving and receiving. And that is a logic that has been perverted by the logic of exchange, where you only give in order to get back. Exchange is ego-oriented, because you give in order to get. Giving and receiving is other-oriented because you give to satisfy a need and somebody is giving to you in an other-oriented way. And then you can imitate that person also but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's an exchange.

Anyway, I began thinking about all of this in the 1960s, and I'll tell you just a little bit about how I came to it. I was born in Texas and I married an Italian philosophy professor and moved to Italy. He was invited to be part of a journal that then never happened, but the journal was going to be based on applying Marx's analysis of the commodity and money to language. I had this huge Aha! moment at the time and just was so overwhelmed with this whole idea of being able to apply economics to language. Then as time went on my husband at the time wrote some books about exchange or the market as compared to language and when I had my little girls I realized that they were learning language but they didn't know how to do the market, they didn't know how to exchange things for money, that was completely beyond them. And so I realized that language could not come from the market, it had to come from something else. I thought at the time that it probably came from the nurturing that was going on, that I was doing myself with them, and I realized that native peoples, that didn't have markets that we have in our Euro-American ways, they could certainly talk even if they weren't having markets, so it couldn't be that. Maybe it was from the gift economies and the respect of the mothering that they actually had. That's how I actually came to this.

After that I began to write about gifting and mothering and then I came back to Texas and since no-body understood what the gift economy that I had in mind

was, I started a foundation in order to try to practice it. Time has gone on for a long time since then and it's now 50 years after the beginning of my falling in love with the gift economy, basically, and I think that we have to do this paradigm shift that I'm thinking of; we have to go back to the essence of mothering, to the very structures of giving and receiving and leave exchange aside. I think that the gift, and the way it's structured, as A gives to B, is the simplest human interaction that there is. You don't need a return gift or an exchange, a quid pro quo, in order to make it meaningful. In fact it's meaningful when you give to satisfy the needs of the other person. And that is what makes meaning happen in our lives. And it also makes it happen in language.

So I think what has happened is that we have created all of this enormous amount of philosophy and academia to explain things that we have to explain because we've left out mothering and this unilateral giving and receiving from the explanation of the world. And instead we can take that small piece of thinking and doing and elaborate it in all kinds of different ways. I was listening to the radio the other day and I heard a piece by Mozart which was twelve variations on a theme which sounded something like Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. It was very simple. He had all of these different variations and I think that's just what life does with this theme of mothering. It goes throughout tons of variations and also is a variation of exchange, which is a doubling of giving, a giving in order to receive, a quid pro quo. That's still a double gift, a giving that gives back. It's constrained, it has to be that way, otherwise the gift is not given.

That is another theme – or variation – that's placed over the gift basis, and it disguises it and contradicts it so we don't really even see that the gifting is happening and when we don't see it we don't know it's happening and we don't value it. And that is part of the reason, I believe, that mothers and mothering have been so ignored throughout history and made second-class citizens and not been able to be the leadership of society, very different from the matriarchal societies that Heide [Goettner Abendroth] and Sherri [Mitchell] will be talking about. It's just this commodification and exchange and the capitalist market that cancels the mothering way but at the same time it takes from that mothering way. The givers give to the exchange society. We don't see the gifts, we don't call

it gifts, we call it profit. We call it the just reward. People who are actually doing plundering. If we were to be able to respect gift giving, to understand it as a basic paradigm and a basic logic, then we could possibly stand back from this plunder, this exchange capitalist way, and understand a way to be in solidarity with everybody, because everybody is born from a mother, everybody has that at the beginning of their lives. What we need to do is to liberate the child who has had the model of the mother and has absorbed that model. It's throughout language; I've been finding it in language all this time as well, words as verbal gifts and syntax as gifts to gifts, verbal gifts to other verbal gifts, and it's all a kind of verbal gift economy. That's what language is.

And even when we think in terms, with language, we're doing this verbal gift giving internally. And that moves us towards a kind of a conscience and a kind of consciousness that works toward community through communication. You know community is co – muni-ty. Muni means gift in Latin so it is a group of people who are giving gifts together. The same with com-muni-cation.

So those are signals of how we need to behave in order to stop this total destruction of the environment and of the human race that we are doing now. We need a very basic, deep, different kind of approach to life. And we do have it because it is in the lives of everyone. We've learned to explain things in other ways but we need to bring back this maternal logic. Unfortunately we've interpreted it as morality, or thought of it as religious ways of doing things, but instead it's actually part of the simple basic practice of every mother and child.

We've had philosophers like [Jacques] Derrida who says that it was impossible to do gift-giving. He didn't even look at the mothers, who were doing this every day without any recognition. In fact he said that you couldn't really give a unilateral gift because you have an ego reward from doing it. But mothers don't get that. Nobody even pays any attention, so it's hardly the – hardly able to do it. to have a big ego from it.

I think that we need to realize also that the market and capitalism, as I was saying, take from the gift economy. They do that, but it does it through surplus labour, which is that part of the work which is not paid for by the capitalist. Also the gift

comes from the domestic labour from women in the home who are caring for everybody and giving their gift labour and the products of that gift labour are the people who go to the market as workers. So that gift is channelled through their children and their husbands and so forth, and themselves, even when they are working in the market themselves.

