



## Gift, She Said

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**review of:** G. Vaughan (ed.) (2004) *The Gift, Il Dono: A Feminist Analysis*. Rome: Meltemi editore (pbk, 334p, 15 Euros, ISBN 8883533437)

This mammoth volume consists in 27 contributions inspired by Genevieve Vaughan's theorization of the gift economy; it offers a wide range of personal reflections on the ways in which the idea of the gift can help us reconstruct social and economic relations on more generous, sustainable and caring basis: on the basis of an ethic of care and generosity rather than greed and self-interest.

The book opens with a short introduction (in English and Italian) and a lengthier paper by Genevieve Vaughan outlining her theorization of the gift economy, and is followed by 25 contributions that all play a variation on the tune of the gift from different perspectives. Indeed, this diversity is one of the strengths of the book. Contributors include women from the Global South and North, from academic and non-academic backgrounds, tackling a wide range of issues (justice, biodiversity, nursing, education, indigenous people's relationships to the land, matriarchy, community radio) from very different positions (as mothers, activists, researchers, victims of oppression, poets, spiritual healers, community workers...) and disciplines (philosophy, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, semiotics, ethnobotany, education sciences). The wealth of voices and experiences included in the book provides a fitting illustration of the principle of abundance central to the gift economy.

But before saying more about the diversity of these contributions, it seems opportune to outline the idea of the gift economy. According to Vaughan and many of her fellow contributors, the 'gift paradigm' exists both within and outside 'patriarchal capitalism' but has been made invisible by the predominance of 'exchange'. The gift economy and the exchange economy are defined in contradistinction to each other, and here it is useful to outline some of the contrasts that are drawn. Whilst relations of exchange are brought to visibility through the acts of identification and calculations that are required to establish equivalence between what is given and what is received, gift giving remains mainly hidden within 'patriarchal capitalism'. By definition a gift does not establish

claims of 'equivalent' return, or any return for that matter. This raises an important issue that is rightly raised by Vaughan, if gift giving does not make any claim about its value, how can it be brought to visibility, how can it be re-valued, or recognised, without becoming subsumed by the competing logic of exchange? As Vaughan suggests, by definition, the gift economy can't compete with exchange since it refuses the very principle of competition, "it loses the competition by not competing" (p. 22).

The gift and exchange economies also produce two different kinds of subjectivities. The exchange logic produces ego-oriented subjectivities governed by self-interest, it encourages competition and hierarchy by setting people against each other in the calculation of equivalence, of who has more or less, or who owes what. On the other hand, the gift logic produces other-oriented subjectivities governed by the principle of nurturing. Here it is the figure of the mother nurturing the child that provides the gender basis and the imagery of the gift logic. Mothering is based on unilateral giving from the mother to the dependent child, without expectation of return as the child can't give back. But if mothering, grounded in giving without receiving back, symbolises (for many of the contributors) the economy of giving, many other examples of other-orientation, of acts of generosity, are offered in the book. For example, in a chapter on 'Education as a Gift', Eila Estola finds this orientation towards satisfying the needs of others in the narrative identity of teachers. Rauna Kuokkanen also vividly illustrates this other-orientation with the example of the Sami's (the indigenous population in the northern tip of Europe, now divided between the nation states of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia) gift to the dead and the land. Similarly, Susan Lee Solar and Susan Bright find this other orientation in the Restorative Justice Movement, a model of justice based on forgiving and reconciliation that seeks to break the cycle of violence engendered by eye to eye, retaliative justice. They offer powerful and moving stories of mothers who have reached out to the murderers of their own son in acts of healing, who have offered reconciliation in front of the sense of despair and brokenness of the murderers.

Another point of distinction between the gift economy and the exchange economy outlined in the volume is the contrast between abundance and scarcity. The logic of exchange requires scarcity for people to be willing to trade, to give up things against other goods they need. On the other hand, the gift economy is based on abundance, an abundance that according to the various contributions in this volume is to be found, for example, in the 'free gifts of nature' (e.g. water, biodiversity, the capacity of the earth to produce enough food to feed the planet), traditional knowledge of plants and agriculture, the care a mother gives to a child, communication (as Genevieve Vaughan points out, language provides the ideal gift economy as everyone has the 'means of production' and participation), the free and open information to be found on the net through open system software... But, as Ana Isla poignantly illustrates in her chapter on 'Dispossessing the local commons by credit', such abundance has often been artificially transformed into scarcity through the commoditisation and privatisation of land, biodiversity, and traditional knowledge. She provides a well informed account of how Third World Debt has been used as leverage by banks, corporations and international institutions representing the Global North to dispossess people in the South from communal resources, and create scarcity out of abundance.

