

## Genevieve Vaughan, Autobiography

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I was born in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1939 to a wealthy family. My father was a lawyer and so was my mother's father who made money in the oil and gas business. I inherited part of that money and since 1980 have tried to use it for social change towards women's values. Having spent the major part of the money in this endeavor I am now in the process of divesting from the environmental pollution business.

I went to Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and later attended graduate school at the University of Texas where I met and married a visiting Italian philosophy professor, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. I moved to Milano with him in 1963 and then to Rome in 1968. In Italy I first developed a progressive political consciousness and then after my divorce in 1978, my feminist consciousness was raised. I joined a group of international feminists from the FAO which was located near my house in Rome. I also participated in the Italian feminist movement, and attended courses at a Feminist University, the Virginia Woolf Cultural Center.

In 1964 my husband was asked to join a group which was planning to publish a journal dedicated to the application of Marx's analysis of the commodity and money to language. I went with him to a few meetings in Bologna where the project was discussed, and was deeply struck by the ideas I heard there. The journal never actually happened, but my husband did write some essays, later collected in books, along the lines they had discussed. I started thinking about those ideas back then and writing about them. Finally during the 70's I wrote two essays which were published in journals of semiotics in 1980 and 1981, 'Communication and Exchange' and 'Saussure and Vigotsky via Marx.' My husband developed an idea of language as exchange, applying Marx's categories of labor, use value, exchange value to account for meaning. For example, he talked about 'linguistic means of production, labor and capital'. Although I found his work fascinating, I had some fundamental disagreements with his approach. In fact during the years in which he was writing his books I was involved in being the mother of our three daughters, communicating with them, watching them learn language and it seemed to me that I was not exchanging with them but giving to them free. I was also supporting him during that period with the money I had inherited and that too was not an exchange but a gift that I had received and that I was passing on to him. (Sometimes it takes doing something at several different levels to become conscious of it). Communication seemed to me to be something that came before exchange, both in the life of the species and in the life of the individual. Communication seemed to be the basic premise, while exchange and its full development in the market was a contradictory variation on the

theme of communication.

I developed an idea of communication in which we satisfy each other's needs by providing words by which we construct relations with one another regarding the world. Words are a kind of common property which we use to satisfy communicative needs, thereby creating social relations on the basis of the constructed common property of shared experience and knowledge. I was then able to develop an analysis of money as an 'incarnated word', a means of satisfying communicative need in a situation of mutually exclusive private property. The need in such a situation is to receive products to satisfy our needs without giving up (the value of) those we already possess. In a market based system we all presumably share at least that need. Money is thus a social invention which we give to one another in substitution for the commodities we trade, which expresses and measures their value with respect to all other commodities. Money satisfies our need as exchangers to share without sharing, to give without giving, since in fact we each receive an equivalent of what we give to the other in exchange. In my essays I show how money follows the pattern of a word in communication, bridging the mutual exclusion of private property, much as words bridge the distance between private minds.

I compared Marx's idea of money as the general equivalent which is in polar opposition to the many commodities that are related to it, as the 'one' opposed to the many, with an experiment by Soviet psychologist Lev Vigotsky, on concept formation. In this experiment Vigotsky found that concepts develop in children through various patterns, ending in what he calls 'scientific' concepts, where items are compared to one exemplar or prototype and are found similar to it according to common qualities. (Vigotsky wrote in Russia in the 1920's however, prototype concept theory developed also independently later in the US.) I was struck by the similarity between the exemplar (called the 'sample') in Vigotsky's experiment and Marx's idea of money as the general equivalent. Either or both Marx and Vigotsky could be wrong, and there were many who criticized both of them. But I wondered, suppose both were correct. What would that mean?

How could the structure of the relation between money and commodities be the same as the relation between samples and items in the development of concepts? Since I was convinced that a market economy and money were a relatively late development, I thought concepts must have come first. That would mean that money was following a logical pattern that was first developed in concept formation. Indeed money did look a lot like the sample or exemplar for commodities, of which the value would be the common quality. That quality was then expressed quantitatively in different quantities of money. On the other hand money also looked like a word in that it was equated with commodities and given in their place in exchange.

Money could be used as a term of comparison for language, a material word

that would show us language in a completely different area from what was usually thought of as linguistic, and if we corrected for the differences we would be able to see the commonalities. On the other hand an investigation of words could be used to illuminate the function of money. Money and words could be seen as having a similar logical pattern.

