

Gen Vaughan and the Maternal Gift Economy

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C'est une discussion de l'auteure qui a rencontré Genevieve Vaughan et appris de ses écrits que l'économie du don maternel offrait une alternative viable à notre économie de marché capitaliste dominante. Elle ajoute que la philosophie de Vaughan a fortement marqué sa vie et son travail. La philosophie de Vaughan a résonné dans sa vie de chercheuse féministe qui toute sa vie a voulu remettre les femmes dans l'Histoire, là où elles et leurs actions furent invisibles ou même sérieusement absentes pendant des millénaires.

When I first met Genevieve Vaughan, I was powerfully struck by the iconoclasm of the Maternal Gift Economy as a viable alternative to our mainstream capitalist market economy. Her philosophy resonated with my lifelong feminist quest to put women (and “women’s ways”) back into history, where they have been invisible or plainly missing for thousands of years. Although Vaughan uses the conceptual language of philosophy in ways that often challenge me as an outsider in that discipline, I intuitively understood what she was saying from the beginning. The alternative explanation she gives for *the way the world is* can actually serve us as a guideline away from our current destruction of Mother Earth; she has even suggested that if our world does collapse in some sort of apocalypse, then this alternative understanding of reality—the Maternal Gift Economy—can help us to create a viable economy that does not plunder gifts as our current economy does. The seemingly radical idea of unilaterally “giving to needs” rather than requiring a *quid pro quo* is very appealing to me and Vaughan’s model of the mother who births and sustains the child as the “basic human logic” makes total sense to me.

Feminist physical anthropologists have come to similar conclusions in their language of human evolution: “The mother-offspring tie was primary; this was the elemental social unit for [hominids or pre-humans] as for other primates” wrote anthropologist and ethnographer Nancy Makepeace Tanner in the 1970s (148). Tanner believed that organized male hunting came much later than the gathering that was so central to women, and that fatherhood as an institution was a very late development. Tanner posited that “since mothers probably carried infants with them wherever they went they likely formed ‘small genealogically based social groups’” with other mothers. (209) Tanner’s work also foreshadowed Vaughan’s assertion that language is a *verbal gift construction*, arising from within the mother-child dynamic, when she posited that through the feeding and care of their offspring, mothers transmitted the gift of language.

Human offspring cannot survive in an exchange-based environment; they require someone (almost always a mother) who is willing to give to their needs unilaterally without payback. One of the most profound aspects of Vaughan’s philosophy is how she reminds us that everyone alive—men and women—have received this original gift of life (and usually nurture) or we would not be here. The gift is our birthright, whereas we have to *learn* to practice exchange. She emphasizes that *unilateral giving is commonplace in early childhood*. Vaughan’s philosophy is congruent with the values and practices of Indigenous cultures, whose social organization for the most part has remained dedicated to communal ownership and the distribution of goods to everyone in the community regardless of their ability to give back. “The logic of gift giving,” according to Vaughan,

“is a maternal economic logic, the logic of the distribution of goods and services directly to needs” (7). One of her central tenets is that this logical form of economy “has been overtaken and made invisible by the logic of the market economy” (3). Competition has replaced cooperation as the valued process in the marketplace, although in the domestic sphere—the realm of the mothers—gifting continues to be the norm. Vaughan brings this unconscious reality into the foreground by naming the *domestic sphere* as *the locus of an alternate economy* to the market.

involuntarily) can be named. The problem, Vaughan writes, is this: “(W)hen the gift economy and the exchange economy behaviours coexist, the gift economy, consistent with its principle, gives to the exchange economy, satisfying its needs, giving it value and thereby colluding with its own oppression” while the exchange economy “cancels gift giving” (5). Feminist women have discussed female exploitation like this for decades in personal ways, for example how inside nuclear family households, the unpaid (but necessary and valuable) work of wives and mothers

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Vaughan deeply believes in gift giving for social change as well, stating that the gift economy model at the “meta level,” provides a guideline “for creating a radical and far reaching alternative” to the market economy (see Petrilli). She confronts the practise of market capitalism as inherently greedy and uncaring, asserting, “It is part of patriarchy to trash the free gifts of the Mother while trying to appropriate as many of them as possible.” She suggests we begin to use her alternate economic model as a guideline for activist gift economy experiments we might make—as she herself has done over the course of her life—to solve some of the enormous problems we have created for the Earth.