So, the volume provides a conceptual framework for envisaging an alternative economy to global capitalism, and provides evidence that the bases of the gift economy are already with us, and have always been. The gift economy may have been hidden and trivialised by capitalism and the exchange paradigm on which it relies, but it is manifested in the generosity of nature, of motherly care, of communication. The task is to bring these everyday acts of giving to visibility and build upon them. However, as several of the authors recognise, there is a danger in seeking to revalorise gift giving; that is, it could easily be reduced to relationships of exchange, as has been done in much anthropological research. Rauna Kuokkanen develops this point particularly well in her essay on 'The gift as a world view in indigenous thought'. She argues that from Mauss' classical essay on the gift, anthropological studies have re-inscribed 'giving' within economic relations of exchange; indeed, Mauss talked of gift exchange, of contracts and purchases. He accounted for indigenous gifts to gods or nature in terms of 'sacrifices' through which people exchanged contracts with the spirits of the dead and the gods. This view of the gift as a mode of exchange characterised by obligations, counter-gifts, paybacks, forced reciprocity, and even violence has informed most anthropological studies and modern studies of the gift. For example, Bourdieu sees the gift as a mark of symbolic violence which is 'the most economic mode of domination'. From this perspective, gifts give power to the giver and work through the accumulation of social capital in the form of 'debt', homage, respect, loyalty. To counter this classical view of the gift, Kuokkanen provides the example of the Sami people's 'grave gifts' and gifts to nature. She argues that these gifts have no 'economic function' of expected return, but serve to establish continuity between the living and the dead, connectedness between humans and the land on which they depend not only for 'survival' but also as a repository of traditions, culture, and knowledge. These gifts should not be seen as 'sacrifice', as suggested by Mauss, as this would imply some forced giving in the hope of receiving something back, in other words it would re-inscribe the gift within a relationships of exchange based on 'forced reciprocity'. According to Kuokkanen, in order to save gift giving from relationships of exchange, we need a different conceptualisation of reciprocity; and she offers the notion of circular reciprocity. For Kuokkanen, gift giving works according to the logic of circular reciprocity; this kind of reciprocity is not reduced to 'give and take' relationships but works through connectedness and sharing, through keeping the gift moving. Circular reciprocity affirms the myriad relationships that stem from collective necessity; it is based on a world view that sees the well-being of the living, the dead and the land and closely intertwined.

In sum, this book sends a welcome message of hope by going beyond providing a feminist critique of global capitalism, and offering an alternative based on generosity and gift. As Kaarina Kailo suggests in her piece, whilst Vaughan's thesis is clearly situated within the tradition of Marxist feminism that sees women's labour as an unacknowledged source of capital accumulation, it moves on to more positive ground. It proposes to conceptualise women's 'free labour', but also the 'free gifts' of nature, not merely in terms of exploitation, but also as offering the basis for building a different economic paradigm, saving women from the position of helpless, exploited victims in the process.

However, there are also many problems with the book, some related to Vaughan's thesis itself (but replicated in many of the contributions that draw upon it); others related to the uneven quality of the various contributions.

One of the fundamental problems of Vaughan's thesis is its incoherent position on gender essentialism. On the one hand, Vaughan refutes biological essentialism by suggesting that women's commonality comes from what they do rather than what they are. Vaughan insists that gender is a 'relational quality', a process rather than a biological property. On the other hand, essentialism seems to creep back in two forms in various parts of her account of the gift economy: firstly there are sometimes strong hints of biological essentialism, and secondly essentialism points its head in terms of universalist claims about 'womanhood'. On the first point, Vaughan's position against biological essentialism in her analysis of 'womanhood' is difficult to reconcile with the connections she draws between male competitive and aggressive behaviour characteristic of capitalism and war, and the possession of a penis:

Since the penis is the identifying property of those in the non nurturing category, 'male', it is not surprising that the individuals and the groups that are competing for dominance provide themselves with even larger and more dangerous category markers. From sticks to swords and from guns to missiles. (p. 21-22)