Around this time I also read Jean Josef Goux's discussion of the general equivalent, the phallus, the monarch and other political and psychological one-to-many figures in *Freud, Marx, Economie et Symbolique*. I began to believe that patriarchy had invested the one-to-many concept formation structure with the male standard on the psychological, political, economic and conceptual planes.

In fact being male becomes confused with being in the 'one' position, and in the position of exemplar for the self concept of the human race. There is a great deal of overlap and reciprocal reinforcement for these patterns especially in the 'west', that is in the societies which are now taking the 'one' position world wide. From these considerations it is possible to develop a description of patriarchy as repetitions of the exemplar-to-many concept pattern on many different levels, beginning with an unwarranted investment of the male identity in the 'one' position. (since concept formation has been invisible to us, that specific investment of male identity has also been invisible). The attempt to achieve that 'one' position drives the masculine identity to dominate, to create hierarchies, to make wars to be 'first'.

How did this happen? The answer came to me from reading Nancy Chodorow's description of the boy's socialization towards the male gender in binary opposition to his nurturing mother. I believe that all babies first identify with their primary caregivers (most of whom are women), and that they do not understand at first the difference between the gender terms. The first prototype for the identities of all children is the caregiver - the nurturing mother. As the boy child learns language and word meanings he must at a certain point understand that he is in a category that is the opposite of his mother's category. At this point he has to give her up as the prototype for his identity and seize upon something else. But what identity can he find that is outside the care giving and receiving upon which he is dependent and which makes up his whole life? This paradoxical situation drives him towards the 'one' position itself, as it drove his father before him. Socially the exemplar position is invested with the male standard, from the phallic 'ones' of swords, guns, and missiles to obelisks and towers, to monotheisms and monarchies, so that the (binary) superiority of the male 'one' prototype over the female is validated at every turn. Since the mother's identity is evidently nurturing (for the child) the boy's identity is formed in binary opposition to nurturing. Because girls are not socialized to be in a category which is opposite to the nurturing mother, they would not logically have the drive to be the prototype as part of the gender identity they develop as small children. The drive to be the prototype is artificial and unnecessary, but by not incor-

porating that drive the nurturing prototype is eclipsed. The over valuation of the male prototype and the socialization of males into a non nurturing prototypical identity is a mistake that society has been making and justifying for centuries.

The overlay of these patterns at many different levels creates a more convincing case in some societies than in others for the validation of (male) dominance. Then those societies as a whole carry out the pattern and do indeed dominate over the many. We have a particularly extended form of this now in capitalist patriarchy. Indeed it seems that by owning a lot of the general equivalent, the 'one' position is achieved in many different realms. 'Stars' of television, politics, academia and entertainment, embody the prototype position and they are usually 'rewarded' with a lot of the general equivalent.

By incarnating the 'one' position in money and absorbing women into the work force, the competition to achieve the male prototype position has been contradictorily extended to females (showing, fortunately, that the prototype position is not pre determined by masculine physiology). The competition to be the 'one' has also been disembodied and extended as a pattern of motivation to non human entities such as corporations and nations. Sexism, racism, classism etc are also one-to-many patterns which combine to validate the dominant prototype and the prototype of domination.

Let me go back at this point and pick up the considerations I was making on communication. There are two basic patterns for the distribution of goods, exchange and nurturing, which I call 'gift giving'. Exchange is now taken as the basic logic in our society (I was talking about my husband's work on language as exchange above) Gift giving has been considered an illusion, an incomplete exchange, even a kind of slavery.

Exchange is giving-in-order-to-receive an equivalent, it is ego oriented and does not transfer value to the receiver. It requires quantification and measurement. Gift giving has its own logic. By satisfying needs directly, without exchange, this logic transfers value to the receiver, it is other oriented, transitive, creates bonds of community and is qualitative rather than quantitative. (Co-muni-ty and co-muni-cation both come from the Latin '*muni*' which means 'gifts'). The receiver is as important as the giver in the gift transaction because if the gift is not used, creatively received, it is wasted, and becomes nothing.

The two modes of exchange and gift giving are actually two paradigms or world views which are in competition with each other. At least the exchange mode is in competition with the gift mode, because competitive values are part of the exchange paradigm. The gift paradigm and those practicing it actually give **to** the exchange paradigm and to those practicing it.