In walking her talk, she founded the feminist Foundation for a Compassionate Society in the 1980s based in Austin, Texas. For almost two decades before the money ran out, the Foundation gave to the needs of women through the jobs it created as well as its ongoing philanthropy, providing support for numerous creative projects and ultimately funding international conferences on the Gift Economy in partnership with the International Matriarchal Studies movement. Several published anthologies have come out of these exciting international gatherings that brought together feminist scholars and activists with Indigenous women and men around the world who practice the gift economy.¹

Vaughan’s naming of this otherwise hidden economy inside of capitalism brings women’s work (the unpaid work of wives and the low paid work of those in the service industries) into the foreground. When this hidden economy becomes visible, the fact that it has been underlying and supporting the mainstream market economy (often

regularly goes unnoticed or unacknowledged, having been normalized as merely the natural role of women. However, Vaughan emphasizes that the gender stereotypes found in western patriarchal cultures are arbitrary and constructed; for example, in “societies based on gift economies, men remain mothering” without losing their manhood, while women are honoured as equals and often leaders.

The larger world situation of globalism likewise acts as “colonization of Indigenous peoples’ gift economies by market economies” and even to nature itself, which was “previously free for all” but is now “commodified” (Vaughan 9). The analogy goes like this: “(T)he category ‘male’ excludes the gift giving, female who gives especially to males; the category ‘white race’ excludes the other races, which are expected to take gift giving ‘female’ positions toward white people” (Vaughan 11) .

Lithuanian-born archaeologist, Marija Gimbutas, uncovered and named the prehistoric sixth-millennium civilization of Old Europe (also called the Danube Culture), introducing the world to female-centered cultures that had taken shape there and sustained themselves through agriculture, ritual, and art for at least two millennia. (Gimbutas, *Civilization; Language; Living*) She also documented the devastating destruction of this peaceful and artistic “civilization of the Goddess” (the name of an important book of hers), describing waves of Indo-European males who made incursions on horseback from north of the Black Sea beginning in the mid-fifth millennium BCE.

Already in the 1950s, Gimbutas had crafted a narrative (the “Kurgan theory”) based on her archaeological research that told the story of this traumatic conquest; she was not believed and her work was all but erased from archaeology.

Now we have incontrovertible DNA evidence documenting a massive wave of Indo-European male DNA into the Danube and the total elimination of local farmer male DNA at the end of the fourth millennium. In a prototype of so many wars to follow, the invaders murdered the local men and bred with the women, destroying almost all vestiges of their highly-evolved culture, art, and religion—including the world's oldest script. The Danube civilization was replaced by various hybrid cultures created out of what Gimbutas called the "collision" of the two worldviews, the female-centered (or "matristic") one and the male-dominated patriarchal one. The various artistic and ritual expressions of the Old European civilization went underground, becoming "women's work" (Barber) or folk art, remnants of which can be seen in the sewing, baking, ritual, dance, and singing traditions still practiced in parts of Europe even today.

Although market capitalism *per se* cannot be dated back to this catastrophic invasion that took place 5,000 years ago, some of its central features came into play at that time, including hierarchy, class stratification, centralized government, male dominance and kingship, competition, slavery, and war. The values of cooperation and sharing that made Old Europe and other ancient cultures peaceful and harmonious were overturned in favour of warfare and empire. What has wrongly been named "the rise of civilization" in Sumer and Mesopotamia was really the "rise of the urban State." The exchange economy can be documented as having come into the foreground at that time in large standardized urban cities that grew up in the Middle East, Iran, Central Asia, and all the way to India and China along trade routes that would eventually come to be known as the Silk Roads. The global capitalism that we know today has deep roots and its history has been glorified as heroic, while prehistory has been distorted and relegated to the shadows, its positive values of cooperation, communalism, and female centrality demonized as primitive and unworthy of attention.