Thus whilst womanhood is not grounded in biology, manhood seems to be so. In addition, whilst Vaughan refutes (albeit inconsistently) biological essentialism, she resorts to another form of essentialism: universalism. Whilst she denies that women commonality is rooted in biology, she still assumes that there are some universal patterns, traits, characteristics that make up womanhood (and manhood) and provide the bases for the development of gendered economic identities. Thus for Vaughan, "women are similar because they make themselves by making others through satisfying their needs unliterary, beyond the exchange process" (p. 32). This other orientation means that women's identities are strongly anchored in the gift economy, even if they come to participate in the exchange economy by entering the labour market. Women "remain in the gift logic in many parts of their lives, even when they have been absorbed into the market and see the world mainly through the eye glasses of the exchange paradigm" (p. 23).

This simultaneous denial of biological essentialism and reliance on universalist forms of essentialism is reproduced in many of the other contributions in the book. For example, Kaarina Kailo, having stressed the non-essentialist position of Vaughan goes on to suggest that "girls as a group are more sensitive to the environment, they are less racist and also more collaborative in their working lives" (p. 60). This connection between womanhood and the environment could have been grounded in a material analysis of the sexual division of labour; thus, for example, some ecofeminist such as Plumwood (1993) or Warren (1997) see women's predominant role in traditional agriculture and household management (cooking, food production, child care, health care) as providing the basis for their close understanding of, and sympathy towards, the environment. However, no such explanation is offered here. In addition, some contributions seem to re-introduce biological essentialism. For example, Hildur Ve claims that "without arguing for a special women's essence, I find it important to take as a point of departure the experience and learning that result from the bearing of, giving birth to and nurturing

of children” (p. 119). This begs the question of how this position that foregrounds childbearing differs from a biologically essentialist one, and what this means for women who do not bear children.

In sum, the position of Vaughan and her fellow contributors on essentialism is problematic on several counts: firstly it is inconsistent by on the one hand explicitly rejecting biological essentialism, on the other hand sometimes resorting to claims that come close to biological determinism. Secondly, it relies on universalist claims about womanhood, thus women’s commonality may be grounded in what they do rather than in their biology, but it remains that women are assumed to share something that clearly inscribes them within the gift economy. The articulation of a common experience giving women a common voice has long been considered problematic within feminism (e.g. Butler, 1992; hooks, 1990; Rich, 1980) since it is based on representations of women that privilege certain experiences (e.g. white, middle class, heterosexual...) and tend to exclude and silence others (e.g. black, working class, lesbian...). As suggested above, some have tried to ground the articulation of women’s common experiences in a material analysis of the sexual division of labour, whilst others have tried to reconcile non-essentialist conceptualisations of womanhood with the deployment of strategic essentialism as a political weapon with which women can, at least temporarily, speak with a common voice in the face of a common enemy (e.g. Braidotti, 1994; Fuss, 1989; Sturgeon, 1997). However, no such argument for justifying universalist claims is offered in this book.

Another problem in Vaughan’s thesis, also reproduced in some of the other contributions, is the assumed primordial nature of the gift over exchange. For example, Vaughan asserts that “gifts are ... prior to exchange” (p. 26). Such assertions are problematic on several counts. Firstly no explanation is provided as to why we should be convinced that this is the case. Secondly, it has a jarring moralistic tone that not only fails to convince but is also dangerous. Just like invoking some divine law, or law of nature, invoking the primordial nature of the gift presents the potential danger of totalitarianism. Does it mean that we should simply and uncritically accept the superiority of the gift economy over other economic models because of its presumed pre-existence? Even if we accept that gift preceded exchange, why should this make it ‘better’? This primordialism appears in many of the other contributions. For example, for Lee Ann Labar, in the gift economy, “we are all able to be our natural selves” (p. 299); for Kaarina Kailo “patriarchy is a societal disease, while gift giving creates an alignment with nature” (p. 61). Both Heide Gotter-Abendroth and Hildur Ve make a similar move in relation to matriarchy that is taken to be an “originary system” (p. 124) whilst patriarchy is ‘derivative’. Throughout these arguments, it is as if invoking the connection between gift and nature (a connection that is simply asserted) was proof enough of the goodness and moral superiority of the ‘gift’. However, we could ask why give such prominence and moral weight to nature (especially, if the authors also profess to adopt an anti-essentialist view)? Why should nature be assumed to be ‘good’? And how would the author adjudicate on what is / isn’t nature? Moreover, this primordialism is not only problematic but also unnecessary to the stance the authors of this volume want to take: if the aim is to offer the gift economy as an alternative to global capitalism, the contributors to this volume could have relied on ethical arguments,

arguments that would of course not be grounded in the certainty or superiority of 'nature' but in uncertain ethical choices.