Many important aspects of society can be understood in terms of the gift. Women's free labor in the home, which adds some 40% or more to many capitalistic GNP's, is gift labor, a gift which nurtures not only one's family but also the market system as a whole. Profit is the free labor of the worker which is given to the capitalist as surplus value. Nature nurtures us free in many ways and her gifts are seized, turned to profit, and commodified. The commodification of air, water, our genes, traditional knowledge etc. that is presently happening can be interpreted in terms of the absorption of previously free gifts into the system based on exchange.

A gift economy requires abundance to function without imposing self sacrifice. Exchange requires scarcity in order to function because if our needs were already satisfied free no one would need to exchange. Scarcity is created by the exchange system by cornering the wealth in the hands of the few (who thus can achieve the 'one' position), by spending it on phallic symbols of domination and weapons of destruction, by low wages, by taxes, by lending and debt, by polluting the environment and by commodifying what was previously a free gift. All of this is accomplished also by concealing and denigrating the logic and values of the gift economy and the interpretative key of the gift which, if used, would cast a completely different light on society. In fact, from the point of view of the gift paradigm, patriarchy and the exchange paradigm are a virulent anti-social psychosis, an aggressive biopathic logic famished for all kinds of gifts.

There are many paradoxes involved in the interaction between the gift paradigm and the exchange paradigm. Many of these are read as 'something else'. For example, by changing one's intention from other-orientation to ego-orientation, one can change what would have been a gift into an exchange transaction. This possibility is often read as a moral dilemma rather than a question of conflict between paradigms. In fact gift giving is usually seen as a question of individual preference. Like charity, it takes place on an individual level and does not attain the status of a system or the visibility of a generalized world view. In fact in scarcity, gift giving is so difficult that it requires saintliness (or masochism with perhaps some biological justification like 'maternal instinct'). In this case the person practicing charity paradoxically takes on the 'one' position, like Mother Teresa or Princess Diana, but because of the special situations of which such people are a part their behavior and the gift logic behind it cannot generalize to the population at large.

Logically the way to change all this would be to validate the gift paradigm at a meta level. Unfortunately the meta level regarding most of human life is occupied by academia in the promotion of disciplines which validate exchange and have not the least idea of gift giving. To take only the example of linguistics and semiotics, there are huge constructions of grammars and logics in which gift giving does not have any place. This is not surprising since the mother has been obliterated from male dominant philosophy for centuries. (Or co opted by patriarchal religions which assign the behaviors of gift giving and nurturing to male exemplar-deities.) In fact academia contin-

ues to support the exchange paradigm, occupying almost the whole meta level of thinking about life in its many aspects.

Marx's idea of economic base and ideological superstructure comes to our aid in trying to create a paradigm shift towards gift giving. If the gift economy and the exchange economy are different economic structures they would logically give rise to different ideologies. People who practice the gift economy at least on the private level (most of whom are women) have up until now been giving to the exchange economy and its ideology. Though practicing these values at an individual level, they have not recognized them as generally valid for all, a nascent economic system, part of a system of values, behaviors and logic, which is covered up under the layers of the ideology and practice of exchange. In the present situation the exchange economy is a parasite upon the gift economy and everyone believes the parasite rather than the host. With the extension of gift giving, as the free distribution of resources and energies, outside the home, the superstructure of ideas about gift giving ought to change. One way of doing this is to re-interpret the world around us in terms of needs at many levels and to attempt to freely satisfy them. Society itself has a huge need at this time for a change away from the paradigm of dominance and towards the gift paradigm. It also has many specific needs for change, needs for new non patriarchal forms of government and for good governors, needs for unmasking the lies of patriarchy, needs to end the exploitation of the Global North upon the South, hunger, disease, wars, the arms business, nuclear proliferation, environmental devastation, the promotion of genetic engineering, the patenting of life forms, etc. etc. By addressing all of these needs as gifts that need to be given to society, and by affirming the general validity of the gift paradigm at the same time at a meta level, models can be created in which the gift logic is visible and can be consciously propagated.