Vaughan's decades of work in developing the Maternal Gift Economy was perhaps not a deliberate reclaiming of the ancient *matristic* civilizations that have been erased from memory, but the concepts and themes of her work hark back to them nonetheless. The living matriarchal and Indigenous cultures that have informed her work are remnants of ancient earth-based and female-centered cultures that existed around the world before patriarchy. All the gift-giving cultures that self-define as matriarchal today are egalitarian and peaceful, as well as artistic and ritualistic (most without having what we would call organized religion). Vaughan reminds us that these Indigenous cultures can be models for us; we can look to them as leaders in our struggles to respond to catastrophic climate

changes and the economic disasters facing us today. She also highlights contemporary gift giving that actively exists inside of western patriarchy today, naming a few examples: "community groups, groups with a common purpose, feminist, environmental, peace, ethnic solidarity, and other activist groups, AA, spiritual and religious groups, therapy groups, social and art groups ... in the free software and free information movement, in such initiatives as Wikipedia, in movements against privatization and patenting, in online gifting circles, in solidarity economics, in progressive philanthropy, in immigrants' remittances and in alternative communities." (Vaughan 21)

The essential thing, she tells us, is "to restore mothering and being mothered as the basic human interaction" (Petrilli). Her most recent work (with echoes of Tanner's earlier feminist anthropology) focuses on language and how the mother-child interaction builds meaning from within the relationship dynamics. "Language (like mothering) is all about satisfying needs: the needs of the speaker to satisfy the needs of the listener, the needs of the topic to be spoken and the needs of the listener to grasp or understand what is being given/said, even the needs of the words to relate to each other" (Petrilli).

It is not possible for me to share all the ways Genevieve Vaughan has been an inspiration and a leader in my life and the lives of others in the international movements of matriarchy and the gift economy. But, hopefully, I have provided a sense of the importance of foregrounding women and matriarchal values that Gen has pioneered with her Maternal Gift Economy. It is these female-centered, earth-based, Indigenous values of egalitarianism and respect for the humanity of everyone that can help us solve some of our most troubling challenges in this next decade. Rather than thinking of women as being naturally altruistic and men as warlike, we need to understand the alternate economy that mothers (or "motherers" as Gen says, including men in the archetype) and Indigenous people display in their daily lives—and then use this understanding as a model of how to move forward to a better world.

This article was based on a presentation given at the ASSA Conference in San Diego, January 4, 2020.

Vicki Noble is a feminist artist, writer, healer, and wisdom teacher, author of eight books, including Shakti Woman: Feeling Our Fire, Healing Our World and The Double Goddess: Women Sharing Power. In the late 1970s, Noble co-created, with Karen Vogel, the round feminist Motherpeace tarot cards revising both divination and world history to include women. In the late 1980s, she founded and directed the Motherpeace Institute in California, and published an award-winning quarterly journal, SnakePower: A Journal

of Ancient and Contemporary Female Shamanism. *She has travelled and taught internationally, leading pilgrimage groups to sacred Goddess sites around the world and facilitating workshops and seminars; her books are translated and published in numerous languages. She has recently retired from teaching in the Women's Spirituality Masters Programs at CIIS, New College of San Francisco, and Sofia University in Palo Alto. She adapts Tibetan Buddhist Dakini practices for her Goddess students, holding private intensives for women in Santa Cruz, where she lives near the Monterey Bay. Vicki Noble can be reached at www.vickinoble.com.*

Endnotes

¹Genevieve Vaughan's books include: *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange* (1997); *Homo Donans* (2007); and *The Gift in the Heart of Language* (2015). She has edited three anthologies *The Gift/ il Dono: A Feminist Analysis* (2004); *Women and the Gift Economy, A Radically Different Worldview is Possible* (2007) and *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy* (2019). Her books are translated into several languages. Her website is www.gift-economy.com.

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One Morning in Birkenau

That black spring in 1944
I will not forget
we were in rags

I don't remember washing once
but I remember that morning

a Shabbat maybe
drenching rains
forced labour march
through bog morasses

a kapo watching me
soaked, shivering from cold

foul smelling bodies, tired
remember a dress mother sewed for me

cotton with long sleeves
I remember feeling beautiful

a Shabbat maybe
a deluge

yellow-star house in Budapest
scribbled notes

the gas chambers

narrative of this object
monotonously grey.

Ilona Martonfi has published four poetry books, Blue Poppy (2009), Black Grass (2012), The Snow Kimono (2015), and Salt Bride (2019). Her forthcoming works include The Tempest (Inanna Publications, 2021). Her writing appears in five chapbooks, anthologies, and various magazines. She is also the artistic director of Visual Arts Centre Reading Series and Argo Bookshop Reading Series and recipient of the Quebec Writers' Federation 2010 Community Award.