A third problem with Vaughan's thesis is that it tends to collapse patriarchy, capitalism, exchange economy, neoliberalism... as if we could all agree that all these terms indexed the same thing. Whilst equating neoliberalism, capitalism and exchange might be less problematic; conflating (without much discussion) capitalism and patriarchy is more problematic. Vaughan talks of 'patriarchal capitalism', this system is allegedly based on a world view that sees everything in terms of exchange; but does that mean that there is a non-patriarchal form of capitalism? Are patriarchy and capitalism the same thing? If so, how did it come to be so? These questions are unfortunately not considered. This conflation and loose usage of concepts is again reproduced in other chapters in the volume; for example, Bhanumati Natarajan claims that: "Patriarchal institutions of capitalism have expanded more than ever due to the mantra of globalisation, which goes beyond privatisation, taking control of biodiversity and knowledge for control of people's lives, just as colonisation did 500 years ago" (p. 113). I certainly do not wish to defend capitalism, patriarchy, or globalisation from the critique to which they are subjected, but simply would suggest that the critique could have been more powerful had its terms (globalisation, capitalism, patriarchy) be used and connected more sharply.

In addition to these substantive problems related to Vaughan's thesis, and repeated in many other contributions, there are also problems of form and structure with the collection. Each of the contribution picks up on Vaughan's gift economy, but does not always add much to it in the way of either empirical illustration or conceptual refinement ...In addition, it is not clear how some of the contributions are related to the notion of the gift. For example, Frieda Werden's describes community radio as a 'gift of sounds'; perhaps, but the connection would need to be teased out a bit more. This sense of repetition of Vaughan's thesis, and disconnection between this framework and some of the empirical material discussed in the chapters make the book rather disjointed. The incoherent structure of the book as a whole, and of some of the individual chapters, is exacerbated by the uneven quality of the writing. In many of the contributions, the analysis too often proceeds by vast over-generalisations that may be 'worthy' but are rather simplistic. Thus we are often left with wild assertions that are not grounded either in theoretical or empirical discussion. For example, Paola Mechiori is able to claim that "the gift launches you into the future and at the same time is rooted in the wisdoms of the past, with the conviction that the only future we have lies in the ability to recreate the knowledge, technology and wisdoms that come from the deeply rooted laws that can help us to survive: the logic of relationship, which is the logic of the only 'real economy' in the best sense of this word" (p. 207). On an equally grand note, Rokeya Begum affirms that "women, whether as feminists, activist or as mothers, daughters, wives, have a passion towards human values" (p. 221), and Leslene della Madre claims that "The mother culture is a far different culture than this patriarchal one in which we are all trying to survive. The mother culture is free from violence, domination and control. It is rooted in the earth, and is governed by the magical rhythms of the moon-mind" (p. 309). The list could go on but I think this is sufficient to give a flavour of the problematic tone of the writing. Such wide assertions are not only groundless, but they are also not particularly helpful in finding ways in which the gift economy can be built upon. It could of course be argued that this is not meant to be a purely academic book,

that indeed its strength is to combine academic and non-academic voices, and that therefore it is exempt of dry scholarship. Maybe, but this does not exempt it from formulating convincing argumentation that would strengthen the case for the gift economy.

In sum, I think that despite the flaws in conceptualisation I outlined above (essentialism, primordialism, conflation of concepts) some of the chapters in this volume make a worthwhile contribution to the feminist literature by providing a message of hope for the development and possibility of alternative economies. The imagery and practice of gift giving reported in some of the pieces in this book offer strong bases and evocative material for constructing alternative economies to global capitalism. Even with the problems mentioned above, there are some thoughtful chapters, in particular Genevieve Vaughan's own introductory two papers, Rauna Kuokkanen's piece on 'The gift as a world view in indigenous thought', Mechtild Hart's piece on 'Transnational feminist politics: Being at home in the world', Ana Isla's wiring on 'Dispossessing the local commons by credit' and Susan Lee Solar and Susan Bright's work on restorative justice. It is a shame, however, that the inspirational nature of these few pieces gets drowned in a sea of cumbersome and unconvincing discussion.

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