And then the biggest gift-giver is Mother Earth. And all of the gifts that come from Mother Earth are also taken and made into profit and into capital that is then recycled and replayed as a way of exploiting and taking more gifts. And so we have this strange situation of this market that is like a parasite on the gift economy, on the mothering economy. And that is really a huge problem and the market is also a parasite on the earth. And this is one of the main reasons why we are in the terrible shape that we are.

I don't mean to say by this that everybody who works in the exchange economy and the market is a bad person. There are lots of gifts that can be given, and are being given, all the time, by people who are working in the exchange economy. But we have still a gift economy that is sort of unrecognized that we practice towards each other. Like I say I think it's done in language but also in all our human relations we do a lot of gifting without being recognized as doing that. We don't recognize it ourselves. We just think it's just the way we are.

But I think if we can begin to recognize this giving and receiving way – the logic of the gift – then we can begin to change and recognize also that the various projects that people are doing to try to change things for the better – the gift economy projects they're trying to create, all of the social change projects that are trying to satisfy a need. And the satisfaction of that need is the gift that we're trying to give.

Many different ways of giving, even sometimes the ones that are with alternative currencies, they're still using money but they're trying to solve a problem and so that is a gift they're trying to give. I do think, though, that money is one of the biggest problems that there are, because it abstracts our thinking away from the gift giving and receiving way. A lot has been written now about the work of this man named [Alfred] Sohn-Rethel, who discussed the exchange abstraction in

Marx's analysis of the exchange of commodities and how that exchange abstraction happens through the exchange itself. and how bad it is, really, for us.

I just thought, recently, that we don't have a gift abstraction. If people are all thinking according to the exchange abstraction they're not recognizing gifting. And so we need to abstract it a little bit in order to say it is at the same level of any of the other activities that are going on in life, and we need to give gift-giving a meta-level of its own so that we can discuss it on its own, not just as part of exceptional behaviour by some good people.

That is more or less what I have to say. I don't know if I've gotten up to 20 minutes yet. I would like to say a couple more things.

LETECIA LAYSON

You have a few more minutes. You can go until 10:30. About seven minutes left.

GENEVIEVE VAUGHAN

Like I was saying, you can interpret so many things in terms of giving and receiving. I think we can base an epistemology on that, on our relation to our surroundings. There is an idea by this psychologist J.J. Gibson who has this theory of visual perception in which he identified affordances. He says the world is full of affordances, those things that the creature who is perceiving them realizes that they can be able to do things with that thing. So he says, for example, that the affordance of a chair is to sit in. Now I see that as the gift that the chair can give us. And I think that we can look at the world around us full of gifts that we can then receive. That is, we base our perception on receiving and giving gifts. It looks very obvious to me but it certainly isn't what philosophers and epistemologists have thought in the past. It is, instead, what native people have often thought. So I think there is a way of arriving at a philosophy based on mothering and giving and receiving that can bring us to a philosophy that mothers and women and indigenous people can share, and that men also can share, but they haven't so far because they haven't taken seriously the giving and receiving that mothers have to take seriously because they're doing it with little kids and they have to do it in order to make them survive.

And in fact it's that survival side of things that is the serious side of how we relate to each other and on that basis we maintain meaningful relationships throughout our lives. And in fact the gift economy is an economy of relationships, of relationality, whereas the exchange economy separates people from each other because if you're only giving to get back something, you're looking out for yourself, for Number One and not for the other person.

It seems very simple, I know, but in our society our values are just going way out the window and neoliberalism takes us into that egocentric way of acting and it's killing the world, it's killing Mother Earth and each other. I see it even with the COVID where people don't wear the mask because they're not worried about the other person. It's obvious for me, everywhere I look I see the necessity of recognizing gifts, the receiving and giving gifts.

Part of the gift paradigm is that it shows up also in other aspects of life. Like telling the truth is satisfying the need, the cognitive need of the other person to know what they need to do, whereas telling a lie is ego-oriented, an exchange-based way of doing things. Justice is based on an equivalence between the crime and the punishment. And that's an exchange-based logic. Although now there is also restorative justice that is much more based on a gift-giving way.

Then we have value. What is value? We talk about exchange value and use value. But there's another value, which is gift value, which gives value to the other. When you're taking care of a child, when you're satisfying somebody's need; that implies that the other person is valuable, that they have some intrinsic value for you. And so that is a way that the other person receives a dose of self-esteem from the gift that's given. On the other hand exchange doesn't do that, it divides the value only of the object into exchange value and use value. Use value is just something that you use. It doesn't imply the value of the user, whereas giving a gift, or satisfying the need of a child does imply the value of the other. And so that part of the discussion of value has been left out by the economists. And putting back mothering and gifting into these discussions, into the view of the world, can really, really change things, and I think we have to do that in order to survive. And

I think we can. I don't know if it seems too simple to you all but simple things are the most profound.

So I invite you, and I pray you, to think of that deeply and try to use the glasses of the gift paradigm to counter the view of the exchange paradigm.

So that is basically what i have to say for now. I thank you all very much listening.

Ends at 30:18