I returned to the US in 1983 with these ideas in mind and tried to create a model of gift giving with money by funding projects for social change. At the time I was struck by the impermeability of the context, even in the non profit area and the feminist community, to a discourse validating gift economy ideas. I realized I had to change the context in order to create an opening for the ideas to go through. By practicing the gift economy myself with the money I had inherited I created an alternative structure which I hoped would produce an alternative superstructure. I both funded a number of projects according to a non bureaucratic no strings attached feminist model, and later hired a number of diverse women to work on social change projects (using exchange for giving).

One particularly noteworthy example of this effort was funding, staffing and helping to organize the Peace Tent at the UN Decade for Women final conference in Nairobi in 1985. The tent was a great success as a place for dialogue between women from countries which were in conflict with each other. Many thousands of women attended. Since I was anonymous at the time however,

and trying to avoid the patriarchal 'one' position, my own intention was not visible. That attempt to create an anonymous gift model was derailed when an organization later took credit for the whole endeavor. There are many paradoxes involved in trying to create change in society without assuming the 'one' position. Leaving the position empty allows others who do not have the same critique to take it over. Indeed it becomes a free gift to them.

I decided I had to give up my anonymity. In 1987 I started the Foundation for a Compassionate Society which employed a group of some 25 women to work in different projects for social change, both locally and internationally trying to give gifts to society at the various levels as I just mentioned. For example there were retreat centers where meetings could take place free of charge, projects in women's media notably FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavor); WINGS (Women's International News Gathering Service) and a training project WATER (Women's Access to Technological and Electronic Resources); there was a lot of Anti Nuclear work - the successful ending of a proposed nuclear dump in Sierra Blanca, Texas; an anti nuclear travelling museum, and many initiatives and protests; there was a lot of solidarity work with Central American countries, particularly El Salvador; there were projects in women's spirituality and indigenous spirituality; there was travel to many meetings and the promotion of international collaboration among women, and much more. In the Foundation, I was the only person with the idea of the gift economy and at same time the only funder so it was difficult to create a model which was not based on the patriarchal patterns. All of us are immersed in the ideology of exchange and patriarchy. The feminist movement itself has been constructed under the aegis of capitalism. The very values that have liberated us from slavery to men are the values that discount gift giving. Yet gift giving is the solution, the gift, certainly not more of the patriarchal capitalist system and values that have brought us to this ruinous moment which is perhaps the end of history.

The problem is not only that the gift economy is de valued, it has actually been pushed into the unconscious so that even people who are practicing it do not recognize that is what they are doing. It is as if the mind/body division masked the gift economy. What is mental is supposed not to be gift giving, and we have relegated nurturing on the physical plane to one small area having to do with women taking care of children. Nurturing is seen as separate from the rest of 'reality' which is said to be 'objective, competitive, un giving, hard, hierarchical'. The fact is that we are making reality hard by denying gift giving and gift values, by bleaching nurturing out of our consciousness and our thinking, our philosophies and our motivations, our ideologies, and the behaviors we base on them. The reason this has happened is the construction of the male gender as non nurturing, with the exchange economy based on that construction, and the disciplines of patriarchy functioning as its ideology, justifying it.

In 1997 I finally published my book *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, which can also be found in its entirety on the internet at [www.for-](http://www.for-)

giving.com. In 1998, I ended the experiment of the Foundation except for a few projects, having spent most of the money I inherited, but keeping enough to continue my work in promoting the gift economy at a consciousness level. Since then I have been continuing to explore aspects of the theory and trying to publicize it. My conviction is that only a deep and radical change of values towards gift giving can solve the problems patriarchy is causing.

Putting an idea into practice is a challenge, especially if it is an idea which is unfamiliar to most people. Nevertheless I believe that with all its defects, the Foundation did demonstrate an alternative model, as a transitory alternative economic structure which to some extent gave rise to and validated a context and 'space' for the idea of the gift economy. Sometimes I am asked what results my attempt at social change has had. I reply that the results are not quantifiable. In fact, the qualitative nature of open ended gift giving makes it difficult to trace, and especially difficult to quantify the results of gifts one gives. However I believe that due to the synchronicities of the way things work, funding in a capillary way at least supports people to be in the right places at the right times and with information and the ability to create change which otherwise might not have been possible. Creating a fundamental change in values is a huge undertaking. It is the belief that the gift giving values are already there, closer to the forefront in women than in men, together with the sense of society's desperate need for change, that move me to continue the effort and gives me the faith that it must eventually succeed.